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The appeal of reality television : a uses and gratifications perspective

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THE APPEAL OF REALITY TELEVISION: A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS
PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Gina Danica Corrie-Metcalf

May 2005

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Diana Stover", written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

THE APPEAL OF REALITY TELEVISION: A USES AND GRATIFICATIONS PERSPECTIVE

By Gina Danica Corrie-Metcalf

This study investigates reasons for the popularity of reality television by using a typology of audience motivations developed from uses and gratifications communications theory. Additionally, it includes an extensive literature review establishing the relevance of this theoretical perspective to a study of reality television. The literature review also examined current research on the genre.

The examination of the literature and a series of in-depth interviews resulted in the following conclusions. First, the uses and gratifications perspective is highly relevant to a study of reality television. Second, the approach revealed that audiences are motivated to watch reality shows for diversion, to build personal relationships, to explore personal identity, and for surveillance. Finally, this study also demonstrated that technology is a key factor in assuring the success of the format.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Antony, my parents, Carole and Stephen, and my Grandma, Edna. Antony, thanks for providing me with this wonderful opportunity and for supporting me throughout. Thank you most of all for your eternal optimism and sense of humor, which has often helped me to put things into perspective. I love you with all of my heart. Mom, thanks for always believing in me and never doubting my abilities. If life is indeed a journey, I owe much of my drive to you. Dad, thank you for being someone to look up to always. Your mellow spirit is an inspiration and I only wish I had inherited your musical talents rather than your good looks! Finally, Grandma, you are an encouragement to us all to keep active, to keep reading, and to keep a healthy and inquisitive mind. For your support and for many happy, happy times, thanks to you all.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Without doubt, television has changed considerably during the past decade. The emergence of cable and satellite technologies has provided the viewer with a plethora of channel choices and more specialized and tailored program content. The advent of technologies such as TiVo, DVD, and the widespread availability of video recorders has contributed to a transformation of viewing habits. Mobile technology has influenced the speed at which information is received. Action from the war in Iraq unfolded in viewers' living rooms in real time. Furthermore, although the Internet initially threatened to challenge the position of television, it has actually served to promote synergies with it. TV remains a ubiquitous source of information and entertainment. However, a more recent development is having a direct impact on television both in terms of transforming its content and in terms of changing the very economics of the industry. This development is reality television.

This thesis is an exploratory study of reality TV. More important, it examines possible reasons for the growing popularity of the genre in the United States. Although different forms of reality programming have been part of the television offering since the 1940s, the genre has grown considerably since that time both in terms of its popularity and diversity. According to the Nielsen television ranking report for July 26, 2004 to August 1, 2004, 2 of the top 10

programs were reality shows. More than 10 million people watched *Amazing Race 5* on CBS and 9 million watched *Trading Spouses* on Fox (http://www.nielsenmedia.com/ratings/broadcast_programs.html).

To explore the appeal of reality television, this study used a qualitative method of inquiry. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of three months. Interviewees were asked a series of questions about their reality television viewing habits. The results were then analyzed for patterns and themes and finally compared to an analytical framework. The framework consisted of four key research categories. These were (a) diversion, (b) personal relationships, (c) personal identity, and (d) surveillance. This framework was developed from the uses and gratifications communications theory. This theory is grounded in the assumption that communication is interactive. It stresses that audiences are not passive receptors in the communication process. On the contrary, according to the principles of uses and gratifications theory, audiences are attracted to different types of media based on their perceived communication needs.

Research on reality TV is important for several reasons. First, this researcher is aware of little academic investigation of the topic. The lack of research stems from the fact that many critics have dismissed the genre because of its base appeal and as such, have considered it unworthy of academic analysis. This study is an effort to fill this research gap and an attempt to

analyze what the growing popularity of reality-based programming teaches us about media and its consumers. Second, this researcher is not aware of any published research that directly employs a uses and gratifications model to explore the genre of reality TV. Finally, the study combines the uses and gratifications model with the relevant ideas contained in Maslow's (1987) study of the hierarchy of needs. The research is therefore of academic interest, in addition to being of general interest to those wishing to understand more about this growing television genre.

This study has five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Results, and Conclusion. The literature review can be divided into three sections. The first section defines the genre and explores some of the central themes and issues of the uses and gratifications research model. It explores how the uses and gratifications paradigm has been developed by various theorists. Additionally, the ideas central to Maslow's (1987) theory of human needs are introduced. The second section of the literature review also provides a context for this study by analyzing contemporary studies of reality television. It explores the genealogy, history, and characteristics of reality TV. The final section of the literature review brings these two distinct bodies of literature together and demonstrates how the appeal of reality TV can be examined from a uses and gratifications perspective.

The next chapter of the study outlines the research method. The operationalization of the study is explained and the qualitative design, data collection methods, and research questions are stated.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to the presentation of the results and conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Other compelling avenues of research and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Because of the lack of academic research on reality television, the research provides an exciting opportunity to use established theoretical knowledge to explore a relatively unknown subject area. In this respect, the study provides a stimulus for additional research into the place of reality TV in the lives of its audience.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This study draws on two entirely distinct bodies of research. First, the review gives a brief overview of uses and gratifications literature, examining some of the central themes and goals of the approach. The body of literature about uses and gratifications theory is extensive. As McQuail (2000, p. 387) noted, “the idea that media use depends on the perceived satisfactions, needs, wishes or motives of the prospective audience member is almost as old as media research itself.” The paper uses the fundamental assumptions of the uses and gratifications approach as a theoretical framework, both to guide and organize the research. Maslow’s (1987) discussion of human needs has also been incorporated into the research framework. In an investigation of audience needs and motivations, this was a logical point of departure, and some of his key ideas are included in this work. The theoretical parameters of the study will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

Second, the review examines the growing body of recent literature that is directly focused on the reality TV format. This literature is mostly articles from newspapers and academic journals, in addition to Internet-based research. Few books have been written about reality TV. Through an examination of this literature, fundamental themes regarding the genre became apparent. The literature review charts the history and genealogy of reality TV. It demonstrates

that, despite its recent popularity, reality TV is anything but new. This section also establishes some of the defining characteristics of reality TV and demonstrates how it relates to other types of TV programs. The section ends with a discussion of the technological factors, which have contributed to today's increased consumption of reality-based programs.

Finally, the review specifically examines audience motivations. By bringing the two bodies of literature together, the review demonstrates how the uses and gratifications paradigm can be applied as one theoretical model to better understand audience motivations regarding reality TV. The section ends with a brief overview of the research and a summary of the conclusions that can be drawn from the literature review.

The Uses and Gratifications Model

Early media research often centered on the concept of media effects. It was not until after World War II that sociologists began to seriously look at audience motivations regarding media consumption. This change in direction marked a shift in how audiences were perceived. The audience thus changed from being a passive receptor in the media communication process to being an active participant in the exchange of media messages. This perspective is highly relevant to today's media marketplace. The proliferation of new technologies has given the individual audience member more choices than ever before. The uses

and gratifications paradigm is therefore relevant to any discussion of contemporary media.

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973-74, p. 510) posited that the uses and gratifications model was concerned with:

- 1) the social and psychological origins of
- 2) needs, which generate
- 3) expectations of
- 4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to
- 5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in
- 6) need gratifications and
- 7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones.

An analysis of reality TV from a uses and gratifications perspective is therefore a logical starting point. As Lull (1980, p. 198) noted, the uses and gratifications approach suggests “individuals selectively use mass media in order to satisfy their human needs.”

Since the late 1940s there have been many attempts by different theorists to develop a typology for various audience motivations and media functions. Lasswell (1948), for example, identified several functions of the media. His model included, (a) surveillance of the environment, (b) correlation of events in the environment, and (c) transmission of social heritage. Wright (1960) added entertainment as a further dimension. Katz, Haas, and Gurevitch (1973, p. 179) developed the idea that individuals choose to connect to other individuals through media, suggesting that:

The mass communication media are thought to satisfy a variety of needs arising from social roles and psychological dispositions. These needs, typically, take the form of 1) strengthening or weakening,

2) a connection—cognitive, affective, integrative—3) with some referent-self, friends, family and tradition, social and political institutions, others.

The typology used as the theoretical framework for this research project was that of McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972, p. 155). These theorists developed a typology of audience motivations consisting of four categories. They posited that (a) diversion (e.g., emotional release and escape), (b) personal relationships (e.g., companionship and social utility), (c) personal identity (e.g., value reinforcement, reality exploration, and personal reference), and (d) surveillance (e.g., gathering information) were key motivational factors in media consumption.

One of the main criticisms of early research on media uses and gratifications, voiced by Katz et al. (1973-74, p. 509), was that it failed to “explore the links between the gratifications thus detected and the psychological or sociological origins of the needs that were so satisfied.” Media uses and gratifications must be viewed within the wider sociological and psychological context. To better understand these areas, Maslow's (1987) development of a needs hierarchy has been incorporated into the literature review, where pertinent. Maslow (1987, pp. 15-31) proposed that basic human needs fall into seven categories. These relate directly to individual motivations and, consequently, to choices and actions. Human needs are broken down into (a) physiological needs, (b) safety needs, (c) the need to belong and be loved, (d) the need for esteem, (e) the need for self-actualization, (f) cognitive needs, and (g) aesthetic

needs. Only those needs which are directly relevant to reality TV have been considered in this study. The physiological need for food and water, for example, is not relevant to the development of this research.

Before exploring how the theoretical concepts relate to reality TV, it is important to discuss some of central issues surrounding the genre. The ensuing sections of this paper briefly examine the genealogy of reality programs, discuss how reality TV may be defined, and demonstrate how far the format truly reflects US social reality.

Following this, the role of audience is examined, using elements taken from the uses and gratifications model.

The History of Reality Television

The concept of showing reality on television is not new. Documentaries, news programs, and game shows have been a consistent part of the TV diet.

Kilborn (1994, p. 423) stated that:

Sometimes, judging by the stir, which various forms of RP (reality programming) have created, one might be led to believe that RP constitutes a major televisual innovation. As we shall discover, however, there is nothing intrinsically new about most of these reality strands.

In his analysis of reality TV in the digital era, Fetveit (1999) discussed how the evidential properties of the photographic image had been recognized long before television was invented. He explored the dichotomy between the artistic and creative potential of the image and its scientific and evidential qualities. He further noted that the advent of the mass production of photographic equipment

and of images through the press “prepared the ground for an increased use of the camera for purposes of surveillance” (Fetveit, 1999, p. 790). This evidential quality was enhanced by the invention of film in the 1890s, which added the dimensions of movement and time.

Our appetite for observing others can also be witnessed throughout the history of the television medium. This is especially true of program genres like news and documentary. However, the idea of reality TV as a mode of entertainment and diversion is also well established. Shows containing reality snippets have been part of the television offering for decades. *Candid Camera* actually debuted in 1948. The show featured footage taken by a hidden camera of everyday people caught in hoaxes that were devised by the show's host. In the 1970s, *An American Family* was first aired. This series focused on the hardships of a California family and was like many of today's reality shows (Chass, 2003). Similarly, MTV's *The Real World*, which brought together 20 young people in an apartment and watched how they related to each other, first appeared in the 1980s (Chass, 2003). In Europe, *Big Brother* was first broadcast in 1999 and achieved high ratings (Van Zoonen, 2001). The show brought together a group of people in a house that was effectively a film studio and filmed how they lived together and related to each other over a period of a few months. Viewers could vote for people to stay on the show or to leave. Clearly, the concept of reality TV is not new.

The arrival of *Survivor* in 2000 heralded the current mass appeal of reality television in the United States with 51 million viewers tuning in for the season finale in August 2000 (www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/TV/08/30/nielsens.ap/). Since that time, interest surrounding the genre has continued. In January 2003, *American Idol* captured 25 million viewers for two nights running, which made it Fox's most watched program, apart from sports (Carter, 2003). A total of 26 million viewers watched ABC the night the star of *The Bachelor* proposed (Chass, 2003). According to Nielsen ratings for the week of September 13 to September 19, 11 million watched NBC's *The Apprentice* (www.nielsenmedia.com).

Clearly, reality TV is an important source of revenue for the television networks and viewers will continue to be bombarded with a constant stream of new shows fashioned from the same mold. MTV has recently launched *The Ashlee Simpson Show*, which follows the life of teen singer and celebrity Ashlee Simpson. *Outback Jack* is new to TBS, which is basically a twist on reality-based dating shows. Similarly, Fox has recently launched *Trading Spouses*, in which contestants on the show swap families.

Before exploring potential reasons for the explosion of reality shows, however, it is important to define exactly what is meant by reality television and to discuss what differentiates it from other concepts on TV.

Defining Reality Television

Reality television is difficult to define accurately because it can encompass a wide range of different program types. Furthermore, there is often considerable confusion between different TV genres. Reality TV often borrows techniques directly from other genres, including documentary and fictional drama. This section explores the inherent difficulties in defining reality TV.

There have been many titles given to reality-based programs. Glynn (2000, p. 2) commented that:

The broad genre represented by *America's Most Wanted* has become one of the most significant developments in U.S. media. This genre has attracted attention, scorn, and a variety of labels.

To add to this confusion, reality television is also difficult to delineate from other programming. Television programs can be divided in various ways. One obvious way to distinguish between genres is to differentiate between fact and fiction. This is somewhat difficult in the case of reality television, because it represents both. As Glynn (2000, p. 2) stated, "this is a genre (or more accurately a collection of genres) that is not susceptible to easy definition or summary characterization, because of both its internal diversity and its many overlaps with other sets of television genres." Also, Fishman and Cavender (1998, p. 3) discussed this issue in their study of reality-based crime television, noting that "television reality programs are especially hard to categorize because they blur the line between news and entertainment; some even blur the line

between fact and fiction.” It could indeed be argued that reality television captures the essence of news. The programs claim to represent reality and the presenters often behave like journalists on screen. Again, Fishman and Cavender (1998, p. 10) noted, “at times, reality crime programs borrow from the vocabulary of journalism.” However, Glynn (2000, p. 7) argued that:

Tabloid television’s discursive conventions and representational strategies place it at odds with the canons of official journalism, which stresses, among other things, objectivism and proper distance—critical and emotional—from its subjects. From the perspective of official journalism, therefore, tabloid television’s sins are indeed numerous.

Andrejevic (2002) proposed a further set of defining characteristics. In his discussion of *The Real World*, an MTV reality series, he suggested two significant defining criteria. These are “first, the fact that the characters are not professional actors and, second, that the show’s action is unscripted” (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 259). He also commented, however, that these criteria did little to separate *The Real World* from a variety of other shows, such as talk shows or game shows, for example. Therefore, he suggested that “a further qualification needs to be added to shows such as *The Real World* to distinguish them as a discrete genre: the fact that they are not based on the documentation of exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life” (Andrejevic, 2002, pp. 259-260). This is not the case for every reality program, however. Some, like *Survivor*, do not merely record the humdrum of daily life, but rather place their characters in truly exceptional circumstances. Similarly,

reality-based crime series would not fit this definition, since they are often concerned with car chases and action-filled arrests, rather than depicting the more mundane aspects of police work. As Kilborn (1994, p. 424) noted:

Programmes in this category are at heart reality shows in that their basic formula involves the packaging of a series of short, authentic sequences into a television entertainment, which has all the excitement and razzmatazz of show business.

Whether reality TV is concerned with everyday events or the depiction of exciting action depends on the program in question. What is clear from the discussion above, however, is that reality TV is often not concerned with a true depiction of social reality. The following section explores just how synthetic reality TV often is.

Reality Programs and Synthetic Reality

Numerous sociologists have conducted research into the construction of synthetic reality on television. The majority of this research has concentrated on the effects of program content on the viewer. Funkhouser and Shaw (2000) described how the media serve to distort reality. They stated that “ubiquitous electric (motion picture) and electronic (television and computers) media manipulate and rearrange not only the content but the processes of communicated experience, thereby shaping how the audience perceives and interprets the physical and social reality depicted” (Funkhouser & Shaw, 2000, pp. 57–58). However, reality TV programs generally claim to portray a true

version of actual events. The sheer entertainment value of such shows, however, suggests a certain level of skepticism is required regarding this notion.

Seagal (1993, p. 51) spent some time working for a reality-based police show for ABC and conceded that there was often a discrepancy between reality and events in the show:

Searching for the scraps of usable footage was like combing a beach for a lost contact lens. The actual bust—a sad affair that featured an accountant getting arrested for buying pot in an empty shoe-store parking lot—was perhaps 1 percent of everything I looked at. In the logic of the story department, we are to deplore these smalltime drug busts not because we are concerned that the big drugs are still on the street but because a small bust means an uninteresting show.

With popularity ratings at the forefront of many producers' minds, various techniques are used to generate a version of reality that viewers seem compelled to watch. Fishman and Cavender (1998, p. 12) noted that:

Reality programming blends information and entertainment. It is about factual events and real people, but often it portrays them using reenactments that mix actors. It emphasizes action, sets events to music, compresses time, speeds up action, and uses camera angles typical of horror films, action movies, or cinéma vérité.

Producers of reality shows also generally have thousands of potential contestants from which to choose. Although the shows usually do not employ actors per se, producers are able to select the most suitable candidates for a particular show. More than 2,000 people attended the March 2004 audition for *The Apprentice* in New York. The program selects only 18 candidates from

across the United States. Furthermore, many hours of potential footage are sifted through to produce the action for a single reality show. Seagal (1993, p. 52) noted that “by the time our 9 million viewers flip on their tubes, we’ve reduced 50 or 60 hours of mundane and compromising video into short, action-packed segments of tantalizing, crack-filled, dope-dealing, junkie-busting cop culture.”

Footage is therefore subject to a variety of different manipulation techniques before it is aired on screen. In an article about *Big Brother*, Van Zoonen (2001, p. 672) argued that, despite these enhancements, reality programs still capture reality:

We rediscover on television what has become ever more invisible in the world around us, the private life of ordinary people: initially mostly in the enacted fantasies of sitcoms and soaps, but currently in a variety of formats in which real life is shown: talk shows, reality-TV, emo-TV, docusoaps, and now *Big Brother*. The obvious comment that such reality genres are just as subject to the constraints of television and are manipulated in countless ways by the makers (casting, editing, stage-management, etc.) does not undermine such an observation.

The level of actual reality depicted in reality shows depends on the show. However, as suggested earlier, the idea that reality TV conveys a true depiction of social reality is highly suspect.

It has already been established that reality formats have existed for a long time and that reality television is closely related to other TV genres. Moreover, most of the content of reality television is synthetic. The purpose of this study is to explore the attraction of reality television for the viewer. Before examining this

narrow focus in greater depth, it is important to briefly discuss the influence of advances in technology upon the genre. Although this area is not the focus of the study, it is essential to an understanding of the growth of reality television and an important background to the subject matter.

The Role of Technology

Modern technology has certainly contributed to the meteoric rise in the popularity of reality TV. As simple and less expensive equipment becomes more widely available, more people are able to shoot their own film. Napoli (2003, p. 2) referred to this as the “deprofessionalization” and “democratization” of video. In addition, new technology has helped the TV industry greatly in simplifying the production process and in making it much less expensive and time consuming. Napoli (2003, p. 2) explained the difference that technology has made using the example of the Raymonds, who made *An American Family* more than 30 years ago, noting that:

Using a 16-millimeter film camera that required loading a new reel every 11 minutes or whenever the action moved into different light, the Raymonds sometimes did not have a chance to view their processed film for weeks. Shooting took seven months, with an additional year's work by a film editor, who spliced the 12 episodes together from three hours of footage using a razor knife and Mylar tape. Each 11-minute roll of film and its processing cost roughly \$300—in contrast to the \$30 typical 64-minute professional-quality tape costs today.

Modern technology has made reality TV relatively inexpensive to produce. Also, there are no actors to pay and no scripts to write. This appeals to producers because it helps to make reality programming less expensive than

conventional dramas or sitcoms. Scripted series were once the success stories of the major networks, before the arrival of reality TV. The hefty production costs of these series were often offset by the demand created by repeat broadcasts and by selling the shows to other networks or countries in syndication. Many series have production budgets that run into millions of dollars an hour (Napoli, 2003). Against this backdrop, reality shows are an enticing prospect for the TV producer.

Another factor driving the production of reality shows is their attractiveness to advertisers. This stems from the huge ratings reality TV generates and also from the ability of the format to attract young audiences. In addition, reality programs provide an excellent environment for product placement. This advertising technique is growing more important as technology increasingly allows viewers to switch between channels to skip commercials. Products can be seamlessly integrated into reality programs, so that their avoidance is less likely.

Having briefly discussed the role of technology, the following section centers on the focus of this research—the audience.

The Audience

The typology of audience-media interactions developed by McQuail et al., (1972) and the ideas of Maslow (1987) were used as the analytical framework for this discussion. The relationship of reality TV to the four proposed categories of

diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance is discussed below.

Diversion

The idea that an individual may turn to a reality-based TV program to escape everyday life is paradoxical. In light of what has already been discussed regarding reality television as a synthetic version of reality, however, the notion is less ill conceived.

McQuail et al., (1972) examined the idea of diversion from three different angles, (a) escape from the constraints of routine, (b) escape from burdens or problems, and (c) emotional release. In his exploration of entertainment gratifications, Zillmann (1985) also identified several factors relating to the notion of diversion. He ascertained that certain intrinsic qualities of entertainment, such as the ability to excite or calm, predictably attract certain personality types or moods. He noted that “exciting programs attracted bored subjects significantly more than stressed subjects and that relaxing programs attracted stressed subjects significantly more than bored subjects” (Zillmann, 1985, p. 229). Similarly, he posited that individuals seeking mood improvement would naturally be attracted to TV genres like comedy, for example. It is difficult to generalize about the diversion created by reality programs, because the genre is so diverse. Some shows, like *The Osbournes*, for example, rely heavily on the comedy created by the incongruity of the family unit and the unusual personality of Ozzy

Osbourne. Reality programs such as *Fear Factor* and *Survivor*, however, create a sense of excitement through the elements of risk and suspense. Zillmann (1985) argued that the attraction of such shows lies in the resolution of conflicts, or in the victory of the protagonist over the impending danger or obstacle. Indeed, much of the attraction could be attributed to the conflict arising from bringing disparate people together in reality shows. Smith and Wood (2003, p. 1) stated:

As we rounded the turn into the twenty-first century, it seemed that every producer was searching for the new wave of reality television and that every viewer was transfixed by each new version of the same basic plot: introduce a diverse group of people, put them into situations bound to induce conflict, and watch them squirm.

Discussing the attraction of *Survivor*, Roth (2003, p. 33) remarked that:

The castaways were selected to comprise a diverse group of Americans for two main reasons: to attract viewers of most ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and to add drama to the show as the producers knew that some castaways had conflicting moral, ethical, and religious beliefs.

Discussing entertainment insurance, Goch (2001) stressed the importance of risky stunts in increasing audience size. Shows like *Mr. Personality* or *Road Rules* rely on the unpredictability factor. Andrejevic (2002) likened *Road Rules* to a kind of social experiment, in which the different locations add to the unpredictability of outcomes. In an article about British reality TV, Lawson (2003) suggested that this reliance on unpredictability to attract audiences would eventually serve to undermine the genre. He suggested that once viewers and

contestants understood the show's format, the show would automatically become less entertaining. Lawson (2003, p. 21) further commented that:

The reason that *Big Brother 2* seemed less impressive than the first *Big Brother*—and the later spin-offs from *Pop Idol* lacked the appeal of the originator—was that reality TV became progressively less real. The concept worked best when contestants didn't know the consequences of taking part.

Many reality shows also appear to rely on the dubious pleasure some take from the humiliation or downfall of others. MTV's *Punk'd*, for example, depicts well-known celebrities being duped by other celebrities. The audience revels in the humiliation of the celebrities, knowing that the joke is always taken in good humor in the end.

Watching reality TV could be likened to watching sports on television. As in a football game, the audience is offered escape from routine and everyday problems through the momentary loss of self in the competition. Certain protagonists grow to be more liked than others, similar to teams in sports, and the audience enjoys the victory of its preferred protagonist. Zillmann (1985, p. 236) commented that:

Seeing a beloved competing party humble, humiliate, and destroy a resented one obviously constitutes the ultimate in sports enjoyment. Equally obvious, the reverse outcome provides no joy; it is upsetting, if not depressing. It is evident, in addition, that indifference toward persons or teams in a contest is the kind of condition under which excitement and intense enjoyment cannot materialize.

The crux of a successful reality TV show must then lie in generating a certain degree of team spirit, conflict, and affinity with the protagonists involved.

To experience escape through witnessing the victory and downfall of others suggests that audiences somehow interact with those taking part in reality shows and furthermore that audiences build some kind of relationships with those people.

Personal Relationships

McQuail et al., (1972) identified two types of personal relationships central to the role of media. First, they noted that audiences tend to build relationships with people in the media, and second that audiences tend to use material taken from shows to interact with other members of the public. In this way, programs serve as a common, shared experience. Van Zoonen (2001, p. 672) also suggested that the division in today's society between the private and public realm has caused "a nostalgic yearning for authenticity, for ties with others like oneself, for familiarity and communality, and for the social legitimization of one's own private experiences." This suggests that individuals seek a connection to wider society through reality TV. This notion is central to an understanding of the role of reality TV today; those taking part in reality shows become household names. They become part of the everyday conversation for those who regularly watch reality TV. Thus, the actions, personalities, and beliefs of the protagonists serve as a conversation point between families, friends, colleagues, and strangers. Reality TV, therefore, conforms to Lull's (1980) notion of TV for relational purposes.

Maslow (1987, p. 20) also discussed the human desire for contact, or the “belongingness need.” He stated that this need “may arise to overcome the widespread feelings of alienation, strangeness, and loneliness that have been worsened by increasing mobility, the breakdown of traditional groupings, the scattering of families, the generation gap, and steady urbanization” (Maslow, 1987, p. 20). Clearly, many of these factors are evident in the United States today and reality TV goes some way toward providing a sense of unity among disparate groups of individuals, who share a similar interest.

Baker (2003, p. 67) argued that some of the success of reality TV could be attributed to the interactive or participatory nature of the format. They alluded to shows like *Big Brother*, in which the audience was encouraged to participate by voting by telephone to have contestants removed from the show. There are also numerous Web sites for reality shows. An Internet based search conducted in September of 2004 showed that more than 6 million sites contained a reference to reality television (<http://www.google.com/search>). Some of these Web sites are devoted to reality TV. Some are simply informational, providing the latest news on people and events in the shows. Many of them, however, are more interactive in nature and provide their users with a discussion forum about the shows. The audience member can often communicate with other people who have seen the show or give feedback about the show to the producers such as through <http://www.realitytvlinks.com>, for example.

Personal Identity

McQuail et al., (1972) also divided the category of personal identity into sub-sections. These are (a) personal reference, (b) reality exploration, and (c) value reinforcement. These researchers suggested that viewers sometimes relate aspects of TV shows to themselves. In other words, they use the program content to highlight a feature of their own situation. Patkin (2003, p. 13) argued that we watch reality television “because reality shows promise a window to the soul.” Furthermore, programs are used to explore situations or problems experienced in real life. When watching the contestants on *Fear Factor*, part of the audience appeal lies in relating the same situation to the self. Some shows also present moral dilemmas. Again, the attraction for the viewer lies in hypothetically applying the dilemma to a personal situation. Thus, reality programs serve to explore social reality as well as personal values.

The need for esteem, as discussed by Maslow (1987), is also relevant here. Maslow (1987, p. 21) noted “the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence in the face of the world, and independence and freedom.” Second, he stressed the importance of “reputation or prestige (defining it as a respect or esteem from other people), status, fame and glory, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, dignity, or appreciation” (Maslow, 1987, p. 21). Many of these elements can be related to reality TV shows. Both the audience and those taking part could be said to have some kind

of fascination with celebrity. Part of the attraction of the format is that literally anyone could be the star of the next show. In an article in *The Buffalo News*, Simon (2003, p. 3) suggested that reality TV was transforming the very concept of celebrity by “defining ordinariness as celebrity.” Patkin (2003, p. 14) stated that, “mediated entertainment also shapes identity, both that of participant and audience member.” This notion is of particular importance for reality television, because the audience trusts that what it is watching resembles reality to some extent. However, if the networks select participants from thousands of potential candidates for each show and participants are also often subjected to activities, which are far removed from everyday situations, what social order is reality TV constructing? What foundations is this order constructed upon? It could be argued therefore, that reality TV has a huge importance in determining how people view society and themselves.

Surveillance

McQuail et al., (1972) suggested that surveillance refers to an individual's desire to know and understand the world. Maslow (1987) also described the human need to search for meaning in the world. He determined that this desire was driven by both negative factors such as fear and anxiety and positive factors such as curiosity and eagerness to learn and develop. Maslow (1987) conceded, however, that the extent to which the desire to know is manifested, depends on the individual.

The notion of using reality TV to better understand the world is a compelling one. However, taking into account what has already been discussed about the format, it is difficult to establish whether individuals actually use reality TV to fulfill this function in the same way that an individual may use a news program, for example. This depends on the particular program. It also could be argued that it depends on whether the show depicts reality or a synthetic version of it. But, consider how much can be learned about the world through genres other than documentary and news. It is often the case that many films or even situation comedies can give the viewer an insightful picture of social realities. Nonetheless, the question of reality TV serving as a window on the world is a difficult one.

Andrejevic (2002) described a completely different perspective of surveillance in his discussion of reality TV. He posited that the portrayal of surveillance in reality TV programs plays an important part in the growth of the interactive economy. By this, Andrejevic (2002) was suggesting that reality TV serves to legitimize surveillance. He stated that in reality TV programs, "surveillance is not portrayed as a form of social control, but as the democratization of celebrity" (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 251). Considered from this viewpoint, reality TV makes surveillance more acceptable. He linked this with the development of e-commerce, demonstrating how trade on the Internet is dependent on the acceptability of consumer surveillance. Andrejevic (2002,

p. 267) commented:

A television show such as *The Real World*, although it implicitly promises the democratization of creative control and productive power, serves as a form of acclimatization to an emerging economic regime predicated on increasingly unequal access to, and control over, information. It also validates the pervasive surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life as a contemporary commonplace—a form of convenience and entertainment.

Thus, Andrejevic (2002) has turned the notion of surveillance on its head.

According to his perspective, it is the audience, and not the world that is being surveyed.

Conclusions and Overview of the Literature

Through the analysis of contemporary literature and research into media uses and gratifications, it is possible to make certain assumptions regarding reality TV.

First, an analysis of the literature has shown that reality TV is not a new phenomenon. It has evolved from other genres and is more closely linked to entertainment than news. Despite the name, many reality programs are highly contrived and therefore present a synthetic view of reality. Although this study concentrates on the appeal of reality TV from an audience perspective, some of the success of the format is not related to the role of the audience. There are considerable economic benefits of reality TV. Furthermore, advances in technology have made the programs easy for TV production companies to make.

The uses and gratifications model, proposed by McQuail et al., (1972) is a useful framework for an analysis of the appeal of reality TV. The examination

within this framework demonstrated that diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance are relevant factors in a consideration of what motivates audiences to watch reality programs. It is difficult to establish how far viewers use reality TV to know and understand the world, because so little is known about the audience's perception of reality in the programs. Moreover, the notion of diversion, discussed by McQuail et al., (1972) does not describe the full spectrum of diversion involved in reality TV. A greater examination of factors such as the role of risk, suspense, conflict, and unpredictability would provide a more thorough understanding of audience gratifications regarding this genre. Similarly, Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs is useful to the uses and gratifications model. However, Maslow (1987) does not explore the need for escape and diversion. An understanding of this human desire from this psychological perspective is essential to an exploration of the role of entertainment in society.

CHAPTER 3

Method

This research explores these research questions:

1. How relevant is the uses and gratifications paradigm to the exploration of reality television?
2. What motivates audiences to watch reality TV?
3. What audience needs are gratified by reality TV?

The qualitative method of in-depth interviews was used. Twenty people were interviewed about their reality television viewing habits. The selection of interviewees was based solely on the objectives of the research. Interviewees were selected who possessed knowledge or experience that was directly relevant to an exploration of the allure of reality TV.

Study Design

This section explains how the investigation of the appeal of reality TV was conducted. It outlines the data collection method, the development of the questions, and the logistical elements of the research.

Data Collection

Data was elicited through a series of 20 in-depth personal interviews. Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 173) noted the value of interviews in the process of understanding the social actor's experience and perspective. The interviews were personal, in-depth, and based on a series of planned questions. The

rationale behind this approach arose from two different considerations. First, the framework of questions enabled the interviews to be compared. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 178) noted, “although the questions asked can vary from one person to the next, many respondent interview studies follow a standard order for all interviewees so that responses can be directly compared across the entire sample.” Second, the interviewer was flexible, allowing for digression by interviewees who were encouraged to respond to the questions on their own terms. Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 170) stated that “at its best, the qualitative interview is an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences.”

Each interview lasted for about one hour. Notes were taken during the interview and each session was tape-recorded. Each interview was scheduled by telephone and was conducted at a time and location convenient to the interviewee—in most cases, this was at a quiet and private location on the San Jose State University campus.

Like all research methods, the use of qualitative interviews has strengths and weaknesses. The chief strength of the method used was that it allowed the researcher to obtain a depth of understanding on the subject that a quantitative survey would not have allowed. However, many of the findings relied on the researcher’s interpretation of what was said during the interview. Furthermore, there may have been a degree of self-report bias. The presence of the

interviewer may have influenced the responses of the interviewee to some extent. This is an inherent problem with interview-based studies. Babbie (2004, p. 300) stated that: "Sometimes we put our respondent under pressure to look good. Sometimes we put the question in a particular context that omits altogether the most relevant answers." This is highly relevant to a study of reality television. Did interviewees accurately report their TV viewing habits in the presence of a researcher? Did they actually remember how many hours of TV they watch? Did the presence of the interviewer bias the interview in any way? The use of self-reports is always a risky venture because the researcher is entirely reliant on an individual's willingness to provide accurate and unbiased information. The questionable reliability of data emerging from the interviews should be taken into consideration throughout this exploration.

Question Development

The questions were developed from the framework established in the literature review. Four categories were formed, which responded to the typology developed. This typology took into account the theories defined by McQuail et al., (1972), ideas developed by Maslow (1987), and results from other studies. Each question was therefore designed to explore one of the four categories of (a) diversion, (b) personal relationships, (c) personal identity, and (d) surveillance. These areas are expanded further in the section on key variables to follow.

Selection of Interviewees

Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 173) noted that researchers “usually select persons for interview only if their experience is central to the research problem in some way.” Because this exploratory study is an investigation of the appeal of reality TV, it follows that the interviewees were selected from those who were naturally attracted to the medium. To this end, those interviewees who wished to take part were only permitted to do so if they regularly watched at least one reality TV show each week.

The Student Union Inc. and Associated Students are the two largest governing bodies at San Jose State University. Between them, these two organizations employ more than 300 employees. Both organizations agreed to allow this study to be conducted with a number of individuals from different departments throughout the organizations. E-mail addresses were obtained for 50 individuals, who were contacted to establish their eligibility to take part in the study. A group of 20 interviewees, who watched at least the required weekly amount of reality TV or more, agreed to take part in the study. It is acknowledged that the individuals selected were not representative of the entire student body or of reality TV viewers in general. Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 122) stated that:

Most sampling decisions in qualitative inquiry are not based on procedures of random probability, in which every element of a population has an equal and independent chance of being selected. Therefore, the results from qualitative studies cannot legitimately be extrapolated to the

population from which they were drawn. This is not normally considered to be a problem in interpretive social science for two reasons:

- (1) Qualitative studies do not produce data that can be subjected to statistical procedures that allow generalization of a population; and
- (2) qualitative studies focus on the social practices and meanings of people in a specific historical or cultural context.

However, the pool of individuals, from which interviewees were selected, represented a wide mix of population characteristics. The group included both men and women from the ages of 19 to 52 years old. Individuals came from various ethnic backgrounds, from different socioeconomic strata, and had different academic and social interests. Therefore, although the group did not match the demographic richness of either the entire TV-viewing population at San Jose State University or the reality TV-viewing population on the whole, it did exhibit what Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 123) call "maximum variation sampling." Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 123) stated that maximum variation sampling "taps into a wide range of qualities, attributes, situations, or incidents within the boundaries of the research problem."

This study therefore precludes any generalization of the results to the San Jose State University population or to the reality TV-viewing population as a whole. Furthermore, because interviewees could only be questioned on the reality show that they watched at the time of the study, the results should similarly not be judged to be representative of all reality TV programs.

Research Categories

To investigate the research questions in connection with the findings of the literature review, a framework of four key research categories was developed. These are discussed below:

Diversion

McQuail et al. (1972) divided this category into three subsections, (a) escape from the constraints of routine, (b) escape from burdens or problems, and (c) emotional release. Additionally, Zillmann (1985) commented that particular personality types were attracted to certain types of programs. He also posited that mood was a relevant factor in program choice. The survey was therefore constructed to explore the following areas:

- (a) Is diversion the most important factor for viewers? Do they watch reality TV for no other reason than to be entertained?
- (b) Do subjects watch reality shows to escape the routine of their daily lives, or is reality TV part of their routine?
- (c) Is reality TV relevant to its audience? Is it important for problem solving?
- (d) Is reality TV important for emotional release? Does mood play a role in program selection?
- (e) What elements of reality shows make them especially entertaining and attractive?

Personal Relationships

McQuail et al., (1972) noted two types of personal relationships. They posited that audiences build relationships with characters in shows and with other viewers. Maslow (1987) noted that people require the feeling that they belong in modern society. Clearly, television offers otherwise disparate groups of individuals a common ground or a shared experience. Also, audience members relate to characters in shows by empathizing with them or, at the other extreme, by rejecting them. The study will explore these concepts by analyzing the following areas:

- (a) Is watching reality shows a social event for the individual or do viewers watch the programs alone?
- (b) Do individuals find that they often discuss what they have seen on television with friends, family, or colleagues?
- (c) To what extent do viewers associate themselves with people in reality shows?
- (d) Is it easier to associate with people in reality shows than with celebrities?

Personal Identity

McQuail et al., (1972) considered this category from three angles, (a) personal reference, (b) reality exploration, and (c) value reinforcement. Maslow (1987) also developed the idea of the human desire for prestige and

reputation in the formulation of personal identity. The interviews were designed to establish the following:

- (a) Do members of the audience measure themselves against cast members in reality shows? Do they wonder how they would react in the same situations?
- (b) Do audience members feel that they can hypothetically explore certain situations by seeing them enacted in reality shows?
- (c) Are reality shows ever used by individuals to explore moral issues? Do viewers, for example, discuss moral dilemmas in reality shows with other viewers?
- (d) Do viewers of reality shows derive enjoyment from watching how participants respond to certain moral problems? Do they ever apply this to their own lives?
- (e) Some shows, like *American Idol* for example, often show contestants in a humiliating manner. Is any pleasure derived from seeing contestants humiliated on television?

Surveillance

The literature review suggested that some TV genres, particularly news and documentary, serve to inform people about the world in which they live. It could be argued that reality TV serves to inform ordinary people about how other ordinary people behave and live. These programs give the viewer an insight into

how people behave in abnormal situations (*Survivor*) or how ordinary people aspire to achieve huge feats (*Fear Factor*). It can give people a chance to show talents, which would otherwise go unnoticed (*American Idol*). Reality TV may also show famous people in more everyday situations (*The Newlyweds*). The interviews were also designed to explore the following areas:

- (a) Do audiences perceive reality shows to be real?
- (b) Do audiences believe that they learn anything from reality shows?

Interview Questions

Diversion: Escape

1. Do you routinely watch any reality shows every week?
2. If so, which ones? (List reality shows as prompt)
3. Do you look forward to any reality shows being on TV?
4. Do you watch the show(s), because you happen to be free that night?
Or is it important that you don't miss them?
5. Have you ever set your video recorder to tape a show if you were going to miss it?
6. What are your main reasons for watching reality television?
7. What are you doing when you watch a reality TV show?
8. When you are watching a show, do you find that you have to concentrate hard?
9. What especially attracts you to the program(s) that you watch?

Diversion: Mood and Emotional Release

1. When you have watched a reality TV show, do you find that you are in a better or worse frame of mind?
2. Does reality TV affect your mood?
3. Would you be more attracted to watching a reality show if you were in a particular mood?
4. What kinds of people or personalities do you think are most likely to be attracted to watching reality television?
5. Can you explain why particular personality types would be attracted to watching reality television?

Personal Relationships: Relationships with People in the Media

1. Do you identify with any of the people in reality shows that you watch?
2. Do you find it easier to identify with people in reality shows or with celebrities?
3. Do you think that people in reality shows are more like celebrities or more like ordinary people?
4. What do you find attracts you to the people in the reality shows that you watch?
5. Do you think that the people in that reality shows that you watch physically look like ordinary people that you might see on the street?
6. How do you think people are selected to take part in reality shows?

Personal Relationships: Relationships with Viewers

1. Do you watch reality shows alone or with other people?
2. Is watching reality television an important social event in your household?
3. Do your friends or family watch the same reality shows as you?
4. Do you ever discuss reality shows with friends or family members?
5. Do you think that it is socially important to be abreast of what is going on in reality television?
6. Do you hear people on campus discussing reality shows?

Personal Identity: Personal Reference

1. Have you ever considered taking part in a reality show?
2. Why or why not?
3. What do you think it would be like?
4. When you are watching a reality show, do you ever contemplate how you would react if you were put in a similar situation?
5. Do you especially like anyone that you have seen in a reality show lately?
6. Do you especially dislike anyone that you have seen in a reality show lately?
7. Do you ever measure yourself against people in reality shows?
8. Do you ever feel strongly about any of the decisions made by any of the participants on the reality shows that you watch?

Personal Identity: Reality Exploration and Value Reinforcement

1. Do you think that reality shows explore any important themes and issues for our lives?
2. How do you think that reality shows are made?
3. Do reality shows explore any moral issues?
4. Do you think that some of the themes covered by reality shows apply to your own life?

Personal Identity: Relationship to Others

1. How does it make you feel when someone in a reality show that you are watching triumphs?
2. How do you feel when someone fails?
3. Does this depend on whether you like the person in question?
4. How do you feel when someone in a reality show is humiliated?
5. How do you generally feel about people who take part in reality shows?
6. What kinds of people do you think might be attracted to taking part in a reality show?

Surveillance

1. Do you think that reality shows are like real life?
2. Do you learn anything from reality shows?
3. If so, what do you think you learn?

Demographic Information

1. Interviewer to note gender.
2. Interviewer to note ethnicity.
3. How old are you?
4. Who do you live with?
5. Are you a student or staff member?
6. How many hours a week do you work?
7. How many hours a week do you study?
8. How many units are you enrolled in?
9. What is your major?
10. Which reality TV shows do you watch?
11. How many hours do you spend watching TV each week, including rented movies?
12. How many hours do you watch reality shows each week?
13. What other social interests do you have?

Analysis

Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 211) noted three different phases of data analysis in the qualitative research model. These were a) data management, b) data reduction, and c) conceptual development. The raw data collected during the interview process was managed in accordance with these three steps.

First, data was organized and categorized by question. Each set of responses was compared to other questions falling into that particular category until all four of the research categories and the demographics had been studied in this way. Yin (2003, p. 111) referred to this as “relying on theoretical propositions,” whereby data is organized around an existing theoretical framework. Second, data that was not relevant to the research questions was separated from pertinent data. Finally, the data was analyzed by category for patterns, themes, and contrasts emerging across different interviews. Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 210) referred to this stage of the analysis as “the process of labeling and breaking down (or decontextualizing) raw data and reconstituting them into patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions.” The decontextualized raw data was thus recontextualized according to the theoretical framework.

On completion of this stage of analysis, dominant themes and patterns in the responses were noted and the findings were inked back to the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Overview of the Interviews

Each interview lasted for about 1 hour, although some were longer than others. Some interviewees were more comfortable or knowledgeable and were able to give more lengthy answers and some digressed more than others. Questions were generally answered in the order that they were asked. However, sometimes answers to particular questions were also relevant to other aspects of the research. This meant that the analysis of the data was not always linear. Much of the information was found in asides or digressions from the main point of discussion. Moreover, interviewees sometimes gave several different answers to one question.

Socioeconomic Background of the Group

Of the 50 candidates who were originally contacted to take part in the study, 20 responded favorably. This meant that they watched a reality show regularly each week and they were willing and able to take part in an interview.

The group of interviewees was fairly diverse. Of the 20 individuals, 15 were female and 5 were male. The youngest was 19 and the oldest 52.

Thirteen interviewees were full-time students with part-time jobs on campus. Seven interviewees were not currently enrolled as students, but worked on a full-time basis at San Jose State University. Eight individuals worked a full 40-hour week and the rest worked less than 20 hours. Living conditions were also varied. Some individuals lived with other family members, some lived with friends, and some lived alone. Those who were studying at San Jose State University had a wide variety of majors, from engineering to kinesiology.

Viewing Habits of the Group

The viewing habits of the group were equally diverse. Thirteen members of the group watched less than 10 hours of television a week. Five participants watched TV for more than 10 hours a week. Two of these individuals watched TV for about 40 hours a week. In terms of watching reality television shows, 14 interviewees watched reality TV for less than 5 hours each week; 4 interviewees watched between 5 and 10 hours of reality television a week; and 2 interviewees watched between 15 and 20 hours of reality television per week.

Individuals watched a variety of programs. Most people watched more than a single show, although two individuals only watched a single show regularly. Shows included *Survivor*, *The Real World*, *Road Rules*, *The Apprentice*, *Average Joe*, *The Newlyweds*, *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *The Littlest Groom*, *Monster House*, *Monster Garage*, *Pimp My Ride*, *American Chopper*, *Joe*

Millionaire, Fear Factor, Extreme Makeovers, Trading Spaces, Fake A Date, Cheaters, Eliminate, American idol, The Osbournes, and America's Top Model.

Once the interview had established which reality shows an individual watched, the questions explored each of the key research categories identified in the previous chapter. Because the analysis of the responses to the questions was done according to these categories, the following presentation of the results was organized in the same fashion. The ensuing quotations are taken directly from the interviews conducted between March 2004 and May 2004.

Results by Research Category

Diversion

As discussed in the literature review, diversion may be analyzed from various angles. An individual may turn to reality TV to escape from daily routine, to escape from problems, or to find emotional release. Furthermore, elements within reality programs, like the use of suspense, unpredictability, and risk may be a factor in the attraction of a show. The conflict arising from bringing together protagonists from different backgrounds was also considered important.

Moreover, the mood or personality of the audience member may also have a significant role. Reality TV was likened to sports in the literature review, in which affinities were built with certain protagonists over others.

Escape from routines and problems. First, interviewees were asked if

(a) they looked forward to shows being on TV, (b) if they watched the shows because they happened to be free or if they made a special effort to be free for the shows, and (c) if they had ever chosen to record a show if they were going to miss it. This offered some insight into the role of reality TV in an individual's routine. Was reality TV an escape from their routine or part of it?

Most interviewees agreed that they looked forward to a particular show, but they were eager to point out that this depended on the particular show. An interviewee stated that, "it depends on how interesting they are. Some of them can be boring, uninteresting, so I'll change the channel real fast." Another interviewee added that, although she looked forward to most reality shows, she felt that some of them were "getting sort of repetitive and copying each other." Some interviewees stated that they did not actively search for reality shows, but would end up watching them if they happened to be free. Others said they would be prepared to make a special effort to be free for a particular show or that they would only watch a show if they happened to be free. These individuals gave the impression that they had busy schedules and tended to work TV into their routine, rather than work their lives around television. One of them stated: "I watch them because I am free. I don't stress over it if I miss an episode or something." It appeared that it was important for most interviewees that reality TV fit into their schedule. One commented:

I guess the reason why I became addicted to it was because it fits into my schedule. I mean, if it was in the middle of the day when I had class,

there's no way, but on Thursday, when *The Apprentice* is on, we will make sure that we get home in time from grocery shopping to watch it.

Most interviewees had never programmed a video recorder to watch a

show if they were going to miss it. Some had also said that the shows were repeated so regularly on television that there was no need for this.

Interviewees were also asked what attracted them to watch reality TV.

Did they watch reality TV to escape their problems and daily routines or were other factors mentioned?

Few interviewees reported that they watched reality TV solely to be entertained. When asked why she watched reality TV, one interviewee replied, "entertainment value. Just mindless entertainment." Some individuals watched reality programs because they thought they were funny. Some felt that reality television was relaxing. One interviewee said: "If I end up watching a show, it is because I have got a little break. It means it's not an exercise night and I'm just sitting down to relax, usually with my daughters." Interviewees reported that they enjoyed seeing how people reacted in different situations. They enjoyed the unpredictability, the human element, and the competitive nature of the shows. One of them remarked: "It's entertaining, because people do terrible things for competition. I like the competition element." Those interviewees who had seen makeover shows said that they enjoyed the good feeling it gave them seeing someone benefit from a makeover on the show. Many interviewees said that they liked watching reality TV because they felt it was more real than other

shows. One said: "I think because it's real, like there's actual real emotions and I mean actors are real people, but their confrontations aren't real and I think that's what attracts me." Another felt that reality TV offered a break from the usual content of other programming. When asked what attracted her to the format, she said: "I think it's different than regular TV that I watch, that I religiously watch, is *Survivor*, because I think it's more real. It doesn't involve depressing things, shooting, killing, all that sex and drugs."

Interviewees also gave other reasons for watching. One said that she was attracted to watching *Survivor* by the media hype surrounding the show. Several individuals felt that they could relate to the people in reality shows and many liked the drama or dynamic between the participants. One stated: "I like to see how people will react in group environments. It's kind of a learning experience to see if that truly is, you know, if they are as cutthroat as you would like to believe or not believe. What kind of ethics people have."

Later in the interview individuals were asked if they especially liked or disliked any of the people that they had seen in the reality shows that they watched. Almost all of the interviewees did have people that they both liked and disliked. One remarked that, "I think you root for some and root against others." For most interviewees, the conflict between protagonists was a key element in their enjoyment of the show. An interviewee said that, "some of them are just jerks and then I wish they were kicked out, but then it creates the whole conflict

that makes me want to watch it.” Another interviewee was asked if the presence of an antagonist in the reality show he watched would make him want to switch channels. He responded:

You know, it attracted me more, because you wanted to see them fall. You look for the conflict. You look for the two characters that are walking toward a showdown. You want to see it happen, because you want to see the one you like get the better of the one you don't.

As discussed in the literature review, watching reality TV can clearly be likened to watching sports. Affinities were clearly being built with certain participants over others, and part of the attraction of the format was witnessing the victory of the favored protagonist.

Interviewees were asked if they combined watching reality TV with other activities, or if they gave it their undivided attention. They were also asked if they felt they had to concentrate when watching reality TV. Their answers would give some indication of how reality TV fit into their routines.

It was evident that almost every interviewee felt that reality TV did not require focused concentration. It was an activity that could be combined with other things. One interviewee said that it was important to concentrate on *Survivor*, “because of alliances that were being formed.” Similarly, one interviewee said it was important to concentrate on *The Apprentice* “to observe the different characters.” Three interviewees said that one of the advantages of reality TV was that it did not demand focused concentration or loyal viewing. One

stated: "You can pretty much do what you want and you can come and go as you want to. You can check back in five minutes." Another interviewee stated:

You can basically miss all the middle, just pick up the beginning of the show and the end of the show and that works also for the beginning, not just of an episode, but like the entire show. A lot of time, I will completely miss all of the shows in the middle and just see the end, because you see so much of what's going on just on the news. They talk about it so much in the morning shows.

An interviewee said that he only needed to have a show on as background noise to get an idea of what was going on in it. He commented:

Usually I think I just hear it and I kind of like visualize what's going on, but eventually I will glance every now and then, but it's mostly like an auditory thing, where I'll just hear it and I'll do something else and I get the same experience without watching it.

Almost all interviewees would combine watching reality TV with other activities. These included eating, doing homework, answering e-mails, surfing the Internet, and household chores such as laundry.

Mood and emotional release. To investigate the role of mood and emotional release in program selection, interviewees were asked (a) if reality TV affected their mood, (b) in what way it affected their mood, (c) if they would be more likely to watch reality TV if they were in a particular mood, and (d) what kinds of personality types they felt would be particularly attracted to watching reality TV.

Most interviewees felt that reality television did affect their mood. Some said that their views depended on the show. One stated: "It depends. If it's

emotional and I like the people, I get all emotional too, but you know, usually it's just good entertainment, good fun."

Of those interviewees who did believe that reality TV affected their mood, the majority thought that the effect was a positive one. Again, this depended on the show. An interviewee said:

I think that after *The Bachelorette*, I am probably in a better frame of mind, because it's about happiness and romance and fantasy and I think that sort of mellows me out and it kind of puts you in a happy place. *Survivor*, sometimes makes me frustrated, because I don't want the person that got voted off, voted off.

Another interviewee felt frustrated after a show, because he would have to wait until the next week to find out what was going to happen next. He stated: "It affects me temporarily, but then after the show's over I just go back to real life and forget what happened."

More than half of the interviewees would not be attracted to watch reality TV if they were in a particular mood. Some interviewees were unsure. A few individuals said that reality TV would uplift their spirits if they were down and some agreed that they would be more likely to watch reality TV if they were in a particular mood. Some interviewees said that exercising was a better way to cope with feeling down than watching reality TV.

Interviewees were asked what personality types they felt would be especially attracted to watch reality TV. Responses were varied. Many adjectives describing positive attributes were used. Individuals described the

audience as motivated, open-minded, positive, sociable, flexible, outgoing, and less conservative. Some interviewees said that reality TV was geared toward younger audiences of 30 years old and younger. One stated that the audience was “probably younger, habitual TV watchers, you know, come home and watch TV all night.” Another said:

I see a lot of young people watching it. They were raised with television, I think, whereas some of us that are parents or grandparents, TV wasn’t necessarily our whole focus. It was a special time of night when you would turn it on for a special show. It wasn’t on all the time.

Three interviewees said that the average viewer was attracted to reality TV because of the drama, celebrity, and excitement. One interviewee said that people who watched *The Bachelorette* were “the same people that have to read tabloid-type newspapers.” He carefully distinguished *The Bachelorette* audience from that of the makeover shows. He felt that the audience for the latter would “maybe want to learn a little bit.” Additionally, some interviewees said that the reality TV genre was so diverse that it was practically impossible to distinguish personality traits for its audience. Similarly, they said that reality TV appealed to all ages. One interviewee noted: “Immediately I thought younger, but then I think of my family and my mom and dad love those shows. I think it depends on the show. There are so many out there, so many different ones, so it depends.” Also, some interviewees mentioned that much of the reality TV audience was accidental. One stated that, “there are people that like watching reality TV and then people that just get sucked into it.” An additional comment was that “there

is a wide range of people that watch it. People like me, I watch just because it's there."

In summary, reality TV was being used as an escape to some extent. Many interviewees felt that it was entertaining, relaxing, and humorous. Some felt that reality TV was more real than other TV formats and it was perhaps also a welcome break from other types of programming. Many interviewees also enjoyed the competition and the voyeuristic element of watching the dynamic between the protagonists involved in the shows. Many reality shows could be likened to televised sports. However, the responses to this series of questions indicated that fundamentally, reality TV was part of the weekly routine for most interviewees. It was attractive as a format, because it demanded little focused attention or loyalty and it fit into people's schedules. As such, reality programs could also be used as a background to other activities.

It was also evident that reality TV had a direct effect on the mood of the viewer. Most interviewees felt that it had a positive effect. However, it was difficult to establish whether people used reality TV for emotional release and as an escape from problems, as most interviewees felt that they would not watch reality TV if they were in a particular mood. This suggested that mood was an insignificant factor in determining program selection. Similarly, interviewees had very different perceptions of the reality TV audience. The reality genre was so diverse that it was impossible to generalize about the reality TV audience.

Personal Relationships

The literature review indicated that television viewers tended to build relationships with other viewers and furthermore, viewers also tended to build relationships with people in the media. It was also suggested that this served to provide a sense of unity among disparate groups of individuals. This need to belong was identified by Maslow (1987) as one of the basic human needs. Therefore, it was important to establish whether individuals discussed reality programs with others, whether they identified with people in reality shows, and whether watching reality shows could be described as a social event. Several questions were designed to explore personal relationships.

Relationships with people in the media. Interviewees were asked if they identified with any of the protagonists in the reality TV shows that they watched. They were also asked to compare this to how much they felt they could identify with professional actors or celebrities.

Many interviewees said that they could identify with people in reality shows. One interviewee stated:

I might look at them and say, you know, I would react differently, or I would do that the same, as opposed to I might associate their decisions or their athletic performance with what I could match or do better. So, it's more of a comparison, compare and contrast, you know, than John is totally cool, I want to be like him.

Some interviewees said they did not identify with the people in reality shows. Five individuals said that it was nevertheless easier to identify with

people in reality shows than with celebrities. One remarked that the identification process depended on the show—he could identify with people in home-improvement shows, for example, but he could not identify with people in more sensationalist shows like *The Bachelor*. Another interviewee could not identify with people in reality shows, although she did state that she could see characteristics of her friends in reality show protagonists. Some interviewees felt that it would be easier to identify with fictional characters or celebrities than with people in reality shows. This was partly because they could not imagine themselves achieving some of the feats of *Survivor* and *Fear Factor*. When asked if she had more in common with people in reality shows than celebrities, an interviewee said: “They’re a little more real world, so it’s easier to see them as people than as big stars, who you only see as a star even though they are just people.” An interviewee said that she could identify with most of the people on *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, because “the people aren’t perfect and they don’t have stylists.” Another individual said:

Well, people in reality shows are being themselves and going through the same things that we might be going through on their shows, versus how celebrities are acting out something that’s written by someone. Granted, sometimes they do have, you know, they’ll act out real life situations . . . but for the most part, you’re seeing what’s going on in people’s lives and you can relate it to your life.

Interviewees were also asked about their perceptions of people who take part in reality shows. Were they like celebrities or were they more like ordinary people? How did they think the producers selected these people?

Most interviewees commented that they felt that people in reality shows were generally closer to being like ordinary people than celebrities. Four individuals said that people in reality shows started off as ordinary people, but often turned into celebrities during the course of the show. One of these interviewees remarked:

They are having their so-called 15 minutes of fame, but I think that they are real people put into a celebrity situation and I think that sometimes they change a little bit. They change how they act according to the TV show and then maybe they'll go back to being real people or maybe it does change them.

Some of the people who were interviewed said that the networks manipulated our perception of people taking part in reality shows. They felt that the networks wanted the audience to believe that protagonists were ordinary people. These individuals also said that protagonists were dressed up or glamorized for the camera. One person remarked: "I think *The Bachelorette* is sugar-coated a little bit. I think in *The Bachelorette*, we as viewers probably really see what the networks want us to see, whereas in *Survivor*, I don't necessarily feel that way." Few interviewees said that people in reality shows were more like celebrities than ordinary people.

When asked whether people taking part in reality shows physically looked more like ordinary people than celebrities, the answers reversed. Most interviewees did not think that people in reality shows physically looked like the average person on the street. Although some individuals commented that every

show was different, most of those interviewed agreed that people in reality shows were generally better looking than the average person. Interviewees characterized reality show participants as more glamorous, more attractive, and in better physical shape.

With this in mind, interviewees were asked how they imagined the producers selected people to take part in reality shows. The answers demonstrated that interviewees were generally aware of the presence of the producers. Many said that participants were selected to fit the profile of a particular show and to appeal to the desired target audience. One individual commented: "I think it depends on the show, I mean, what are they trying to market? If they are trying to market sex, then they are going to have a cast of sexy and handsome people." Another person said: "I think they look for people that the target audience would relate to. I think they're looking for smart, attractive people that America will respond well to."

Most interviewees mentioned the importance of physical attributes. They felt that contestants needed to be pleasant looking. However, although physical attributes were important, this had to be combined with strong personalities and a degree of screen presence. The most apparent trend was that interviewees felt that the success of a show hinged on achieving the right mix of personalities to induce as much drama, excitement, and conflict. One interviewee said:

For say *Survivor*, they are trying to market it to everybody, so they have the older woman, the older man. They always have to have an attractive

young person. That person is probably fit, you know, could be borderline model. Same thing with maybe another gentleman. Then they have almost like the outsider or geeky-type person and then they always have to have somebody that is going to cause trouble. And I think a lot of times, they pick people that they know, for most of the shows, will be very talkative and can be rude in a sense, because they want the drama.

Another interviewee said:

I definitely think they pick people that are going to look good on TV. So, they are not going to pick somebody that is ugly or unattractive. I think that's a major thing. Next, I think if they are screening then they will pick people who kind of, I guess, engage others or kind of cause drama, because without any conflicts, there wouldn't really be a show. They want someone who will bring some conflict or personality to the show.

One individual felt that the whole purpose of a show was to create conflict

"so that we want to watch it more and more." Another interviewee also felt that

the success of a show depended on the presence of conflict. She stated:

I mean everything is revolving around ratings and money, pretty much, so if they're looking for a recipe for a successful show, they are going to look for number one, glamour. Number two, they have to find some sort of source of conflict, or they are going to create conflict, definitely.

Clearly, the dynamic between those people selected to be in a given reality show is important for viewers.

Relationships with other viewers. The second area of discussion in the literature review explored how viewers create relationships with other viewers or other people through the medium of reality television. To explore this, interviewees were asked (a) if they watched reality TV alone or with others, (b) if watching reality shows was a social event in their household, (c) if friends, family, or colleagues watched the same reality shows as they did, (d) if they discussed

material from the shows with others, and (e) if they ever overheard other people talking about reality shows on and around campus.

Most of those who were interviewed did not watch reality TV alone. Generally interviewees watched with other family members or with roommates depending on their situation. Only one interviewee said she always watched reality TV alone. Furthermore, viewers generally felt that watching a reality TV show was an important social event in their household. An interviewee remarked: "It brings us together, you know. It's like tonight, we are going to watch this, you know, and we plan it." Another interviewee added: "We actually have a big-screen TV and watch it as a family sometimes and then we just chat about it. It's kind of like one of those social gatherings, like family dinner, only it's a reality TV show instead."

Many interviewees had other friends, family members, or colleagues who watched the same reality TV shows as them. Similarly, interviewees agreed that they would often discuss material from reality shows with other people. Most individuals also agreed that they often heard others talking about reality shows on campus. However, despite this, the majority of interviewees did not feel that it was socially important to be abreast of what was happening in reality shows. However, some interviewees mentioned the fact that talking about trivia such as reality TV was good for "breaking the ice" in a relationship. Another interviewee described it as "water-cooler" talk. One interviewee indicated that reality TV was

an important part of our popular culture. She explained, however, that it was not of particular importance whether you did or did not watch reality TV. Another person said that, although it was somewhat important to be abreast of what was going on in reality shows, this was not as important as keeping up with the news, for example.

In summary, interviewees clearly could identify with people in reality TV shows more than they could with actors or celebrities. Most felt that people in reality shows resembled ordinary people. It was apparent that interviewees built relationships with protagonists in reality shows to some extent. Reality TV was also an activity that people generally liked to share with others. Interviewees enjoyed watching the shows with other people and furthermore, they enjoyed discussing the shows afterward. The literature review discussed the interactive and participatory qualities of reality television, which was evident from the interviews. Clearly, reality TV was being used to create a sense of community and shared experience, as discussed in the literature review. Moreover, reality TV was being used to fulfill Maslow's (1987) need to belong. However, most interviewees were not of the opinion that reality TV was socially important.

Personal Identity

The notion of personal identity construction through television was discussed in three ways in the literature review. It was argued that viewers used

television as (a) a form of personal reference, (b) for reality exploration, and (c) to reinforce existing values.

Personal reference. Interviewees were asked about their views on taking part in reality shows. They were also asked if they related situations in reality shows to their own lives and how strongly they had felt about any of the decisions that participants had made in the shows they watched. This series of questions was designed to investigate how viewers related episodes in reality TV shows to their own frame of reference.

Most interviewees said that they would not wish to take part in a reality show. Most tended to have a negative idea of what the experience would be like. Few had given any serious thought to the idea of trying to get on a reality show. Most interviewees said that taking part in a reality show would be invasive and would change their lives. One person felt uneasy about taking part in a reality show because she believed that the producers of such shows readily manipulated the footage to portray people in a negative manner. However, almost all of those interviewed agreed that they often related episodes in reality shows to their own lives. Interviewees remarked that they often speculated on how they would react in many of the situations presented in reality shows. One stated: "I always wonder how I would react to that situation, like if I would do what they do, or if I would do it differently."

Most interviewees said that they measured themselves against people in reality shows. One interviewee stated:

You know if there's a situation that's relevant to something that's happened in my life, you might think the way they acted was pretty good, or whatever. It was a good response, you know. I could actually do that maybe.

Another interviewee remarked: "The one that I think of is *Real World*, where they pick people that are so different from us that we relate to one and we don't really relate to the other ones, so that we look at ourselves differently." One interviewee also remarked that this type of comparison was very natural, stating: "In most instances, you paint yourself in a better light than the competitors, so of course I am going to be a better athlete, or I am going to be a better diplomat." Few interviewees said that they did not compare themselves to people in reality shows.

Most interviewees did not feel too strongly about many of the decisions made by people in reality shows. They generally did not take the issues raised that seriously. One remarked: "I would definitely not base my decision-making skills on them. I am pretty solid in my own values and my own opinions that I would make my own decision and they're entitled to, because they base it on theirs." Another remarked: "Even though it's reality, it's still television and it's not real anyway. Some people make dumb decisions, but it's not like huge, you know. I don't get particularly upset if they make a bad decision. It doesn't matter."

Those interviewees that did feel strongly about decisions made on reality shows all made reference to *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé*. This show depicted a young woman who lied to her family about her choice of fiancé so that she could win a large amount of money. Interviewees generally felt that this was immoral.

The next series of questions about the variable of personal identity were designed to explore how interviewees related to participants in reality shows. They were asked (a) how they felt when participants failed or won, (b) how they felt when a participant was humiliated in some way, and (c) what kinds of people took part in reality shows and for what reasons.

It was clear from the responses that interviewees tended to favor certain participants over others in most shows. They hoped for the victory of certain participants and were entertained by their victory, much like in sports. One interviewee remarked that, “if it’s someone I like, it makes me feel really good, because I know they are going to move on further, but if it’s someone I don’t like, it frustrates me.” This partisanship was often accompanied by a strong code of ethics and moral standards in the interviews. Most interviewees wanted participants to be treated fairly in the shows—winners had to deserve victory; losers had to deserve defeat. One interviewee said: “I think it goes back to the morals. If they played it morally and ethically, then they deserve the money.” Interestingly, few interviewees thought that the competitions in reality shows

were contrived. One stated that, “sometimes, I wish other people would win than the actual winners, just because you can really tell they are giving effort, whereas it’s almost like the winner was already set up to win.”

Similarly, most of those interviewed did not enjoy watching shows that humiliated contestants. If this were the case, interviewees often said that they would switch channels. One interviewee remarked: “I probably would stop watching it. I think that when you get to the point where it’s got to get to humiliating people, it’s not funny and it’s not interesting any more.” Some interviewees favored watching participants being humiliated. One of them stated: “I have no feelings for them. It doesn’t matter. They put themselves in that position, so they have to be humiliated.”

Interviewees generally described participants in reality shows in a positive manner. Many felt that they were brave, outgoing, courageous, competitive, athletic, and fun loving. Most said that participants were on the shows because they wanted to challenge themselves. Some interviewees differentiated between shows. They said, for example, that *Survivor* attracted adventurous people, whereas *The Bachelor* attracted people who hoped to achieve celebrity through being on the show. Some interviewees felt that participants took part in reality shows because they wanted to become famous. Some also described participants as egotistical.

Reality exploration and value reinforcement. Interviewees were also asked questions that delved into the notions of reality exploration and value reinforcement. They were asked (a) if they felt that reality shows explored important themes and issues, (b) if reality shows explored moral issues, and (c) how relevant they thought the themes in reality shows were to their own lives.

Some interviewees said that reality TV was entirely trivial. One stated: “They don’t explore anything really important. They try to make a mockery of life.” However, most interviewees were somewhat mixed in their responses. They largely felt that the relative importance of the themes discussed in reality shows depended on the show in question. Some of those interviewed felt that important themes were perhaps touched upon, but were not explored in great detail. One interviewee stated:

It’s totally trivial. I think the potential is there to explore something—and that may be the next manifestation of reality TV, that they actually look at social issues and they look at situations that matter—but in general, it’s a microcosm of society and they put a bunch of people together that match a certain personality profile and you see what happens. It’s like a psychology experiment.

More than half of the interviewees said that reality TV shows explored moral issues, although many expressed the opinion that moral issues were not explored in any depth. One interviewee suggested that shows used moral issues: “I think it probably exploits moral issues. I think it probably looks at sex and sexuality and relationships and at some level, it trivializes them, you know.

So, I think it dilutes the value across society.” Some interviewees stated that all reality shows ignored moral issues.

In summary, interviewees clearly related experiences in reality television to their own lives. They imagined themselves in similar situations as participants and measured themselves against them. This suggests that reality TV is being used to assess self-image, as discussed in the literature review. It was evident that watching reality television could also be likened to watching competitive athletics. One party was often favored above another and their victory was entertaining to the viewer. Similar to sports, interviewees expected reality TV to be bound to certain rules and ethics, which assured that participants were treated fairly. The literature review discussed the importance of television in reinforcing traditional values. It could be argued that this notion was clearly evident for reality TV viewers. However, most interviewees did not seem to take the issues raised in reality television programming too seriously. Complex moral issues and issues of social importance were not explored in any depth through reality television. In this respect, it could not be argued that reality television was definitively important for reality exploration.

Surveillance

The final research category in the framework was that of surveillance. This refers to how an individual desires to know and understand the world. In the literature review, it was suggested that despite the synthetic qualities of reality

television, much could be learned from it, both by its viewers and about its viewers. Interviewees were asked (a) if they thought that reality shows were like real life, and (b) if they learned anything from reality shows.

Learning and understanding. Interviewees did not perceive reality shows to be a reflection of real life. Those who argued that reality TV reflected certain elements of reality generally agreed that shows presented an exaggerated or synthetic version of it. One interviewee said that “they would be more boring if they were totally reality.” Only 2 of the 20 interviewees said they believed reality shows were like real life.

Some interviewees stated that they did not learn anything from watching reality television. Some, however, explained how they had learned practical skills from watching makeover shows. One interviewee commented:

You know what, in these kind of shows that are like remodeling, sometimes the people that do the remodeling are good and you like what they do and you say wow, they can take some piece of fabric and fill in a wall and decorate, you know. That’s interesting. I would never have thought of that myself. So, those shows I really like, because you learn the most from them and it gives you something that you can use in real life.

Many interviewees also said that they could learn about themselves, about others, and about relationships from watching reality television. One remarked, “I think my husband and I will talk about the decisions they made and how we would make a different decision.” Another interviewee stated:

If I were to watch *The Real World*, it would be that I’ll steer clear of those people, kind of thing, but in *The Apprentice*, you learn a little bit about

corporate business, about the top people, their success, how they gain success, and kind of the steps that they take—how they think.

Almost all interviewees clearly understood that reality television presented a synthetic view of reality. In this respect, reality television could not be aligned with news or documentary programs in shaping how audiences view the world. Interviewees were not using reality TV to explore or define their worlds. However, many interviewees clearly learned something from reality TV, whether this was on a superficial and practical level or on a spiritual and emotional level.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Before a summary of the conclusions is discussed, it is important to review the original research questions, which prompted the researcher to investigate reality television and to conduct this exploratory study. This study was designed to explore these three research questions:

1. How relevant is the uses and gratifications paradigm to the exploration of reality television?
2. What motivates audiences to watch reality TV?
3. What audience needs are gratified by reality TV?

The uses and gratifications paradigm clearly provides one possible framework for the study of reality television. It established a basic structure for the analysis of audience needs and motivations. Audiences are clearly attracted to watching reality shows because they derive certain gratifications from the format. Diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance are key determinants of audience needs and motivations toward the genre.

As the theoretical approach described in the literature review from McQuail et al., (1972) indicated, interviewees were attracted to watching reality television as a form of diversion. Interviewees watched reality shows because they needed a break from their routines. Watching reality TV was regarded as a form of relaxation, as a source of fun, and as an entertaining distraction. The

interviews also demonstrated that reality television could be incorporated into the viewers' routines. It demanded little concentration, so it could be combined with other activities. Viewers tended to watch reality shows while they were doing other things. Furthermore, reality television did not demand any kind of viewer loyalty. Individuals could tune in and out as their lives demanded. This would suggest that diversion was only part of the attraction. Interviewees also enjoyed reality television as a background to other activities. The elements of novelty, risk, suspense, and conflict resolution defined by Zillmann (1985) were also an important attraction for interviewees. They commented on the fact that the formats for many reality shows had grown tired and that much of the interest of the shows was in the conflict between the different characters.

Reality TV was also an important tool for emotional release. It left viewers feeling uplifted in most cases. In many ways, it could be likened to professional sports in which individuals clearly took pleasure in the triumph of favored individuals and the failure of others. This finding is similar to research results reported by Zillmann (1985), who noted the importance of victory and failure in sports. It was clear from the interviews that viewers were building relationships with protagonists that were similar to the affiliations people have for teams in sports. As such, reality television serves to reinforce the basic human values of fairness in competition.

Reality television also fulfills a social function in viewers' lives. It provides a sense of shared experience and community—viewers readily build relationships with people in reality television shows and with other viewers. McQuail et al., (1972) noted that audiences tended to identify with people in the media and that they used material from shows in conversation with other members of the viewing public. Maslow (1987) also discussed the human need to belong. The literature review provided evidence of how television could be used to reduce feelings of alienation and to bridge the generation gap. Interviewees reported that they watched reality shows with others and often talked about the shows with friends and family. Clearly, reality television was being used as a unifying factor between individuals.

Furthermore, the interviews demonstrated that viewers measured themselves against people in reality shows. The literature showed how researchers like Patkin (2003), for example, studied the role of television in shaping how viewers see themselves. This research indicated that reality shows allowed viewers to reflect on their identity through the observation of others. Similarly, Maslow (1987) discussed the human desire for self-esteem. He described how human beings naturally compared themselves to other human beings to highlight their own superiority over them. If viewers were indeed measuring themselves against protagonists in reality shows, the format was providing an outlet for self-exploration. Reality television was allowing the viewer

to play out certain life situations and hypothetically explore what their reactions to them would be. Reality television was being used as a means of self-exploration and as a learning tool. However, interviewees felt that the themes of the shows were normally not of any moral, social, or personal significance. Thus, the situations that viewers could explore were not of any fundamental importance. It was evident that people did not take the themes of reality television too seriously.

As discussed in the literature review, reality television was difficult for interviewees to define and to discuss in general terms. Interviewees found it difficult to generalize about shows as they were all so different. Interviewees were careful to point out that their views on many questions varied according to the show. Some interviewees were also confused about what types of shows they would actually categorize as reality shows.

Most important, people did not think that reality television was real. As discussed in the literature review, interviewees were highly suspect of the social reality depicted in reality TV shows. This was evident from the fact that interviewees felt that shows used manipulation techniques and editing to make the shows more exciting for viewers. Furthermore, interviewees felt that, although actors were not used in reality shows, protagonists were carefully selected for their looks and for the amount of conflict or interest they generated in the shows. Viewers are aware of the illusion of reality television, the selective

editing, scripting, and deception. It could therefore not be argued that reality television was being used as a means of surveillance or as a means of learning about the world.

Contributions to the Study of Television Media

First, this exploratory study has taken an established theoretical framework and used it to analyze a modern, growing television genre. The results indicate that the uses and gratifications perspective can be used to provide insight into a modern communications phenomena—that of reality television. It is one possible theoretical approach that can be used as a framework for the analysis of reality TV. Second, the research has demonstrated how the uses and gratifications perspective can be further supported by the incorporation of Maslow's (1987) theory of human needs.

Finally, the researcher found little academic research on reality television. This study helps to fill this research gap. The academic body has largely ignored reality television because of its base, anti-intellectual appeal. However, television has an important social function in modern society. Reality programs have some of the highest viewing figures in television. They need to be studied for this reason alone. If so many people are watching reality television, what does this tell us about them, the genre, and contemporary society? This exploratory study has contributed to a greater understanding of this

phenomenon. Thus, it provides a springboard to further explorations of the role of reality television in shaping the lives of TV viewers in the United States.

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation to this study is that it is based on a group of only 20 interviewees. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the reality TV audience as a whole. Also, the results cannot be analyzed for demographic patterns because of the small size of the group under study. In this study, there were 2 interviewees, for example, who felt that reality television was real. Interestingly, these 2 individuals were the only interviewees who watched more than 40 hours of television a week. A large-scale quantitative study would have allowed the researcher to fully explore such relationships through correlational analysis. Does confusing reality with reality television become more apparent in those who watch more television, for example? A quantitative study would provide insight into such research questions. However, a quantitative study alone would lack the richness, spontaneity, and depth of the qualitative analysis method used here. Ideally, reality television should be studied by conducting both a qualitative and quantitative analysis.

A second limitation of this study is that the reality television genre is incredibly diverse. Furthermore, there are several different sub-genres. Each of these sub-genres has a unique set of characteristics and a distinct target audience. Many of the differences between responses were related to the

diverse nature of the reality programs that interviewees watched. A distinction could be made in any future attempts to study reality television between dating shows, survival-type shows, and makeover shows, for example. However, as this study has already demonstrated, reality television is difficult to define and categorize in this manner because of the many overlapping themes and concepts. Categorization and definition are inherent problems with any study of reality television.

Directions for Future Research

Taking into account the limitations of this study, it would be valuable to conduct a series of further studies devoted to individual reality shows. Researchers could investigate the singular appeal of shows as diverse as *Survivor*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *The Bachelor*. Furthermore, a quantitative study on a large number of respondents would be enlightening. A comparison of reality television shows that are broadcast in different countries would also be interesting because many shows use the same formats, changing them only slightly to reflect the different cultural contexts.

It is important to understand what factors have led to the enduring audience appeal of certain shows. *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, for example, have been running for several years. Other shows only seem to last for a single season. What factors have led to the enduring success of *Survivor* and *Big*

Brother? Why do these shows appear to benefit from a high degree of audience loyalty?

A further study could investigate the long-term effects of reality television in shaping the major networks from an economic perspective. What proportion of the annual income of a network comes directly from reality television? How does this relate to previous traditional programming? How are other shows affected by reality television, both in terms of borrowing techniques derived from reality shows and in terms of program scheduling decisions?

Clearly, reality television appeals to many television viewers. It is ironic that, in an era when technology has facilitated digital image manipulation to such an extent, viewers are demanding footage that is more real. However, reality television is ideal for the busy lifestyle of today's television viewer. Bombarded from all directions with a constantly expanding choice of media, viewers are drawn to reality television because it wants nothing from them. It is not morally, socially, or intellectually demanding. It allows the viewer to slip into a different reality, beyond the realm of personal experience and of everyday life. This reality is used to explore the self and relationships with others from the comfort of the home. It provides a sense of community and common ground, without any real shared experience beyond four walls. Reality television extols the virtues of physical prowess, good looks, and youth. As such, the basic social structures

that reality television is conveying to its audience are highly suspect and demand academic study.

Reality television presents an exciting opportunity to break new ground on many levels. This research provides a valuable foundation for future studies to build a more comprehensive understanding of this constantly evolving mass communications phenomenon.

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