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Simply Irresistible: Reality TV Consumption Patterns

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This purpose of this study was to explore college students' consumption patterns in regard to reality television, their rationale for watching reality shows, their perceptions of the situations portrayed on these shows, and the role of social affiliation in the students' consumption of reality television. The results of focus groups indicate that while participants perceive a social stigma associated with watching reality television, they continue to watch because of the perceived escapism and social affiliation provided.

Keywords: Reality Television; Social Affiliation; Uses and Gratifications

Introduction

Extreme sports, celebrity lives, and dating shows—while the phenomenon of reality television (RT) lacks clear definition (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003), it pervades contemporary network and cable programming. Scholars in psychology and media studies, among others, have shown interest in this genre of television and its effects on modern culture. In contrast to scripted television, reality television portrays people in their natural settings. "As a presentation of non-actors in legitimately natural settings and situations working without a script, reality TV stakes its claim with viewers to regard its depictions as unadorned and spontaneous truthful documentation of natural reality" (Bagley, 2001, p. 1).

RT began to emerge as a distinctive genre in the late 1980 s (Hill & Quin, 2001). Mead (2005) defines reality programming as "as an unscripted program that shows

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real people, not actors nor athletes, active in a specific environment'' (p. 3). The assumed realistic nature of RT programming is commonly associated with the television talk-show genre. Both of these television genres are similar in that they ''create audiences by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming the bases for cultural judgment, by redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions and cultural distinctions'' (Abt & Seesholtz, 1994, p. 171). The influence of reality television is in its ostensibly accurate depiction of social experiences (Joniak, 2001).

Contradiction surrounds this television phenomenon as ''network executives say they'd be happy to be rid of it,'' yet ''still it mutates across the airwaves like a disease, growing nastier in its new forms'' (Kronke, 2004, D1). While reality shows like *Survivor* and *The Real World* struggle to maintain ratings (''Reality TV turns to race 'tribes,' '' 2006), reality shows still enjoy a solid place in the line-ups of network and cable channels. Reality shows were also a reliable source of programming for the networks during the recent Hollywood writers' strike. For a phenomenon that blossomed a few years ago, reality programming is still widespread in broadcast television (Joniak, 2001; Kronke, 2004). According to Hight (2001), most assumptions about the psychology of RT viewership are derived from textual analyses of reality-based programs, rather than research involving audiences. Thus, Hight calls for investigations of reality-based programming based on the assumption that such programs may implicate a network of social, economic, and political changes in modern society.

Literature Review

Viewers have conceptualized reality programming by the approach taken to various content areas of documenting real-world events (Hall, 2006). Viewers in Hall's (2006) study further clustered reality programs by characteristics such as the show's objective or prize, the format, the level of manipulation or intervention by the producers, and the message. Hall suggests this clustering of shows reflects distinct themes, ideological messages, and content areas. According to Pecora (2002),

> Reality TV is, for me, the expression of a powerful, and increasingly unbridled, tendency within democratic society, one also embedded in academic institutions, to reveal the norms and limits of individual responsibility and group identity, however exaggerated (and commercialized) the settings that reveal such knowledge may be. In effect, television is now doing the kind of social psychological research our universities no longer permit. (p. 356)

Nabi et al. (2003) offer a definition of reality-based television programming, which excludes news programs, talk and interview shows, and nonfiction narrative programs. They refer to several characteristics of RT:

1. characters are real people (not actors),
2. programs are not filmed on a set, but in natural living or working environments,
3. programs are not scripted,
4. events are unplanned, but evolve from narrative contexts, and
5. the primary purpose is viewer entertainment.

In uncovering these characteristics, Nabi et al., conducted a study of randomly selected city residents to determine their construction of the RT genre. They found that respondents perceived some reality programs as more realistic than others. In Hall's (2006) study of viewers' perceptions of reality programs, she also found inconsistencies in participants' conceptualization of reality programs. Some participants highlighted competition as a key element of reality programs, while others emphasized unpredictability or a focus on negative circumstances or behaviors.

Following the uses and gratifications perspective that Nabi et al. (2003) offer, the present study attempts to explore the choice of RT and the gratifications sought from RT viewing. In explaining media choice and the types of gratifications that result from that choice, Lazarsfeld and Stanton (1944) developed the uses and gratifications theory. At the core of extensive communication research, uses and gratifications theory has been the focus of research on understanding audience needs and motives for using mass media. Uses and gratifications theory also aids in understanding audience consumption patterns of specific mass media channels. Considered a subtradition of media effects research (McQuail, 1994), Wimmer and Dominick (1994) suggest that uses and gratifications originated with the interest in audiences and why they engaged in certain forms of media behavior. Early studies of uses and gratifications include the contexts of quiz programs and the reasons people listened to soap operas (Herzog, 1942), the interest in music on radio (Suchman, 1942), the development of children's interest in comics (Wolfe & Fiske, 1949), and the functions of newspaper reading (Berelson, 1949).

Although uses and gratifications has been used in varying communication contexts, Rubin (1986) confers that uses and gratifications research is best applied when exploring specific links among attitudes, motives, behaviors, and communication effects. In a summary of Katz and Blumler's contribution to this theory, Lin (1996) suggests that

> the strength of this theory is its ability to allow researchers to study mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communications content, and psychological gratifications within a particular or cross-cultural context. (p. 574)

Katz et al. (1974) describe uses and gratifications as having three main objectives: to explain how people use media to gratify their needs, to understand motives for media behaviors, and to identify functions or consequences that follow from needs, motives, and behavior. As a major communication theory, uses and gratifications is based on five basic assumptions (Katz et al., 1974; Palmgreen, 1984; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rosengren, 1974; Rubin, 1986):

1. Behavior is purposive, goal-directed, and motivated.
2. People select and use media to satisfy biological, psychological, and social needs.
3. Individuals are influenced by various social and psychological factors when selecting media.
4. Media consumers are aware of their needs and whether they are being satisfied by a given media option.
5. Different media compete for attention, selection, and use.

According to Reiss and Wiltz (2004), individuals act to satisfy one of 16 basic motives: power, curiosity, independence, status, social conflict, vengeance, honor, idealism, physical exercise, romance, family, order, eating, acceptance, tranquility, and saving. Reiss and Wiltz studied the motives for watching reality TV under the premise that these motives may be achieved vicariously through television characters. The romance motive may be achieved through watching a romantic movie. Reiss and Wiltz found status to be the most significant motive for watching reality TV. The authors infer that viewers may perceive themselves as better than the characters portrayed or feel that the portrayal of ordinary people in reality TV elevates their own status. Reiss and Wiltz also found vengeance to be a significant motive for reality TV viewers as compared to nonviewers. Vengeance is closely associated with competition (Reiss, 2000). The authors also found viewing reality TV to be negatively associated with the motive of honor or morality.

In a quantitative study in 2002, Wei and Tootle found two unique gratification dimensions for reality TV viewing: life-like format and vicarious participation. This study seeks to learn from listening and watching participants discuss their viewing of reality TV. The study adds a qualitative dimension to Wei and Tootle's findings in understanding the uses and gratifications for reality TV viewing. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore college students' consumption of RT. This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the consumption patterns of college students in regard to reality television?
RQ2: What rationale do college students provide for watching reality television?
RQ3: How do college students perceive the situations portrayed in reality television?
RQ4: What role does social affiliation play in the consumption of reality television for college students?

Method

Due to the limited literature regarding consumption of RT, a qualitative research design was most appropriate for exploring the research questions posed at the outset of this study. Focus groups were used as the method of data collection for this exploratory, qualitative study, allowing for in-depth exploration into the phenomenon. Focus groups allow for rich and enlightening exchanges between participants, where ideas can build upon one another. Through the interactions of RT viewers, the researchers sought to explore and understand consumption patterns for young adults of RT.

Four focus groups were conducted, with each group ranging between six and 12 undergraduate participants. Focus group participants were recruited from a large, undergraduate, core-curriculum course offered at a southern university. College students were selected because they represent one of the most targeted viewing audiences of RT programming (Carter, 2000).

Focus groups were conducted over a four-month time period from March 2004 through July 2004. Four focus groups were chosen based on Morgan's (1997) suggestion

that three to five focus groups suffice for a research project because more groups seldom provide meaningful new insights. The size of each focus group, six to twelve students, was chosen based on the characteristics of the population under study. It was the assumption of the researchers that a smaller focus group would be more manageable in terms of response and the feeling of confidentiality for the college student participants. The focus groups were conducted in a classroom environment due to its convenience and familiarity for participants.

Prior to the start of the focus group, participants were asked to complete a short survey including several demographic questions as well as basic questions about their television viewing behaviors. Once the informed consent process and a short explanation of the study's procedures and purpose were reviewed, the focus group discussion began with the participants introducing themselves by sharing their name, major, hometown, and favorite television show. A question guide was then used to facilitate participants' responses to questions regarding their opinions, perceptions, and behaviors toward RT programming. A moderator opened and guided the group discussion.

The focus groups were recorded using both audio and videotape, which complimented the observations and field notes recorded by the research team during the focus group discussions. The audio- and videotapes were transcribed; transcripts were compared with field notes, and analyzed using the inductive data analysis method outlined by Hatch (2002). Following analytic methods similar to other important inductive models (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979), the model of analysis used in this study searches for ''patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made'' (Hatch, 2002, p. 161).

The inductive analysis methods utilized followed the subsequent steps (Hatch, 2002):

1. read data and identify frames of analysis,
2. create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis,
3. identify salient domains and assign them a code,
4. refine salient domains and keep record of emerging relationships,
5. decide if domains are supported by data,
6. complete analysis within domains,
7. search for themes across domains,
8. outline relationships within and among domains, and
9. select data excerpts to support the relationships.

The three researchers analyzed the data following the inductive analysis procedures outlined above. Following the analysis, the research team discussed emerging themes and supporting elements and identified the dominant themes that characterized the data.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore college students' consumption of RT. From the four focus groups conducted, data was gathered from 20 females and 14 males, totaling 34 participants. Results from a preliminary participant survey

indicated that participants watch anywhere from 3 to 30 hours of television per week, with the average being 11.5 hours. The majority of participants, 76.4% (n = 26), indicated that they watch a RT program on a regular basis (at least two to three times a week).

Through the preliminary participant survey administered to the students preceding the focus group discussion, students provided their responses to basic open-ended questions regarding RT. First, participants were asked to provide their own definition of RT and through a comparative analysis of the provided definitions, participants' confusion over the nature of RT emerged. Participants provided diverse definitions of RT. Although varying, most definitions included characteristics like "unscripted," "everyday people," "non-actors," "portraying some aspect of real life," "real people in front of cameras," and "real-life yet edited situations."

RQ1: What Are the Consumption Patterns of College Students in Regard to Reality Television?

"Oh no ... I don't really watch reality television."
The first theme that emerged from the data was the underestimation of RT viewing. Initially, participants denied watching much RT; in fact, RT was rarely mentioned when participants were asked to describe the type of television shows that they typically watched. Instead, shows that were typically mentioned included adult and teenage drama, sports broadcasting, comedy sitcoms, and news shows. However, over the course of the focus group discussions, it was evident that participants watched (or were at least familiar with) more RT shows than first indicated. Despite the fact that participants from each focus group listed only half a dozen reality shows at the beginning of the focus groups, at least 25 different RT shows were discussed throughout the focus groups as shows that were watched on a regular basis. One participant realized this phenomenon in saying, "I didn't think I watched this much or knew this much about reality television but apparently I was wrong." The RT shows that were most commonly discussed included *The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, American Idol, The Real World, Trading Spaces, The Swan, Survivor, Joe Millionaire, Average Joe, Extreme Makeover, The Simple Life, and American Chopper.* There were several occasions in which a specific RT show was not mentioned as being watched; however, when it was referred to in conversation, the majority of the participants were familiar enough with the show to partake in the discussion.

RQ2: What Rationale Do College Students Provide for Watching Reality Television?

"It's like a great escape." Escapism and Living Vicariously through Others.
Escapism emerged from the data citing RT as an escape from reality for participants. Participants felt that RT offered the viewer a "glimpse" into another world, which for

a moment could take the viewer away from their own reality. One participant suggested,

> I think because it is an escape from the reality of like the war and a lot of economic problems and like political problems. I mean you have the option of watching reality television, which although it can be extreme, it is amusing, as opposed to watching the news about Martha Stewart, Michael Jackson, Kobe Bryant or even the war. Basically something that is depressing as opposed to something, while ridiculous, is entertaining and an escape from some of the negative reality that people deal with day in and day out.

This theme of escapism also emerged in the discussion of viewers living vicariously through reality shows. One participant mentioned, ''You can see yourself in the show,'' while another said, ''I mean you put yourself in their situation and you're watching and you think, 'Oh what would I do? Would I eat that? Would I eat whatever they are eating or do whatever they are doing?' '' Eloquently stated, one participant divulged what they believed to be the secret of RT by saying, ''I don't think it is real life but that is the point. Real life is boring and you watch reality shows to live vicariously through others.'' As one participant said, ''reality television is reality television because as a viewer you can see yourself in that situation or you can say to yourself, if I was on that show this is what I would do. It is reality 'cause you can see yourself in it.''

Clearly, for most participants, RT provided an escape from reality, ''a break from the depressing stuff.'' It seemed as though in this situation most participants projected their lives onto the characters of the shows, trying to determine what better decisions could have been made and what they would have done differently.

''It's like a train wreck—I just can't turn away.''
For most participants, disparity existed between *perceptions* of RT and *consumption* of RT. One participant best described this phenomenon by saying, ''it is like watching a train wreck—horrible, but [you] can't turn away.'' While Nabi et al. (2003) hesitated to characterize viewers as voyeuristic, they stopped short of generalizing reality viewers as innocent, which supports this finding. Although listing many reasons for watching RT, participants most commonly shared that they watched because they were bored, it was humorous and entertaining, they liked to see other people fail, or the shock factor. Further reasons participants provided were that they watched RT because ''it doesn't require full attention,'' or ''it is something that you do not have to watch every week to understand what is going on.''

Candid responses from participants conveyed the voyeuristic quality of RT. For example, one participant admitted, ''It is just plain funny. It's pure entertainment and it may not be real but it is funny.'' Several participants reflected on their enjoyment in watching RT characters exposed to uncomfortable situations outside their normal realm of experience. One participant commented, ''If the show has like 20 ridiculously hot girls who are all used to being pampered and are put outside in some extraordinary situation where they have to like shovel manure or something like that,

it really amuses me." Aside from the pure entertainment factor of reality television, participants also mentioned that they, or their friends, had become addicted to following the characters and situations in RT. One participant's response was, "I heard so much about it that I had to see what it was about. Now I am hooked." While another participant said, "It makes you want to turn it on week after week. I don't know, maybe because you want to see who wins or who gets picked. It just has an addictive quality." Some participants even remarked that RT feels like a "cliffhanger," making it nearly impossible to prematurely abandon the show.

RQ3: How Do College Students Perceive the Situations Portrayed in Reality Television?

"It's definitely the good, bad, and the ugly of TV." Good vs. Bad Reality TV

When discussing opinions toward RT, participants described certain elements of RT shows. From these descriptions, "good" RT materialized as being beneficial because they give the viewer useful ideas or advice; give people a second chance; are entertaining or funny; and can be applied to the viewer's actual life. Good reality shows were commonly associated with home or personal appearance improvement, like The Learning Channel's (TLC) *Trading Spaces* and *Baby Story*, HGTV's *House Hunters* and *Landscape Smart*, and ABC's *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*. From the participants' perspective, these shows provide a "happy" and "uplifting" perspective of reality. As one participant mentioned, these shows "make you feel good and they attempt to educate the viewers about something, often a skill." Other aspects of "good" RT included shows that improve participants' appearances or self-esteem, that are funny and entertaining without a personal expense to participants, and that give the viewer a positive glimpse into the lives of others. Supporting the difference in good versus bad RT programs, one participant shared,

> I feel like the TLC shows or *Extreme Makeover* do not choose people who are supermodels....these are people that for whatever reason want to boost their self-esteem or their lives as opposed to the shows that are all about the money or 30 seconds of fame.

Yet another participant argued that some RT programs are "okay" while others are not:

> See, I think the *Real World* is okay because they have a goal and it is to live together. The cut-throat stuff like where people are constantly doing stuff to screw other people, I think those are what aren't good. Like I think the *Real World* is fine and *Road Rules* and stuff like the *Amazing Race*...that's fine.

Conversely, "bad" RT was commonly linked to concepts of immorality. Bad RT, also referred to as "junk TV" by participants, though indicated as entertaining at times, included television shows that were based on deception, ridicule, contempt, and physical or emotional harm. According to the participants, RT has "gone too far" with regard to the conceptual foundation of some of the shows. One participant corroborated this stance toward RT by saying that "too much humiliation exists for participants." Focus group members characterized "bad" RT as: "unrealistic,"

"just plain mean," "misrepresenting reality," "obvious attempts to spur contro-versy," "ridiculous situations," "manipulated and exaggerated," and "driven by the shock value." Shows cited as "bad" RT typically included *Married by America, I Married a Millionaire, Married a Midget, Average Joe, My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé*, and several other dating shows. One participant suggested that there are certain RT programs that are bad due to the immoral concept of the show:

> My biggest moral issues come with shows like *Joe Millionaire*, like I consider almost prostitution . . . I just think these girls are like you know belittling and just making themselves look like garbage, which is obviously bad.

One participant even described "bad" RT by saying, "At first it was kind of a cool concept but now it is beyond the point of entertaining. It has really gone downhill." Another participant echoed this opinion by citing an actual show that goes too far, "this trading moms (*Wife Swap*) thing is almost at the edge of not right. Cause now you are messing with kids that are young . . ." Yet another participant shared that it is the physical harm that encouraged them to discontinue their consumption of some "bad" RT programs. "I used to watch a lot of the dating shows, I used to watch *Blind Date Hall of Shame* and then I watch *Cheaters* for a while and then the guy got stabbed and I thought 'this is out of control.' "

This classification between "good" and "bad" RT appeared ambiguous because participants disagreed on some of the "good" and "bad" characterizing traits. For example, the RT show *The Swan* appeared to be a show that caused disparate opi-nions from participants. Demonstrating this disagreement, one participant noted, "I did not watch *The Swan* because I thought it was despicable that people have to do this, like get plastic surgery and change who they are to be accepted and for people to like them." However, a different participant shared the following:

> [T]hey do perform plastic surgery and judge some on their looks but it [*The Swan*] was also on how far they came emotionally and physically and how they progressed themselves. It helped these women with what they have always wanted and dreamed of.

Other shows that seemed to provoke disagreement among participants included *Survivor, Outback Jack, American Chopper*, and various MTV RT programs like *The Ashley Simpson Show, Newlyweds*, and *Real World*. Nonetheless, it was noticeable that each participant had his/her own established notions of good versus bad RT and that each made their viewing decisions based on these notions.

"It's morally corrupt." Concerns over Portrayal of Ideals

The deception and lack of morals was a common concern expressed by participants. Even though one participant indicated that RT is "not going to affect my morals," the data collected revealed that participants believed there were moral implications of RT when judging its collective impact on society. Many participants characterized RT programming as "morally corrupt." One participant said, "I think a lot of television has gone downhill, like the morals of it. There is just not much left of it anymore."

Additionally, most participants were concerned at the concept behind many RT shows, citing them as "wrong" and "corrupt." Describing this moral corruption in association with money, one participant said,

> It all happens when you put money at the end of the road. People lose track of what is important and like their morals go out the window and that is when I have a problem with the reality issue; when people start doing things they normally wouldn't do in order to win.

Confirming the negative impact money has on the morals of reality show participants, a participant echoed, "I think reality television teaches lying and deceit . . . instead of wishing goodwill and friendly competition, everybody lies and deceive just to get rid of somebody and win the money, which is wrong." Yet another participant noted that RT communicates to younger audiences that "immoral and unethical actions are OK," and that "dating 20 different guys and having sex with several of them is OK; that there are no consequences with actions like this."

As a result of the "moral corruption" demonstrated through RT programming, many participants expressed concerned about the impact the popularity of this television genre will eventually have on society. Representing the majority view, one participant conferred, "I really believe what goes in comes out, and if you are constantly watching trash you are going to get trash out. . ." While most participants agreed that they believed RT can have a negative impact on viewers' behaviors, another interesting finding from one of the focus groups was that RT was more of a "reflection of society than an influence on society," implying that maybe RT was only exemplifying our "morally corrupt" world.

"The real truth and nothing but the truth, I don't think so."
Throughout the focus group discussions, participants frequently referred to the "truth" of RT. One of the largest discrepancies in participant opinions was the realism of specific RT shows. Participants shared their strong opinions toward the realistic nature of RT by referring to it as "drawing the line," which insinuated distorting the premise of RT. Basically, most of the participants indicated that many of the shows do not reflect reality anymore. Specific to the reality dating shows, one participant observed that it is "not realistic to find love with 50 people around you." Participants also felt that many of the shows have gone "overboard" in order to attract viewers. One participant communicated, "at first it was kind of cool but now it is beyond the point of entertaining, it is sickening what they will call reality television just to increase ratings." Resonating with another participant, one respondent noted, "Because the networks are making so much money on this genre, they are willing to go as far as they can." Overall, participants believed that RT is set up to make people "believe that these things on the reality shows can actually happen." Manifest in the data was the opinion that the shows and characters become exaggerated over time, to the point that "characters are reacting to unreal situations."

Coupled with this exaggeration or "drawing the line" quality of RT, the discussions also focused on the accurate portrayal of reality due to the excessive amount of editing that was believed to occur in the development of the shows. Respondents in Nabi et al.'s (2003) study voiced similar frustrations. Several participants mentioned watching television programs that provided behind-the-scenes views of the RT show production. Participants indicated that these behind-the-scenes shows provided proof to the large amount of editing that takes place during the final production phases for a RT show. A common belief was that the program's producers, "don't show everything," but rather only what they want the audience to see. In addition to the editing process, many participants believed RT is "staged," "contrived," "exaggerated," and "fake." One participant summarized the realism debate in saying,

> I think it has always been staged because I mean, who do you know that would get up in front of a TV and really act as if they were not in front of a camera, comfortable. I think it has always been fake to a point, but we are now beginning to notice it more 'cause there are so many television stations and so many reality shows out there to watch.

As such, it can be assumed that, for these focus group participants, RT does not represent reality. Overall, RT was perceived as a "misrepresentation of reality," which participants suspected was becoming more scripted and contrived in an effort to boost ratings and derive profit for the producers and networks.

RQ4: What Role Does Social Affiliation Play in the Consumption of Reality Television for College Students?

"Social"ity TV: –Social Affiliation

The social connection that RT provides for participants is indicated in several different ways, including the way in which participants watch RT shows, the conversations that result from RT viewing, and the involvement that participants experience while watching RT.

Participants rarely watched RT alone. Participants revealed that they watch RT programming in groups, with roommates, friends, and family. It is important to note that many of the participants called watching RT "our time," alluding to the scheduled time every week that siblings or groups of friends spend together. Most of the participants indicated this social component as a rationale for watching RT. One participant exemplified this theme saying, "The reason I like it [reality television] is for the social value." Another participant described their viewing behavior saying, "When there are like more people, you get more excited. You just feed off the tension and the anticipation together." Several participants even referred to watching the same reality show every week with friends as a "routine"; conveyed by one participant, "I have friends that will get together to watch *Real World* like every week." This routine was echoed by another participant:

> I mainly watch with my roommates, I mean it is just a time when we all get together and kind of watch a show that is funny to watch because people can make

fools of the characters on the show. And then we can kind of relate to it and discuss it from there.

In Hall's (2006) study, participants referred to groups watching reality shows to guess the outcome together, noting the unpredictability of reality programs as an attractive attribute. The social connections provided by RT also include the conversations that RT motivates between viewers. One participant mentioned the social value of RT in that it is not age-specific, allowing the topic of RT to establish common ground between any two people in a conversation. For example, one participant described their behavior by saying,

> When I meet people I am like, "Hey, do you watch reality TV?" 'cause pretty much everyone has at least one show that they can relate to or they know something about. It is always a good common ground when you are talking a person for the first or second time.

Another participant mentioned watching RT in order to feel familiar with what others were talking about and to be able to participate in the conversation. The feeling of being left out in a RT conversation was mentioned by one participant: "Some of my friends would sit and talk to each other about certain reality characters and I would just sit there like I have no idea what was going on, like they talk about these people like they know them or something." Most participants referred to these conversations about RT as "shallow," "just in passing, or "nothing in-depth"; however, all participants indicated at least having one discussion about "a memorable episode," the "stupidity of the characters," or "what was going to happen next week" on the show.

While most participants admitted to discussing RT on a regular basis, they also insinuated an element of shame associated with such conversations. One participant said,

> I feel really stupid, I mean I am in college I should be smarter than that. I mean, I am 20 and I know I have a lot to learn but I usually like talking about something a little more intellectual than something like that.

In agreement, another participant said, "It makes me feel kind of silly, to actually be discussing reality television."

Respondents also referred to their involvement and interaction with the characters of reality shows and the show themselves. Several participants indicated that being able to make decisions affecting the show's outcome, like voting, gives the viewer a connection, a feeling of belonging and importance to the show. Additionally, participants indicated that the "real" context of some reality shows makes it possible for them to participate and get involved with the characters and situations on the show. For example, one participant conferred,

> I don't personally have time to vote. Although I did talk to my cousin and they were so hooked on *American Idol* that they voted every night. She was talking about how she got on the land phone, her Mom got on the cell phone, and her brother got on another cell phone and they all called like three or four times . . . they were that into it.

Another participant summarized this sub-theme by saying,

> I voted on *Nashville Star* once. So yeah, I think the interactivity of [reality tele-vision] gives people a connection to the show, they are more involved because they have some kind of say with its outcome.

Discussion

College students' consumption of RT appears to be a complex phenomenon that offers many opportunities for further study. In this exploratory study, focus-group participants progressed from initial denial, or underestimation, of RT consumption to the shocking realization of the actual amount of RT they consume. While reticent to characterize themselves as RT viewers, participants appeared to be watching a great deal of RT. Throughout the focus groups, the modesty over RT consumption appeared to be caused by the social stigma that surrounds RT. For example, participants seemed hesitant, as well as embarrassed, when they revealed the amount of RT that they consumed; their reactions of guilt coupled with their responses insinuated that it is bad to enjoy watching RT.

The researchers attribute one of three possible explanations for the underestimation of RT viewing. First, it is plausible that the participants did not realize that the shows they watch are considered RT; for example, there was an in-depth discussion in two of the focus groups as to whether certain shows were "reality television shows." In fact, Mead (2005) suggests that RT is different from other genres of television due to the numerous subgenres that exist, making the genre diverse and sometimes difficult to define and/or classify. Second, it is plausible that participants were embarrassed or hesitant in disclosing the actual amount of RT that they watch in the beginning of the focus group because of the social stigma associated with RT. This explanation would be consistent with the findings from research investigating the soap opera genre of television. Blumenthal's (1997) focus on the "social devaluation" of soap opera viewership explains this notion of female viewers being embarrassed or apologetic about the pleasure they find in watching soap operas; moreover, Whetmore and Kielwasser (1983) found that these feelings were commonly caused by the social stigma of soap opera programming being "silly" and "inconsequential." Similarly, Lemish (1985) investigated college students and their consumption of soap opera programming and found that their "awareness of publicly held opinions about soap operas" is what caused their feelings of embarrassment and, thus, their caution in revealing their viewing habits. Finally, another possible explanation is students simply forgot or had a hard time recalling all the RT shows that they watched throughout the year, implying that they did not omit the information on purpose. Regardless of reasoning, the underestimation of time spent watching RT programming is not unique to the RT genre in that numerous studies suggest that individuals tend to underestimate the amount of television they consume (Seiter, 1999).

Regarding their rationale for watching RT, participants referred to the "great escape" provided by RT. They felt that RT offered an opportunity to sample other lifestyles and realities than their own. Participants discussed living vicariously

through the characters in reality programs. For these college students, RT seemed to offer an opportunity for them to contemplate and discuss how they would respond or behave in the situations portrayed in the programs. Many of the situations characters face in reality programs—dating, family issues, racial tension, and moral decisions—are particularly relevant for college students. Therefore, it would be valuable to investigate the reality television phenomenon through the lens of social learning theory to determine how the decisions or actions of RT characters are impacting the decisions or actions of viewers.

Another rationale given by participants for watching RT is their perception of the discrete nature of each episode. Participants felt they could watch a given episode at their convenience and out-of-sequence. They also felt watching RT did not require their full attention, unlike scripted television dramas where they fall behind if they miss an episode; therefore, the RT genre seems to fit well with the changing schedules and active lifestyles of college students. The convenience of reality television programming appeared to be a major gratification of reality television consumption.

Focus-group participants articulated two perceived types of RT, ''good'' and ''bad'' RT. They characterized ''good'' RT as giving viewers useful ideas or advice, giving characters a second chance, and providing entertainment or humor. They also included in ''good'' RT shows that improve participant's appearances or self-esteem, shows that are funny and entertaining without a personal expense to participants, and shows that give the viewer a positive glimpse into the lives of others. In contrast, participants characterized ''bad'' RT as shows based on deception, ridicule, contempt, and physical or emotional harm. While participants disagreed on some of the ''good'' and ''bad'' characterizing traits, it was clear that each participant had his/her own established notions of ''good'' versus ''bad'' RT, and that these perceptions influenced their viewing decisions. Participants also expressed concern regarding morality in RT. They expressed a shared sentiment that RT's collective moral impact on society was negative. Interestingly, these findings of ''good'' and ''bad'' television are consistent with the findings of Ang (1985) in studying the pleasure derived from watching the soap opera, *Dallas*. Ang found that many viewers classified the soap opera program as ''bad television'' in regard to quality but still found an attraction, while other viewers gave numerous reasons for why the show was ''good'' television and thus deserved their attention.

The college students in this study do not watch RT alone. Social affiliation appears to play a significant role in RT viewing for the participants in this study. Participants watch RT with their roommates, friends, and family members. Television is sometimes criticized for breaking down social connections where people watch television rather than spend time developing interpersonal relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Reality television, for the college students in this study, seemed to have the opposite influence. RT appeared to bring students together, not only for watching the shows, but in conversations resulting from RT viewing. In fact, participants even acknowledged watching RT shows they do not particularly enjoy because of the social affiliation of RT viewership. They do not want to be ''left out'' of conversations about RT, which coincides with the findings of Babrow (1987) that suggest one of the many

motives for college students in watching soap opera programming is the social inter-action it provides; interaction in the form of watching the programs together but also the interaction of conversing about the program at a later time.

Participants also discussed the realism of RT. Overall, they did not perceive RT as real, feeling that RT shows go overboard in order to maintain ratings. They were also skeptical of the editing process in RT. However, participants did seem to associate their feelings about the realism of RT to their consumption patterns. Although this study was guided by the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications, to further investigate the argument over RT's realism, it may be valuable to examine RT programming through the theoretical perspective of Hall's reception theory. Hall (1980) posits that in the encoding and decoding process of media discourse, the meaning of the text is located between the producer and the reader, or in this case the viewer. According to this theory, the producer (encoder) frames the text by giving it a certain meaning based on their personal background and cultural perspective, while the viewer (decoder) will adapt the textual meaning by decoding a different ver-sion of the text based on their personal background, various social situations, and frames of reference (McQuail, 1994). This perspective on audience theory and research is especially useful in determining how individual circumstances like gender, age, ethnicity, and cultural affiliations affect the way a reader or viewer receives and interprets text. Clearly, in this case, defining characteristics of the college-aged popu-lation could have some affect on the way they receive and interpret the meaning, specifically the realism, of RT programming. For example, Brasch (2006) suggested that unique to young adults is the appeal of content involving relationship issues and their ability to identify with the no-name stars that appeared on the programs. In addition, reasons cited for the appeal to young adults have been the high volume of interactivity that attracts a generation absorbed in a multimedia world and the structure of RT programming that compliments the shortened attention span and lack of patience of the young adult audience (Hiltbrand, 2004). Finally, the view that the reception and interpretation of RT programming in this study is unique to young adults is supported by the original proposal of Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), that media uses and gratifications differ across age, gender, and lifestyle.

Throughout the focus groups, evidence of a possible third-person effect was observed in participant responses. For example, in describing the effect RT may have on behaviors as well as in explaining the popularity of RT, participants commonly exemplified the "I don't watch but I know someone who does" syndrome. This also provides an interesting area for future inquiry.

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that RT is and will continue to be a significant part of the young adult television appetite. Although students are generally confused about what constitutes RT programming, they are absolute in their opi-nions and perceptions toward this growing genre of television. Due to the amount of RT consumption by these viewers, there are implications for advertising and pro-duct placement, sitcoms and traditional television programming, and extreme RT consumption on morals and behaviors, especially among younger viewers. Through the uses and gratifications perspective, RT programming provides a unique genre of

television to study. Not only does RT have the attention of television networks and viewers alike, but as Oullette and Murray (2004) suggest, it provides the gratifications that viewers seek. "What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what might be called the 'entertaining real'" (p. 4).

Although the findings of this study are similar to other studies that investigate the gratifications sought from young adults through RT programming (Brasch, 2006; Frisby, 2004; Hiltbrand, 2004; Mead, 2005), these studies can be used as a foundation for future research on college students and RT. Future research should investigate its influence on decision making, perceptions of reality, reactions toward specific programs and program content, exploration of good versus bad RT and association with viewing behaviors, exploration of the third person effect in RT viewers, and comparison of perceptions toward RT of high vs. low consumption/viewers. Because RT can be considered a popular culture phenomenon, future research in this area can significantly contribute to the growing and diverse field of cultural studies by uncovering how different audiences, in this case young adults, receive, interpret, and consume cultural texts.

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