

REALITY TELEVISION: USING PARA-SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP THEORY
AND ECONOMIC THEORY TO DEFINE THE SUCCESS OF
NETWORK REALITY PROGRAMMING

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This study seeks to use a dual-theoretical approach, through the use of para-social relationship theory and economic data analysis, to explain the success of reality television since the early 2000s. This study uses both qualitative and quantitative components to understand the growth of reality television. This study includes a literature analysis of both methodologies used. Focus groups were used to seek to find a strong level of para-social interaction in viewers of reality television. Two focus groups were conducted with participants 18-35. There were a total of 16 participants who attended the focus group sessions. The information collected suggested that viewers of reality television formed para-social relationships. It appeared that female viewers were more likely to form para-social relationships than male viewers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, reality TV has begun to monopolize both cable and broadcast primetime television programming schedules. In this context reality TV is defined as a show without “actors” in which the general public has access to becoming a contestant on the program. While technically any type of live, unscripted, or non-fiction program is reality TV, this examination excludes news and talk show type programs and focus on competitive and entertainment reality TV programs. What those in the television business can understand is that reality TV is the most profitable form of television programming because it has lower production costs and often brings in more viewers and more advertising revenue than scripted programs (Hirschorn, 2007). However, what is not always fully understood is why more viewers are watching reality TV.

Reality TV programs have attempted to bring important personal and cultural issues to the forefront that are otherwise not commonly given attention in mainstream media. Specifically this research looks at different subgenres of the wide genre that is reality TV using a sample of shows such as *The Biggest Loser* from NBC, *American Idol* on Fox, *Survivor* from CBS, and the *Bachelor/Bachelorette* franchise on ABC. By breaking down the genre and looking at how people are consuming reality TV, it opens the doors to more closely understanding the relationship that viewers have with

these programs and why they choose to watch. To fully understand reality TV as a new cultural trend, one must analyze the successes it has seen along with criticism it must fight.

By using both para-social relationship theory and general economic theory, this thesis gains a dual-theoretical exploration towards finding the reasoning behind the rise in viewership of reality TV. Television and production executives seek to maximize profit while audiences seek to form relationships with those whom they observe on TV. Reality TV straddles a line between both of these theoretical concepts, which in turn allows them to work in support of one another.

From headlines to ratings, reality TV programming has been rising exponentially and is met with disgust as well as praise. Although apparent throughout the history of television, reality TV is re-defining itself as a new genre. Television networks are making incredible amounts of money from advertising during reality TV programs (Baker, 2008). Also, money is being saved during pre-production and production due to the considerably lower production costs of a reality television program (Hirschorn, 2007). It is easier to understand why the networks are producing reality TV, but the harder question is, for what reason do viewers find the life of someone whom they've never met, who potentially lives a world away, so fascinating? What is driving the viewers to keep these shows so successful? No matter how trashy or exploitative viewers regard reality programs, as demonstrated in the focus groups later in this study, the audience is one of the main reasons keeping these shows on the air.

Reality TV is a genre that does not always get the utmost respect from people both in and outside of the television industry because “on one hand, it blurs television’s promise of information with its penchant for entertainment; on the other hand, it highlights the paradox central to television itself that actuality may seem most real when mediated” (Kavka, 2005, p. 94). Often it is seen as lowbrow television, but that does not stop even some of its harshest critics from tuning into these programs, even if only as a guilty pleasure. While many critics see the growth of reality TV as a decline in the quality of programming as well as a gross exploitation because “these shows are driving wedges in real relationships . . . it really makes you wonder if the money is even worth it?” (Women’s Center, 2008), a counter-argument is that rather than a decline in quality, it is a new type of program which allows a new type of viewing experience.

Programming has become much more interactive for viewers because they can literally become a part of the show by becoming a contestant on a reality TV show, or they are often able to watch the program and vote on the fate of other contestants on the show. Viewers must also remember that the participation in these shows is seemingly voluntary, thus challenging the fact that participation in these programs could be exploitative. However, while participation is voluntary, programs have a motive behind the casting of reality TV programs. In efforts to gain the largest and most diverse demographic, casting is methodical. “Most TV shows want us to see ourselves on screen” (Berman, 1987, p. 103) so in order to appeal to the masses, there is a conscious effort made to have many different types of people within a show so that viewers can find someone with whom they most closely relate. Not only do these new programs open

doors to deeper para-social relationships, but they also allow for a more interactive viewing experience for the audience through new media platforms, which may be a key idea in why audiences are choosing to engage in and watch these programs.

Reality Television and the Viewer

Beyond the economic reasons for reality TV's success, many researchers have struggled to find the link between the viewer and their para-social relationships. Initially para-social relationships were defined as a "seeming face-to-face relationship that develops between a viewer and a mediated personality" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Since the introductory definition of para-social relationships, there have been many hypotheses about why individuals are choosing to partake in para-social relationships. The formation of para-social relationships has been hypothesized as a means to cope with loneliness, or as a fulfillment of their need for interaction that has not been met by other means. However, what reality TV brings to the table are contestants on the show who are normal people that viewers are simply relating to because they see themselves in that character. Viewers see a character that they believe they can relate to, thus they create a "quasi-friendship" which in turn creates the para-social relationship that attaches them to the show and creates successful programming.

As stated earlier, reality TV is a more recent genre that has been growing over the past few years and as a genre, it is utilizing many tools in order to create a profitable product. The goal of reality TV is to create a new genre that ordinary people could relate to and one that would also be successful. "Reality TV's playful approach to generic

hybridity, and its relations with the documentary, the soap opera, the talk show or the game show, were debated self-consciously in the initial academic work in the field,” (Geraghty & Jancovich, 2008, p. 160). Hill (2005, p. 2) explains, “reality TV is about the viewing experience of a developing factual television genre. It is commonly assumed that audiences cannot tell the difference between entertainment and information, or fiction and reality in popular factual television.” Audience perception of this particular genre of television really opens the doors into giving us an understanding of why this genre seems to be here to stay. Reality programs are becoming a more interactive type of programming in which the audience not only feels closer to the cast members, but also in some cases the audience is responsible for their fate on the show.

There is more hybridization now than ever when it comes to television programming. The line between scripted and reality continues to blur while scripted programs such as “*Modern Family*, *Arrested Development* and *The Bernie Mac Show* have all used the conventions of reality storytelling” (Gabert, 2010) and reality programs have begun to emulate their scripted counterparts with their storylines because “audiences have reached a comfort level with the two genres — and with shows that display characteristics of each” (Gabert, 2010).

Given the fact that this genre has now risen to the top of the ratings charts (see Tables 10-15), it is time to look at how this has become such an integral part in contemporary culture. Reality TV allows people to bring private emotions into public arenas. Mestrovic (1997, p. 87) argues that “Almost every hour of every day, Americans and other Westerners can tune into a television program that either offers some sort of

self-help therapy or presents someone confessing how they engaged in or overcame drug abuse, rape, adultery, obsessions, psychotic symptoms, or whatever.” This is seen as either positive or negative depending on the critic. Watching a show that attacks such intimate topics allows viewers to relate more closely to things that have happened to them that are possibly too taboo to discuss in their daily lives and therefore shows with such hard-hitting topics create an outlet for them. However, the counter-argument is that cases such as these are why people tend to find reality shows controversial or even exploitative. While there is a fine line that must be walked, it is still possible that these shows can open people’s eyes to their own problems and issues in the people they love. These programs can be a learning experience because in human nature we learn from what we see others do. And unlike a scripted drama where audiences understand the stories and characters were all contrived, reality TV consists of people that the average viewer can connect to and feel closer to.

One then must question whether voyeurism is a key component as to why people feel pleasure from watching reality TV. “The power and control associated with the voyeuristic fetish is frequently evoked in popular descriptions of the appeal of reality TV...” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 173) Viewers love to watch others like them and this creates the perfect opportunity to be voyeuristic without feeling as if they are doing something inappropriate. “The modern social realm was, it seems, further expanded to accommodate a new brand of celebrities, of ordinary people rendered remarkable through their encounter with new hybrid media forms and by their absorption into the complex processes of identification and voyeurism that made them household names” (Biressi &

Nunn, 2005, p. 144). *Psychology Today* questions; “Is the popularity of shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island* a sign that the country has degenerated into a nation of voyeurs?” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2001) Are we crossing lines by having access to these individuals most intimate moments? Arguably, the people on these shows are not unsuspecting participants. They voluntarily choose to participate in these shows and thus exploitation should not always necessarily be a concern in this case; however it is a fair question to ask whether these people were aware of the possibility of exploitation at the time of participation. And, is exploitation just the price to pay in order to gain fame and fortune?

Para-Social Relationship Theory

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the idea of para-social relationships. While mass media was still a fairly new concept back in 1956, the authors stated that “One of the striking characteristic of the new mass media . . . is that they give the illusion of face-to face relationship with the performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). Because of different techniques used in production of film and television, even though the actor was engaging with others on screen, it often appeared as if he was directly addressing the spectator thus creating the illusion that the spectator was involved in a personal and private way. However, “the interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216). Television personae exist as a function of the media; they have the ability to achieve a so-called intimacy with a crowd of strangers. This intimacy can be

influential and satisfying to those who are willing to take part in the relationship.

Viewers, who choose to make these personae a part of their daily life, will then strengthen this relationship. As time passes in this supposed relationship, “the devotee – ‘the fan’ – comes to believe that he ‘knows’ the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 217). This base creates the primary understanding in the formation of para-social relationships when related to television.

For the majority of audiences, para-social relationships are simply “complementary to normal social life,” (Horton & Wohl, 1956) however; in some cases para-social relationships can become pathological. If these relationships become a replacement for autonomous social participation, therein lies the problem because it is likely to proceed into “absolute defiance of objective reality” (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and that is when it becomes pathological. The media recognizes the lonely segment of Americans and tries to create the maximum level of intimacy with these groups. “The programs which fall in this extreme category promise not only escape from an unsatisfactory and drab reality, but try to prop up the sagging self-esteem of their unhappy audience by the most blatant reassurances” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 225). In 1956 when the initial article was published, spectators of various television programs were seen as relatively passive participants. This was regarded as, “the status of an accredited hypothesis, but it is, after all, no more than a hypothesis” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 228).

From the time Horton and Wohl first published in 1956 “there was little significant interest in PSI [para-social interaction] until the advent of the uses and gratifications approach to mass communication research in the early 1970s” (Giles, 2002, p. 280). McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972), in a study of British television audiences, found para-social relationships as described by Horton and Wohl, in relationships between viewers and soap operas. Rosengren and Windahl (1972) found that para-social interactions primary function as means to create alternative companionship due to loneliness and inadequate social life, and a dependency on television. Another important para-social interaction study of this time was conducted by Levy (1979) with older adults and local television news. Levy used focus groups to gauge viewers’ para-social interaction with newscasters. Some of the most strongly agreed with items were “I compare my own ideas with those of newscasters” and “when the newscasters joke around with each other it makes the programme easier to watch.”

A para-social interaction scale was created by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985) in order to measure the bond that viewers created with their local news personalities. The term “para-social relationship” is used most commonly to describe the “affective bond that individuals develop with characters and personalities in a variety of media genres” (“Attachment to media”).

Koenig and Lessan (1985) conducted a study that showed viewers did create relationships with their favorite television performers and defined these relationships to be somewhere between the level of acquaintance and friend, where they feel closer to these performers than they are to their acquaintances but not quite as close as they feel

with their friends (Koenig & Lessan, 1985). Cole and Leets (1999) surveyed 115 undergraduate students at a large urban university in order to gauge the level of relationship that participants felt between themselves and television performers. Many of the highly rated answers were right along the lines of para-social relationships. The highest scored answers were, “I think my favorite TV personality is like an old friend, My favorite TV personality makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends, My favorite TV personality seems to understand the things I know” (Cole & Leets, 1999, p. 501). This data helps show the types of relationships found among television viewers.

Rubin and McHugh (1987) conducted a study in which 303 undergraduate students studying communication completed a questionnaire consisting of a para-social interaction scale with 20 items, an importance scale, and an interpersonal attraction scale. The para-social interaction content of this study was measured by using the Para-social Interaction Scale created by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985) and by replacing newscasters from the initial study to favorite television performers. The mean para-social interaction scores in this study ranged from 1.15 to 4.85 on a 5 point scale with a mean of 3.31. This study was found to support “previous contentions that media relationships can be seen as functional alternatives to interpersonal relationships” (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 288). However, the authors did not find a relationship between the length of exposure to a television character and para-social interaction.

Viewers are more interactive in their practices because they are able to build their own meanings from those that are in context of a television program. “They participate without passive identification, they blur boundaries between viewing and living by

endless ‘what happened then’ discussions and by bringing their everyday experience to judge the drama” (Livingstone, 1990, p. 2). Viewers are becoming contributors to the process of TV production because they are creating their own message, meaning, “viewers employ interpretative procedures to reconstruct meanings of television programs” (Annese, 2004, pp. 373-374). “Through their responses to television, people generate social identities” (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p. 91). This interpretation allows negotiation for the viewers to relate what they are seeing with other factors such as past experiences of reception and gender, as well as social disposition towards the information received. This means, “reception is an active process creating a para-social interaction with production” (Annese, 2004, p. 374).

Annese (2004) hypothesized that “viewers co-construct identities through involvement in what they are watching” bringing audiences away from what was earlier seen as a more passive experience, the author argues that they are not only forming para-social relationships while watching TV, but in turn are also creating their own identities. These mediated processes bring remote people and situations into the lives of everyday social worlds and thus are changing the viewing experience.

The previous studies outline the research done since the introductory publication in 1956. These studies agree that viewers become involved with a program they watch and form relationships with television performers. Horton and Wohl (1956) suggest that these relationships are formed to cope with loneliness, and as a replacement for lacking relationships in a viewer’s life. However, as the studies delve deeper into para-social interaction theory, they describe the viewer as a more active participant (Livingstone,

1990). These studies do observe however, that television viewers can blur the boundaries between real and fiction, and relationships can occur. However, these relationships often fall more as acquaintances instead of close friends.

Economic Value of Reality Television

Media companies operate in a mixed capitalist society, which means that these companies are producing and distributing their products to consumers in order to generate revenue and profits. However, consumers have the ability to decide what type of media a company will deliver due to their demand for a specific product (Albarran, 2002). In this sense, that specific product would be reality TV. While media companies are in the business of production and distribution of reality TV, their main goal is to maximize profit. Consumers hold some responsibility in the dictation of the growth of the industry through the concept of supply and demand, whereas if the audience is demanding a particular product (in this case, reality TV), then the industry will continue to supply this product for the consumption of consumers. In a competitive market structure, a firm that wishes to “maximize profits are not only concerned with costs but also need to know what revenues are associated with different levels of output” (Doyle, 2002, p. 8). Using economic theory allows an avenue for analyzing various structures a market can have and the competition between different firms in that market. Television, like most other forms of media, takes place in a dual-product market in which the first product is its program service, while the other product is the audience (Doyle, 2002).

There are four major categories of economic forces that affect media operations: market forces, cost forces, regulatory forces, and barriers to entry and mobility. The first of the four major categories, market forces, can be described as “external forces based on structures and choices in the marketplace” (Picard, 2002, p. 48) and market forces, as described by the author are capital availability and rent, audience and consumer demand, advertiser demand, competition and substitutability. Inversely, cost forces are “internal pressures based on the operating expenses of the firm” (Picard, 2002, p. 48). The author lists cost forces as: economies/diseconomies of scale, economies/diseconomies of scope, economies/diseconomies of integration, fixed and variable costs, content costs, production/distribution costs, transaction costs and nonmonetary costs. Regulatory forces “represent the legal, political, and self regulatory forces that constrain and direct operations of media firms” (Picard, 2002, p. 48) and these include, technical and structural regulation and behavioral regulation. Finally, the last category of economic forces that affect media operations is listed as barriers to entry and mobility, which “represent factors that make it difficult for new firms to enter and successfully compete in a market,” (Picard, 2002, p. 48). Some of those barriers are; capital requirements, economies of scale, product differentiation, switching costs, limited access to distribution channels, government policies and competitive advantages (Picard, 2002).

In most developed economies such as the United States, the largest money making component of media industries is television (Doyle, 2002). “Unscripted” programming has exploded over the past decade due to various economic reasons. *USA Today* reported in 2007 that along with the early successes seen in reality programming,

writer's strikes in Hollywood and the pressure of low production costs have also been factors in the continuing rise of these types of programs. The writers' guild strike of 2007-2008 can be said, "to have helped further illustrate how the prevalence of reality TV has just as much to do with its mainstream popularity as its ease of inexpensive production" (Essany, 2008, p. 3). In the summer of 2007, the television industry saw one of the most reality show dense schedules yet, "ABC has nine reality shows due this summer...CBS is filming five game-show pilots this month" (Levin, 2007). TV tracker, a company that monitors trends in television, said that in the 2007 season 56 network reality series would air with pilots for reality programs up 50%. "It's simple economics," (Levin, 2007) is the response to the data showing that the number 1 and 2 shows for the previous season were *American Idol* and *Dancing With the Stars*. These programs have since stayed on top of the ratings charts. Even with lower rated reality programs, since the upfront costs are low, the net profit can be enormous. While Reality TV programs used to be a filler for networks to use when they had no other option, they have now become something used to boost their ratings during primetime blocks and to generate a significant amount of revenue (Levin, 2007).

What is important to note about reality TV is that these programs are not just television programs; they are transmedia franchises that incorporate all different forms of media. *American Idol* for example, the winner of the program signs a contract with RCA records to produce an album. *American Idol* then utilizes their cast after the finale to go on a nationwide tour of sold out venues. In the case of Kelly Clarkson, *American Idol*'s first winner, she continued the transmedia franchising by starring in a feature-length

movie with runner up Justin Guarini in *From Justin to Kelly* (2003) (Jenkins, 2009, p. 344).

Audiences are a vital piece of the economics of television. Over the past few decades, the number of television, cable and satellite channels have grown exponentially while the amount of time that people spend viewing television has not risen proportionately “because demand for more content has grown more slowly than the supply of programming” (Picard, 2002, p. 102). The audience is not the population as a whole; it is those who choose to select a channel or program to view. Audiences use these channels and programs and various communications to satisfy their wants and needs for information and ideas and each audience member individually goes about a different way to satisfy these wants and needs.

However, a part of the economic model of lowest cost for highest profit depends on the audience reception of reality TV. If no one is watching the shows, they will not be profitable, so it has become increasingly clear that these programs are here because people are watching them consistently which is allowing the network to create longevity with a program and thus gain viewer loyalty when the show stays on the air for multiple seasons. While it is argued that “reality shows cost much less to make than scripted shows, and, they argue, this is just a profit play by the broadcast networks,” (Goolsbee, 2007) it has to be countered that they are simply filling uses and gratification of audiences nationwide, as these shows are among the top watched and profitable. A question to consider is, why has there been a shift in what type of programming is the most successful, and why has it shifted to the genre of reality TV? Some attribute it to the

fact that “people now lack the attention span for old-style television or that our tastes have changed” (Goolsbee, 2007). Caves (2005) points out that programming is a fixed cost, and the investment will only pay off if there is a potential market for the show. Due to the penetration of cable and satellite television throughout the United States in the past decade broadcast television has a smaller potential market, “so the increase in reality programming is not just a matter of broadcasters wanting to save money. It’s that a shrinking potential market gives the networks less incentive to spend money” (Goolsbee, 2007).

Another aspect is that the audience of network television has changed over the years, which causes new types of programming to be introduced. Technology has allowed viewers to have a different viewing experience with the ability to view programs in HD as well as skip commercials, someone who may have avoided network television before due to advertising may watch now. The incentive that reality TV has is that it allows people to watch it live, which creates an immediate appeal to a mass audience (Gans, 2007).

Jenkins (2009) describes the concept of “affective economics” and how to understand successfully reality programming such as *American Idol* we have to understand the “changed context within which American broadcasting is operating and the changed model of consumer behavior shaping programming and marketing strategies” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 345). Affective economics is a theory in which an understanding of the emotional background of consumer decision-making is sought after in order to understand why consumers are deciding to view and purchase certain

products. While these desires cannot be quantified, they are able to be fit into economic categories that media and brand companies are familiar with because “it is still a world where what can be counted is what counts most” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 345).

What the literature on the economics of reality television shows, is that reality television has become a cost effective way for major networks to produce original programming. Reality television production has increased since the early 2000s, and continues to be on the rise. Reality television is also a means to cater to the changing audience viewing habits of television, and do the multi-tasking and shortened attention span of Americans today (Goolsbee, 2007).

How “Real” is Reality Television?

Reality, when used in the context of reality television, needs to have some definition and clarity. Much of what is known as reality television is a hybridization between the “real” and the produced. They are thus sites of ‘constructed unmediation’ where the technology involved in both production and post-production shapes a final product that comes across as unmediated, or real (Kavka, 2005). Instead of older film and television texts, which seek to have a relationship with their audiences in which they provide a particular perspective to their audience for them to view what is taking place on screen, reality formats seek to create a different relationship in which viewers feel a relation to these on-screen protagonists both as characters on this created TV situation and also as “real individuals with flesh-and-blood characteristics” (Kilborn, 2003, p. 52). This is where a new type of viewer emerges, because now “rather than being allowed to

remain at a safe, critical distance, viewers are drawn in to the world that these real-life performers inhabit” (Kilborn, 2003, p. 52).

This constructed unmediation has implications in the realm of media globalization where there is a constant demand for an ‘ethics of actuality’ that reality entertainment is reconfiguring. The most consistent criticism of reality TV is that it is not truly real because the shows are manipulated in such a way that there is an assumption of “a dumbed-down viewership that conflates what plays out on one side of the screen – framed as a spectacle – with what happens on the other – grounded in the experiential world” (Kavka, 2005, p. 94). However, viewers could also be credited with having enough experience watching television to realize that reality television is a mediated form of television and manipulated in a way that the programs tend to showcase instead of hide. Meaning, that if both can be accepted, that viewers know there is a manipulation to this reality, and that the actuality is important, then the appeal of reality television would be understood to lie “precisely in its performance of reality in a way that matters” (Kavka, 2005, p. 94).

Another technique used in reality television to enhance the authenticity of the program is the usage of “amateur” video. Professionally produced reality programming has emerged using “caught-on-tape” amateur-like video techniques. It creates the feel that ordinary people inadvertently with a sub-professional level of production have recorded it. This specific aesthetic format was said to have come to fruition in the late 1980s by cable stations that needed programming during a screenwriters’ strike in Hollywood. Through this movement, “an abundant, United States-wide resource of pre-recorded

images from personal handycams, store security cameras and police video archives proved the antidote, and much to the chagrin of the writer's union, 'unscripted TV' was born" (West, 2005, p.84). This led to the production of such non-narrative shows as *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1990). This juxtaposition of amateur video and accidental footage gave them a "special promise of authenticity" (West, 2005, p. 84). It signified truth because of the quality of the video shown, being non-professional. This suggested that the act performed on these programs were unpremeditated and to a viewer, it must be real.

West (2005) explains that in the caught-on-tape genre of production, "The self-evident non-professionalism of footage screened under the caught-on-tape banner certifies that the represented event is not staged, because both the technology utilized and the operator controlling it lack the sophistication to fake" (West, 2005, p.85) and this mode of production is then coded as transparent. With two distinct categories of production evident in caught-on-tape video, both have different variations of the feelings of realness for the viewer. While the first production category is that of hand-held devices, in which a viewer has the human point-of-view and it is displayed through the physiological responses of the person who is operating the device. The other is the fixed camera from security and surveillance type video. This can feel real because it is showing an impartial view of what is happening around it 24/7 and there is no participation or interference from someone operating this camera (West, 2005, p. 85).

This "caught-on-tape" style is seen mimicked in what West describes as 'second generation' reality programming. These are characterized by season long interpersonal

relationships in the form of character-driven narratives. Aesthetically these hold the higher standard of video used in broadcast standards with multi-camera set ups and seamless editing however, these contemporary forms of reality television allow room to represent the caught-on-tape style. This amateur video work is redone to “suit the purposes of this character-driven realism and to serve the sophisticated palette of a new generation of reality television viewers” (West, 2005, p. 89) by using some of the techniques and audiovisual markers used in amateur video-cording. Magazine and makeover shows such as *What Not to Wear* use hidden camera or amateur recording during parts of their programs. However, in contemporary second generation reality programs, these amateur videos are easily distinguished from the rest of the professional video by visual clues such as poor resolution, audio, color, and shaky hand held framing. This is what Benjamin describes as the paradox of technology-permeated realism because the footage from the amateur “offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free from all equipment” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 233).

Another aspect of second generation reality television that reflects this amateur video style are those which use confession or diary cams to create a more intimate and authentic feel between the individual on the screen to those viewing at home. These differ from the earlier mentioned magazine format, and makeover shows because the focus is put onto one set group of individuals from an entire season which offers exposure to an audience of an extended period of time, which “fosters promises of intimate knowing” (West, 2005, p. 89). This mimics amateur aesthetics because by the intimacy that is

implied by the diary/confession cam, a viewer is meant to conclude that this person is alone with this camera, which suggests that the camera being used for this footage is a non-professional one being operated by this particular character. These clips, usually of poorer technical quality, “and so easily edited out, is included in the sequence for good reason. It stands as a marker of authenticity,” confirming an amateur and intimate feel with the maker of the image and the confessor.

While *Survivor* attempts to pull away from this aesthetic, in which Mark Burnett, the show’s producer, coined the terms “unscripted drama” and “dramality” for his production, there are occasions in which unanticipated events that occur fall back into the aesthetics of amateur video. The continuous capturing of footage during reality shows allows for there to be unforeseen circumstances that get recorded that were not able to be properly captured by a “professional” aesthetic such as a campfire incident in the *Australian Outback* (season 2, episode 6) when contestant Michael Skupin fell into the campfire¹, which disrupted the show’s well-polished aesthetics and gave it a more amateur feel. Moments like this remind viewers that these scenes are not staged and gave it the appeal, and while “fan, critics and watchdogs disagreed over questions of morality, safety and privacy raised by the episode, but nobody suggested it was faked” (West, 2005, p. 92). Jeff Probst, host of *Survivor* states that they have a “responsibility to keep the cameras rolling” (West, 2005, p. 92).

¹ In season 2 of *Survivor: Australian Outback*, contestant Michael Skupin inhaled smoke and passed out into a campfire. After regaining consciousness, he burned his hands and wrists while pushing himself out of the fire. He then jumped into the cold river while awaiting necessary medical attention (CBS, 2001).

Purpose

While reality TV has been studied in the past, many projects focus on one aspect of the genre, whether it is the audience and trends in the demographics that watch the programs or economically why it is most beneficial for networks to invest in reality programming. However, putting the two concepts together offers a more complete look at why reality TV has become such an integral part in media and culture today. Although both are working independently in ideology, they support one another while looking at reasons for success. Networks can continue to produce reality TV, but unless the audience continues to watch and create revenue, it would be a waste of the network's money. The question that needs to be answered is, why are audiences so receptive to reality TV programs in contrast to other programs currently being aired? The comparative component of this study is not the definitive purpose of this study, however there is an inherent need for comparison to give meaning to the data that appears in latter chapters of this study. This is where the two concepts of audience reception and economic value overlap and impact one another. Networks need people watching their shows, but viewers are looking for a deeper reason to continue watching the shows and through para-social relationships, they may feel more connected which in turn is why the quantitative data must go hand in hand with the qualitative analysis. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ 1: What are the trends of reality TV scheduling on broadcast networks since 2004 in regards to quantity of primetime programming and viewership?

RQ 2: What kinds of relationships are viewers of reality TV forming with the characters on screen?

RQ 3: Why do viewers 18-35 watch reality TV programming?

RQ4: How does the gender of the viewer affect the para-social relationships that are formed?

Chapter II defines the methodology in which this study was conducted. The methodology used in this study draws on research provided in this introductory chapter and previous studies outlined in the literature review portion. The methodology used in this study attempts to answer the above research questions.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative components in the methodology by studying the increase of reality TV on broadcast networks. A dual theoretical approach is used by first examining the economic concerns of television executives. The production of reality TV and how it fits into general economic theory of minimizing cost in order to maximize profit are discussed. Then this study also addresses emotional concerns of the audience by using focus groups to give in-depth responses from viewers of reality television as to how and why they watch reality programming. By using both approaches, this study offers a well-rounded examination of why reality TV has become such an integral part of contemporary television culture.

Focus groups have many purposes, and for this study it is to suggest and react to ideas of why and how viewers of reality television watch and interact with reality programming because “a focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size composition and procedure. The purpose of conducting a focus group is to listen and gather information, it is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service” (Krueger, & Casey, 2009, p. 2). In this study, the product is reality television. These focus groups supplement the textual research that viewers are more apt to form para-social relationships with those seen on reality TV rather than

characters on scripted TV, leading to more habitual viewership. The concept that more habitual relationships are formed between viewers and these programs support that idea that the economics in reality TV are thriving because they are acquiring large audiences resulting in more advertising revenue and thus maximizing profit.

Economic Data Analysis

In this examination of profit and advertising, one successful, long-term show from each major broadcast network is analyzed. Shows chosen include; from NBC, *The Biggest Loser*, which begins its 10th season in September 2010, *American Idol* on Fox, which will be starting its 10th season in January of 2011 and on CBS, *Survivor*, which begins its 20th season. On ABC, *The Bachelor/The Bachelorette* franchise is used as an example, which recently completed its 14th (*The Bachelor*) and 6th seasons (*The Bachelorette*) respectively.

Along with these shows, other network reality programs are used to get an overall comparison of how reality shows fare against scripted shows in terms of viewing habits and attachment and program loyalty. In chapter III, a series of tables outlines advertising revenues for the networks during primetime from Sunday-Thursday to determine where reality programs rank in terms of amount of advertising revenue acquired for the network. Nielsen-ranked lists of the top 25 network shows for the last week of every month from February through July 2010 are examined in order to see where reality programs fall in these rankings. These lists include data from the 18-49 demographic to show the rating, and the number of viewers in that demographic. The 18-49 demographic was chosen for

this study to coincide with the focus group demographic of participants 18-35. Using this demographic will vary slightly from how the programs fare in ratings and viewership when examined with the total population.

Focus Groups

In the focus groups, a habitual viewer was defined as someone who regularly watches one or more reality TV programs. Ideally they were a habitual viewer of one of the four programs outlined above, but those four shows are more indicative of the quantitative portion of this study. In order to get an ideal representation of the variations between scripted and non-scripted program viewing, participants who are not habitual reality television viewers were invited to participate as long as they habitually watch at least one television program regularly for comparison purposes. There was an inquiry about the viewing habits of the participants involved to gauge how they watch reality TV programs, as well as their thoughts and emotional concerns resulting from the time they have invested. For example, did the participants feel that they can relate to particular cast members more than others and why? Or did they get angry/upset when their favorite contestant got voted off or leaves the show? The data was content analyzed and examined for generalized trends between the two focus groups, as well as for differences based on gender.

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Texas gave approval for the focus groups for this study on March 30, 2010. Subsequently, two focus groups were held on May 7, 2010 at the University of North Texas. Each focus group was audio

recorded for research purposes. Each participant was fully informed of the purpose of this study and signed the approved consent form prior to the start of the study.

The focus groups were divided by gender. The first focus group consisted of 7 females, and the second group consisted of 9 males. Keeping male and females separated during the focus group was to ensure that unbiased opinions from participants were observed. Since participants would talk about how they feel and relate to reality programs, it was hoped that this goal would be more easily achieved if divided by gender. Due to the nature of the focus groups, conversations deviated slightly depending on gender and their specific interests; this is noted in the discussion of the focus groups in Chapter III.

Questions were then posed to guide a conversation that would reveal relevant insight into the relationships that viewers form with their favorite television programs and characters. As the moderator, I merely offered a direction in which the conversation to flow by asking a broad range of questions outlined below. However, those participating in the focus groups mainly dominated the direction in which the conversation went. The moderator only interjected when it was necessary to keep discussion on track.

Questions were designed by looking at previous studies on para-social interaction in a way to engage an in-depth conversation on the topic. These questions were formulated in order to receive open-ended responses and freely allow for the conversation to lead to the various questions in the set. These questions were not asked in any particular order in the focus groups, they were instead asked when they appeared to be relevant to the current topic of conversation.

Focus Group Questions

1. What draws you to watch a TV program, reality TV, scripted TV?
2. Why do you choose not to watch reality TV programs, scripted TV?
3. What is more appealing about reality TV than scripted TV?
4. What is less appealing about reality TV than scripted TV?
5. Do you watch more or less reality TV than scripted TV?
6. Do you feel more connected to those appearing on reality TV programs? Why?
7. What are some of the reality TV shows that you watch? Scripted TV shows?
8. Why do you watch them? How do you watch them (in what settings? As a group or alone?)
9. Do you find yourself wishing that you could be a part of a reality TV program? In what ways do you wish you could participate in reality TV programs?
10. Do you often watch more cable or network TV during primetime?
11. When you watch a TV program (reality or scripted) do you watch it on a regular basis?
12. Do some reality programs feel more “real” than others? Why?

Participants

Participants were chosen for these focus groups based on the purpose of the study, to gauge how and why viewers of reality television watch reality programming. A specific demographic had been set for the study for the age group of 18-34. A sampling of an equal number of male and female viewers was important in order to examine gender differences in viewing habits and reception. Maintaining a sample of a broad gender, ethnicity and age ranges was sought in order to have a diverse population sample.

Participants represented a mix of undergraduate students, graduate students, and non-students.

Participants were recruited for the focus groups by using word of mouth between family and friends. The requirements for participation in this study were simply to be between the ages of 18-34 and to habitually watch at least one television show. Attention was paid to ensure that there were an equal number of males to female and also to scripted and non-scripted television viewers. Both focus groups were conducted on the same day in the same location.

The focus groups lasted approximately one hour each. The female focus groups met first, and were then given lunch while the male participants arrived. The male participants then ate lunch prior to beginning their focus group, which then lasted approximately one hour. Each focus group was thoroughly educated on the purpose of this study, and what their role was in participating in this study.

In Chapter III, the economic data analysis is presented. A series of tables are used to show how reality programming rank amongst its competitors. Also in Chapter III, a detailed content analysis of the focus groups is presented. This shows each focus group's responses to the questions asked of them, and then compare the answers of each focus group to one another. This illustrates the audience's emotional concerns of reality television after data is presented to show the strong economic success of reality television.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Advertising Revenue

Advertising is the key way in which profit is earned for television programs due to the fact that advertising is one of the main sources of revenue for most media organizations and “patterns of advertising activity exert a very significant influence on the fortunes of the media industry as a whole” (Doyle, 2002, p. 39). In prime time, reality TV is able to demand top dollar amounts for their 30-second ad rates. The following series of tables display the top 10 prime time network shows in order of cost of average 30-second advertising rates. The following tables cover the 2004-2005 seasons through the 2007-2008 seasons. In the following tables, the reality programs that ranked in the top 10 advertising costs are listed next to their respective placement on the list.

Table 1

2004-2005 Prime Time TV Season 30-Second Ad Rates

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>30-second Ad Rate</i>
1	American Idol – Wednesday	Fox	\$658,000
2	American Idol – Tuesday	Fox	\$620,000
4	Survivor	CBS	\$412,833
5	The Apprentice	NBC	\$409,877
10	Contender	NBC	\$330,000

Source: Baker, 2008

Based on the data in Table 1, reality television programming began to really rank highly in terms of average 30-second spot costs. Reality programs nearly dominated the top 5 costliest shows to advertise on, and ended with 5 of the top 10 programs on network primetime programming. *American Idol* (Tuesday and Wednesday), the most expensive program charged more than \$600,000 per 30-second spot in the 2004-2005 season. The gap between *American Idol* at Spot 1 and 2 and the number 3 program, *ER* (\$479,250), was nearly \$150,000 per 30-second spot.

Table 2

2005-2006 Prime Time TV Season 30-Second Ad Rates

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>30-second Ad Rate</i>
1	American Idol	Fox	\$705,000
2	American Idol – Wednesday	Fox	\$660,000
7	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	ABC	\$355,000
8	Survivor	CBS	\$350,000
8	The Apprentice	NBC	\$350,000
9	The Apprentice: Martha Stewart	NBC	\$310,000

Source: Baker, 2008

Again in the following season, *American Idol* saw an increase in their advertising rates, which once again put them at the top of the list. While still making an impressive showing, reality programming makes up 6 of the top shows for this season. However, they did not seem to rank as highly on the list. However, the differences in ad rates between the 3rd and 10th programs on the list are not as drastic as those between the 1st and 3rd.

Table 3

2006-2007 Prime Time TV Season 30-Second Ad Rates

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>30-second Ad Rate</i>
1	American Idol – Wednesday	Fox	\$620,000
2	American Idol- Tuesday	Fox	\$594,000
9	Survivor	CBS	\$296,000
10	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	ABC	\$293,000

Source: Baker, 2008

As a whole, advertising revenue dropped in the 2006-2007 season, with *American Idol* only receiving up to \$620,000 per 30-second ad, and this downward trend can be seen throughout reality and scripted programming. The 3rd ranked show from 2006-2007 was *Desperate Housewives*, which even its advertising rates drop from \$560,000 in 2005-2006, to \$394,000 in 2006-2007. However, the same top shows have continued to dominate in advertising revenue with *American Idol*, *Survivor*, and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* making the list for several consecutive years.

Table 4

2007-2008 Prime Time TV Season 30-Second Ad Rates

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>30-second Ad Rate</i>
8	Survivor	CBS	\$208,000
9	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	ABC	\$198,000
10	Dancing with the Stars – Monday	ABC	\$196,000
11	Dancing with the Stars- Tuesday	ABC	\$191,000

Source: Baker, 2008

Reality programming for the fall schedule of the 2007-2008 season seemed to stay near the bottom of the top 10. The 11th was added, due to the fact that it was close behind,

and that it shows the proximity in costs for both nights of *Dancing with the Stars*. The survey taken from AdAge used for this table was taken in the fall of 2007. Top performing shows such as *American Idol* were not slated to start until the spring of 2008, and it has been said that “‘Idol’ is already fetching 30-second ad prices ranging from \$500,000 to more than \$700,000 (depending on when in the run of the program marketers wish their ads to appear) and is expected to surpass ‘Grey’s’ top price” (Steinberg, 2007). *Survivor* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* continued to stay around the same rankings. However, all shows have seen a decline in advertising revenue due to the overall economy at this time.

The above tables illustrate that reality TV programs are able to bring in top dollar advertising rates in prime time. Many of the same shows have proven that season after season they are able to top the list in broadcast prime time advertising revenue. Most notably, *American Idol* is pulling in significantly higher rates than the next rated show, which have been *ER* and *Desperate Housewives*. These high advertising numbers factored in with low production costs are very valuable assets for reality television producers.

Forbes Magazine published a list of prime time’s biggest money making shows with figures ending on January 31, 2009. *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars* took the number one and two spots on the list for the prior year. *American Idol* brought in \$623,000 for a 30-second ad, an estimated \$14 million in revenue in one hour. *Dancing with the Stars* brought in \$205,000 per 30-second ad, or about \$5 million during a one hour episode of their results show, while the episode in which the dancers compete brings

in a comparable amount. Since *Dancing with the Stars* is on two nights per week it brings in an estimated \$8 million of advertising revenue per week (Rose, 2009).

Survivor was also on the Forbes list of TV's 15 biggest moneymakers, bringing in \$204,000 per 30-second ad, which equals \$4.2 million per hour long episode. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* continues to make the top moneymaking list with a 30-second ad costing an average of \$196,000 equating to total revenue of \$4 million in one hour. Along with viewer strength for the show, advertisers also have other variables that dictate the amount they are willing to spend on an ad, including the day on which the program airs. Also, advertisers are not as likely to spend large amounts on a new show, so the longevity of a show will help to generate more advertising revenue (Rose, 2009).

With advertising figures consistently changing as a whole, reality TV programs are still able to lead in advertising rates, even when as a whole advertising is on the decline. It can be concluded that large sums of money are being spent to advertise during reality TV programs on network television compared to some of the scripted counterparts. Data indicates that the less expensive reality programs can earn similar (or higher) advertising revenue over the more costly to produce scripted programs. In 2002, CBS reported that reality TV programs cost an average of approximately \$400,000 per hour to produce while drama series cost upwards of \$2 million per hour (Hibberd, 2002). This combined with substantial advertising revenue allows reality TV to be very profitable for the networks.

Network Primetime Advertising Rates as of October 26, 2009

In the following series of tables, the cost of advertising for the 2009-2010 season as of October 26, 2009 are listed by day and timeslot for network primetime programming. What this will illustrate is how programs are faring against those which air at the same time. Reality programs are noted by **bold** in the following tables. It is important to note that because this is a specific snapshot of shows on at a specific period in time, not all significant shows are present, such as *American Idol*; but data for these shows will be discussed later.

First and foremost visible between 2009-2010 advertising rates and the previous years listed below, is that overall there has been a decline in prices for advertising on TV due to the economy and audience fragmentation. The decline can be seen in such programs as CBS's *Two and a Half Men*, for which a 30-second ad costs \$226,635 which has declined from 2008s, \$276,433. *Family Guy* on Fox saw a slight decrease for its 30-second advertising cost from 2008s \$231,306 to an average of \$214,750. Even long-running animated program *The Simpsons* on Fox fell from \$250,000 per 30-second spot in 2008, to an average of \$201,920. This is also seen with *American Idol*, which once obtained prices as high as \$705,000, which is now listed as \$490,000. *American Idol* has maintained its position as the top program in advertising revenue, but advertising is decreasing throughout prime-time television (Steinberg, 2009).

These figures listed above can be used as indicators and estimates of what advertisers paid for their airtime “during a recent upfront market, during which marketers commit to pay for predetermined amounts of ad inventory months or weeks in advance in

exchange for locking down price guarantees” (Steinberg, 2009). Ad time that is purchased much closer to airtime is called scatter inventory, and the market noticed that prices for scatter inventory is up above the upfront prices, according to Wells Fargo Securities. This news is ideal for TV broadcasters, who held back up to 15% of advertising time normally sold in the upfront market, hoping that they could demand higher scatter prices closer to the airtime. This drop in pricing shouldn’t come as a big surprise because of the economy hindering what advertisers are able to spend. However, it is important to note is that there is not a set price for advertising because most TV advertising is bought as a larger negotiation. These negotiations often have many factors, including the relationship that the advertiser has with the network, the amount of airtime being purchased by the advertiser, and whether or not the advertiser is utilizing nontraditional forms of advertising (i.e. product placements) as a part of their package (Steinberg, 2009).

It is important to note that when it comes to programs in the reality genre, there has been a rise in the number of product placement advertisements. An article in the *New York Times* in 2005 attributes this widely seen change of advertising to the changes in the way television is being watched. With DVRs and online television viewing, 30 second commercials are no longer as effective with advertisers as means to publicize their product during some of television’s most watched shows. Many are deciding to turn to product placement within shows in order to ensure that viewers are still seeing their products even if they have the ability to fast forward via their DVRs (Manly, 2005). Although this has been happening for several years, it has really made its way into reality

TV on hit shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *Survivor*. In the 2004-2005 season there were more than 100,000 product placements that appeared between the 6 major broadcast networks according to Nielsen. Reality shows are “shamelessly stuffed to bursting with brand tie-ins; indeed, whole episodes can revolve around a product” (Manly, 2005). Chief executive of Reveille, whose shows include *The Office* and *The Biggest Loser* states, “the fact is brands are part of our lives and brands exist in these television environments, so why not showcase them” (Manly, 2005).

Table 5

Sunday Primetime Schedule Advertising Rates

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>Fox</i>
7 p.m. ET	America’s Funniest Home Videos \$75,893	60 Minutes \$93,772	Football Night in America \$108,275 Dateline Sunday \$21,200	
8 p.m. ET	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition \$136,743	The Amazing Race \$109,736	Sunday Night Football \$339,700 Celebrity Apprentice \$110,283	The Simpsons \$201,920 The Cleveland Show \$158,701 Family Guy \$214,750 American Dad \$136,388
9 p.m. ET	Desperate Housewives \$228,851	Three Rivers \$95,663		
10 p.m. ET	Brothers & Sisters \$140,445	Cold Case \$99,595		

Source: Steinberg, 2009

On Sundays, *Sunday Night Football* by far earns the most in advertising revenue compared to other programming. But, it is hard to use sports as a comparison because the goal of this research is to show the differentiation between scripted and non-scripted programming. Technically speaking, *Sunday Night Football* is non-scripted programming, but for the sake of this argument, it is not being considered reality TV. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* which has shown previously that it does well against other scripted shows, ranks in the middle for advertising revenues on Sunday nights, but is the top reality program for the night. Comparatively, the reality programs airing on Sunday nights fare decently well against their scripted competitors, but this is definitely not a strong night for reality TV (Steinberg, 2009).

Table 6

Monday Primetime Schedule Advertising Rates

<i>Monday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>FOX</i>
8 p.m. ET	Dancing with the Stars \$178,687	How I Met Your Mother \$145,106 Accidentally on Purpose \$107,817	Heroes \$108,675	House \$183,298
9 p.m. ET	The Bachelor \$139,500	Two and a Half Men \$226,635 Big Bang Theory \$191,900	Trauma \$75,928	Lie to Me \$128,105
10 p.m. ET	Castle \$92,700	CSI: Miami \$140,065	Jay Leno \$53,640	

Source: Steinberg, 2009

Mondays, *Dancing with the Stars* is one of the top earners for the night bringing in an average of \$178,687, falling only behind *House* (\$183,298) in its 8 p.m. first hour, and coming in behind *Two and a Half Men* (\$226,635) between 9:00 and 9:30, and *Big*

Bang Theory (\$191,900) between 9:30 and 10:00. *The Bachelor* which begins mid-season in the same timeslot as *Dancing with the Stars* brings in slightly lower numbers at \$139,500, falling behind *House* and *How I Met Your Mother* (\$145,106) in the first hour, and behind *Two and a Half Men* and *Big Bang Theory* in its second hour (Steinberg, 2009).

Table 7

Tuesday Primetime Schedule Advertising Rates

<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>FOX</i>
8 p.m. ET	Shark Tank \$67,960	NCIS \$133,304	The Biggest Loser \$128,295	So You Think You Can Dance \$132,558
	V \$110,450			Past Life \$83,628
9 p.m. ET	Dancing With the Stars \$172,570	NCIS: Los Angeles \$106,508		
	Scrubs \$70,063			
	Better Off Ted \$72,100			
10 p.m. ET	The Forgotten \$97,527	The Good Wife \$126,882	Jay Leno \$65,678	

Source: Steinberg, 2009

During Tuesday primetime, *Dancing with the Stars* brings in the most money for any show airing that night with \$172,570 while competing against 2 other reality shows, *The Biggest Loser* (\$128,295) and *So You Think You Can Dance* (\$132,558). *The Biggest Loser* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, which starts one hour before at 8:00, fall only behind *NCIS* (\$133,304) during that hour. (Steinberg, 2009).

Table 8

Wednesday Primetime Schedule Advertising Rates

<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>FOX</i>
8 p.m. ET	Hank \$91,167 The Middle \$97,812	Old Christine \$80,106 Gary Unmarried \$79,986	Mercy \$91,172 Parenthood \$99,417	So You Think You Can Dance \$105,421
9 p.m. ET	Modern Family \$130,388 Cougar Town \$103,314	Criminal Minds \$116,553	Law & Order: SVU \$101,632	Glee \$127,350 Human Target \$145,536
10 p.m. ET	Eastwick \$110,558	CSI: New York \$127,941	Jay Leno \$62,012	

Source: Steinberg, 2009

On Wednesday nights, the only reality program is *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Wednesday night's episode of *So You Think You Can Dance* is the results show. It demands the highest costs for its advertising in the 8:00 p.m. timeslot, but against the rest of primetime it fares about average for the night bringing in \$105,421.

Table 9

Thursday Primetime Schedule Advertising Rates

<i>Thursday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>Fox</i>
8 p.m. ET	Flash Forward \$175,724	Survivor: Samoa \$152,246	SNL \$122,000 Community \$120,000 Parks and Recreation \$119,990	Bones \$107,942

(table continues)

Table 9 (continued).

<i>Thursday</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>Fox</i>
9 p.m. ET	Grey's Anatomy \$240,462	CSI \$198,647	The Office \$191,236 30 Rock \$159,674	Fringe \$120,062
10 p.m. ET	Private Practice \$175,450	The Mentalist \$140,940	Jay Leno \$57,295	

Source: Steinberg, 2009

Thursday nights feature *Survivor: Samoa* (\$152,246) during this snapshot of a schedule. *Survivor: Samoa* falls short only behind *Flash Forward* (\$175,724) in its 8:00 p.m. time slot, however again ends up approximately in the middle for the evening against the other programs (Steinberg, 2009).

When broken down by timeslot, it is apparent that reality TV shows are able to acquire strong advertising rates compared to some of their scripted competitors. While it does show that reality programs are not always the top earners in their timeslot, their competitive advertising rates, paired with their cost of production, makes them financially successful. According to a survey by Ad Age, *American Idol* demands prices between \$360,000 and \$490,000 per 30-second ad. The price for this specific program varies on when the ad is played, depending how close it is to the season finale when a winner is announced (Steinberg, 2009).

Network Viewers and Ratings

In the following tables, a sample of network shows were taken from the last week of each month from February 2010 – July 2010, in order to provide a sampling of where

shows ranked over an extended period of time, since there are always extenuating circumstance that can alter the overall outcomes of that week’s rankings. For example, the Winter Olympics took place during February of 2010, the NCAA Basketball Finals took place in March 2010, and the NBA Finals were broadcast in June 2010. Reality shows, consistent with the previous tables, are noted with **bold** text while specials, such as the Olympics or NBA Finals appear in *italics*. The months were chosen in order to reflect 3 elements of television schedules: sweeps periods (which can be seen in March), regular season finales (which can be seen in May), and summer series (which appear in Jun and July). The demographic chosen is adults 18-49 which varies slightly from similar tables given with total viewers. This is for consistency purposes to coincide with the focus groups which were aimed towards the 18-35 demographic.

Table 10

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on February 21, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	American Idol - Tues	Fox	9.2	12,099
2	<i>Winter Olympics – Wed</i>	<i>NBC</i>	9.0	11,893
3	<i>Winter Olympics – Sat</i>	<i>NBC</i>	7.4	9,716
4	<i>Winter Olympics – Mon</i>	<i>NBC</i>	7.1	9,380
5	<i>Winter Olympics – Thurs</i>	<i>NBC</i>	7.0	9,217
6	American Idol – Wed	Fox	7.0	9,154
7	<i>Winter Olympics – Sun</i>	<i>NBC</i>	5.9	7,740
8	<i>Winter Olympics – Tues</i>	<i>NBC</i>	5.5	7,247
9	<i>Winter Olympics – Fri</i>	<i>NBC</i>	5.4	7,139
10	Undercover Boss	CBS	4.8	6,367
11	Lost	ABC	4.5	5,924
12	The Bachelor	ABC	4.1	5,333
13	Survivor: Heroes – Villains	CBS	3.9	5,179
14	Grey’s Anatomy	ABC	3.9	5,179

(table continues)

Table 10 (continued).

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
15	Desperate Housewives	ABC	3.7	4,892
16	Big Bang Theory	CBS	3.6	4,742
17	Two and a Half Men (R)	CBS	3.3.	4,379
18	Family Guy (R)	Fox	3.2	4,158
19	Simpsons	Fox	2.9	3,863
20	Amazing Race 16	CBS	2.9	3,763
21	Sortilegio	UNI	2.8	3,683
22	American Dad	Fox	2.8	3,670
23	Cleveland	Fox	2.8	3,669
24	24	Fox	2.8	3,662
25	Private Practice	ABC	2.8	3,649

Source: Seidman, 2010

The Winter Olympics dominated most of the top 10 programs for this week. However, the other 3 programs appearing in the top 10 are *American Idol* – Tuesday at number one, *American Idol* – Wednesday which found its way in the middle of all of the Olympics coverage at number six, and *Undercover Boss*, which ranked number 10 for this week. The rest of the top 25 included Reality TV programs *The Bachelor*, *Survivor* – *Heroes vs. Villains*, and *Amazing Race 16*.

Table 11

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on March 28, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	American Idol - Tues	Fox	8.4	11,105
2	American Idol –Wed	Fox	7.2	9,502
3	Dancing with the Stars – (P)	ABC	6.4	8,457
4	Big Bang Theory	CBS	5.2	6,885
5	Undercover Boss	CBS	5.1	6,746
6	Two and a Half Men	CBS	5.1	6,671
7	NCAA Basketball Championship - Thurs	CBS	4.3	5,613

(table continues)

Table 11 (continued).

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
8	Lost	ABC	4.0	5,304
9	Amazing Race 16	CBS	3.9	5,135
10	<i>NCAA Basketball Championship - Sat</i>	<i>CBS</i>	3.8	4,995
11	Family Guy (R)	Fox	3.8	4,991
12	<i>NCAA Basketball Championship - Fri</i>	<i>CBS</i>	3.7	4,923
13	Modern Family	ABC	3.7	4,852
14	Grey's Anatomy	ABC	3.7	4,850
15	How I Met Your Mother	CBS	3.5	4,669
16	Office	NBC	3.5	4,641
17	Survivor: Heroes – Villains	CBS	3.4	4,511
18	Rules of Engagement	CBS	3.3	4,375
19	Castle	ABC	3.3	4,373
20	Law and Order: SVU	NBC	3.3	4,330
21	CSI: Miami	CBS	3.2	4,164
22	<i>NCAA Basketball Championship – Thurs</i>	<i>CBS</i>	3.1	4,139
23	60 Minutes	CBS	3.1	4,118
24	Biggest Loser 9	NBC	3.0	3,988
25	Private Practice	ABC	2.9	3,847

Source: Seidman, 2010

March also featured sporting event specials that made the top 25 list. March is home to the NCAA Basketball Championship that is once again noted in *italics*.

However, the NCAA Championships did not fare nearly as well as the Winter Olympics did, and therefore did not have as large of an impact on the list for this specific week.

Once again, *American Idol* made the top two with its performance and results shows. The number three spot was held by *Dancing with the Stars*, which premiered for this week.

The other reality programs included in the week's list include: *Amazing Race 16*,

Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains, and *Biggest Loser 9*.

Table 12

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on April 25, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	American Idol - Tues	Fox	6.9	9,055
2	American Idol - Wed	Fox	5.9	7,752
3	Glee	Fox	5.3	6,919
4	Dancing with the Stars	ABC	4.8	6,296
5	House	Fox	4.1	5,381
6	Big Bang Theory	CBS	4.1	5,341
7	Two and a Half Men	CBS	3.8	4,935
8	Lost	ABC	3.7	4,921
9	Survivor: Heroes - Villains	CBS	3.6	4,775
10	Biggest Loser 9	NBC	3.4	4,479
11	Desperate Housewives	ABC	3.4	4,420
12	Office	NBC	3.2	4,272
13	How I Met Your Mother	CBS	3.2	4,267
14	CSI: Miami	CBS	3.2	4,239
15	Family Guy (R)	Fox	3.2	4,201
16	Amazing Race 16	CBS	3.2	4,155
17	Apprentice 9	NBC	3.1	4,028
18	Rules of Engagement	CBS	3.0	3,990
19	The Mentalist	CBS	3.0	3,936
20	Parenthood	NBC	2.9	3,841
21	Romantically Challenged (P)	ABC	2.9	3,790
22	CSI	CBS	2.8	3,663
23	24	Fox	2.8	3,648
24	Law and Order: SVU	NBC	2.8	3,628
25	Simpsons	Fox	2.7	3,603

Source: Seidman, 2010

With no special programs airing at this time, this chart dictates the rankings with just regularly scheduled programming. The *American Idol* trend continues to rank in the top two spots for the week. *Dancing with the Stars* follows closely behind in 4th place. *Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains* and *The Biggest Loser 9* also fall in the top 10, this again gives reality programming 5 of the top 10 programs for this week. *The Amazing Race* and

The Apprentice fall slightly but still remain in the list for the top 25 shows. The same shows are consistently appearing in the charts, often around the same opposing shows, which suggests that the random sampling of weeks offers an accurate picture of where these programs lie week to week.

What is important to note in the following table is that at this time, is that all of the programs that fall into the regularly scheduled 2009-2010 season had their finales around this time which did in fact adjust where certain shows landed on the list:

Table 13

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on May 23, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	American Idol - Tues	Fox	6.7	8,800
2	American Idol –Wed	Fox	6.1	8,018
3	Lost: The End(s) Finale	ABC	5.8	7,668
4	Big Bang Theory	CBS	5.5	7,252
5	Grey’s Anatomy	ABC	5.4	7,143
6	Glee	Fox	4.8	6,293
7	Two and a Half Men	CBS	4.4	5,844
8	Lost	ABC	4.3	5,653
9	House	Fox	4.3	5,636
10	Modern Family	ABC	4.2	5,592
11	Dancing with the Stars	ABC	4.1	5,349
12	<i>Lost: The Final Journey(s)</i>	ABC	4.1	5,331
13	Office	NBC	3.4	4,514
14	Apprentice 9	NBC	3.4	4,485
15	Criminal Minds	CBS	3.3	4,387
16	CSI	CBS	3.3	4,306
17	NCIS	CBS	3.3	4,299
18	The Mentalist	CBS	3.2	4,208
19	Family Guy	Fox	3.1	4,140
20	Biggest Loser 9	NBC	3.1	4,122
21	NCIS: Los Angeles	CBS	3.1	4,096
22	How I Met Your Mother	CBS	3.1	4,094

(table continues)

Table 13 (continued).

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
23	24	Fox	2.9	3,881
24	CSI: Miami	CBS	2.9	3,854
25	Rules of Engagement	CBS	2.9	3,831

Source: Seidman, 2010

American Idol again secures the top two positions, while *Dancing with the Stars* drops out of the top 10. Many scripted shows gained viewers as it was the time for season finales including the much-anticipated *Lost* finale, which also had a pre-finale special, and a regular episode that week as well. Reality programs in the rest of the top 25 included *Dancing with the Stars*, *Apprentice 9*, and *Biggest Loser 9*.

The following table is the first observation of the summer series, which proved to be abundant for reality programs:

Table 14

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on June 20, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	<i>NBA Finals Game 7</i>	ABC	11.4	15,036
2	<i>NBA Finals Game 6</i>	ABC	7.1	9,380
3	America's Got Talent – Wed	NBC	3.1	4,047
4	America's Got Talent – Tues	NBC	4.0	3,925
5	Hell's Kitchen – Tues – (P)	Fox	3.0	3,911
6	<i>NBA Countdown Game 7</i>	ABC	2.9	3,776
7	Hell's Kitchen	Fox	2.7	3,516
8	So You Think You Can Dance-Wed	Fox	2.6	3,446
9	Big Bang Theory (R)	CBS	2.6	3,443
10	Bachelorette	ABC	2.6	3,422
11	<i>NBA Countdown Game 6</i>	ABC	2.5	3,240
12	Two and a Half Men (R)	CBS	2.4	3,201
13	So You Think You Can Dance-Thurs	Fox	2.3	2,994

(table continues)

Table 14 (continued).

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
14	Last Comic Standing 7	NBC	2.2	2,892
15	Family Guy (R)	Fox	2.1	2,721
16	Lie to Me	Fox	2.0	2,590
17	Soy Tu Duena – Wed	UNI	1.9	2,552
18	Soy Tu Duena – Thurs	UNI	1.9	2,546
19	Hasta Dinero Separe – Mon	UNI	1.9	2,544
20	Hasta Dinero Separe – Wed	UNI	1.9	2,526
21	Soy Tu Duena – Fri	UNI	1.9	2,479
22	True Beauty	ABC	2.9	2,447
23	Soy Tu Duena – Mon	UNI	1.8	2,411
24	Hasta Dinero Separe – Tues	UNI	1.8	2,368
25	Last Comic Standing (R)	NBC	1.7	2,293

Source: Gorman, 2010

What reality programs are able to do because of the ease of production is to run in cycles rather than true seasons like their scripted counterparts. This means that during the summer while many scripted shows begin filming for their next season, reality shows are still airing new programming while scripted shows air repeats. Many reality shows offer more than one cycle per year because of the way their production schedules work and summer is the time for reality to really shine. Even with the NBA Finals sharing the top 25, reality programs were able to hold 10 spots in the top 25. Along with the NBA Finals, *America's Got Talent*, and *Hell's Kitchen* fill out the top 5, while *So You Think You Can Dance* and the *Bachelorette* join them in the top 10. While the rest of television programming lulls during the summer time, reality programming really remains strong.

Table 15

Top 25 Network Shows Week Ending on July 25, 2010, Adults 18-49

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Network</i>	<i>18-49 rating</i>	<i>18-49 viewers (000)</i>
1	Bachelorette	ABC	3.4	4,419
2	Hell's Kitchen – Tues	Fox	3.2	4,228
3	America's Got Talent – Tues	NBC	3.0	3,937
4	Wipeout – Tuesday	ABC	2.9	3,871
5	Hell's Kitchen	Fox	2.7	3,578
6	America's Got Talent – Wed	NBC	2.6	3,464
7	Family Guy (R)	Fox	2.6	3,395
8	Wipeout – Thurs	ABC	2.6	3,386
9	Big Brother 12 – Sun	CBS	2.5	3,316
10	Big Bang Theory (R)	CBS	2.5	3,267
11	Soy Tu Duena – Wed	UNI	2.4	3,148
12	Soy Tu Duena – Thurs	UNI	2.4	3,132
13	Family Guy (R)	Fox	2.3	3,022
14	Big Brother 12 – Thurs	CBS	2.2	2,958
15	Soy Tu Duena – Tues	UNI	2.2	2,947
16	Big Brother 12 – Wed	CBS	2.2	2,920
17	Soy Tu Duena – Mon	UNI	2.2	2,866
18	So You Think You Can Dance -Wed	Fox	2.1	2,819
19	Two and a Half Men (R)	CBS	2.1	2,795
20	So You Think You Can Dance-Thurs	Fox	2.0	2,687
21	Hasta Dinero Separe – Tues	UNI	2.0	2,676
22	Hasta Dinero Separe – Wed	UNI	1.9	2,527
23	Hasta Dinero Separe – Mon	UNI	1.8	2,431
24	Minute to Win it – Wed	NBC	1.8	2,420
25	Hasta Dinero Separe – Thurs	UNI	1.8	2,403

Source: Seidman, 2010

With the NBA Finals off the schedule, reality TV accounts for nearly half of the top 25 this week with 12 programs appearing on the list. With the constantly rotating schedule of reality programs, new programs appear such as *Big Brother 12* and *Minute to Win it*. The *Bachelorette*, *Hell's Kitchen*, and *America's Got Talent* stay consistent near the top of the list, joined by *Wipeout*.

It really becomes apparent that in the summer, as scripted programming is in reruns, reality programs still thrive and arrive in mass quantities to fill the time. This is an economically efficient way for networks to fill all of the empty timeslots. The summer reality programs are getting the some of the highest ratings, and number of viewers during this time, as well as top advertising rates.

Focus Groups

In the following sections, the results of the focus groups are discussed in detail. Participants discussed which programs they watch, both scripted and reality. Then the participants responded with what aspects of reality programming appeals to them. Discussion continued as the topics listed in chapter II were discussed. Following the breakdown of events from the female and then male focus groups, an overall analysis will be given based of the findings of both groups.

Female Focus Group

The female participants were instantly at ease to discuss the topic. Initial observation showed that the female participants were heavier viewers of television as a whole, both in terms of reality and scripted programs. The discussion began by asking participants what shows they typically watch on television. Reality TV shows mentioned were *American Idol*, *Project Runway*, *The Bachelor*, *Top Chef*, *Hell's Kitchen*, HGTV and Bravo shows. One participant described the types of shows that she watched on a regular basis by saying; "I love *Project Runway* but I can't make clothes, and I love *Top*

Chef but I can't cook." As other participants agreed, it appeared that viewers tend to engage in viewing programs that do not reflect what they do in their own lives, rather that they watch shows that offer insight into things they aren't familiar with but do have an interest in.

When asked what was appealing about the aforementioned reality programs, participants primarily agreed that the competition style reality shows definitely felt more legitimate than other types of reality shows. Another overall agreement from the female participants was the drama factor that reality programs thrive for, "it's like a car wreck, and you just can't stop watching it." Another participant described what appeals to her about reality television as, "I get entertained by some of the trashier stuff but I'm not committed to those shows but I turn them on every once in a while to see stupid people do stupid things" because "watching these people be stupid makes me realize that I'm doing alright in life." A feeling was that the time constraints placed on seemingly regular tasks, such as making clothing on *Project Runway* or cooking a meal on *Hell's Kitchen* or similar shows, is what adds to a lot of the drama. It's not that what is happening on the screen is extraordinary in any way, but having to do a task in a short period of time with limited resource adds to the excitement and drama of the program. One participant noted that they "like the general human interaction between them, seeing how other people work."

"The trashier the better" was another common theme discussed in this particular focus group. Then the question was asked; "I don't know why we're so drawn into drama." Which other participants attempted to answer by saying that it is fun watching

people “make asses of themselves” and that “it makes me feel smarter,” this relates back up to the notion that people aren’t necessarily watching programs that mirror their own lives and experiences but rather they are watching things outside of what they are used to. It allows them to see different types of people react to different types of problems that viewers don’t necessarily have in their own lives. Subjects added that in scripted dramas, the problems encountered by the characters are so extreme that they do not feel like something that could actually happen, and while the drama in reality television is so petty and stupid, they are issues that do occur in viewer’s lives. However, the degree to which the participants feel as if they can relate to a show does vary by the show and how outrageous it is. In a program such as *Jon and Kate Plus 8*, situations do not feel manipulated because it is a specific family dynamic that already exists. In a program like *The Bachelor*, a scenario including 25 women who live together in order to win the heart of one man, is not a dynamic that exists in true reality. *The Biggest Loser* more closely examines problems that people are dealing with on a daily basis. It gives insight into how certain people live, even if it isn’t directly relatable to each viewer. The situations are what feel real to viewers, if not the people involved in the situations.

Reality TV Viewing Habits

Participants were then asked about the loyalty of their viewing once they start watching a season of a competition style reality show, if they continue to watch the whole season. Responses were fairly divided on this question, while some participants responded that “you have to” and that “you’re stuck” others rebutted by saying “I don’t have that sense of ‘I’ve got to watch it, I’ve got to see what’s going on.’” Another

participant said it is all depends on whether or not the drama draws her in at the beginning of the season. Another participant stated that the first time she watched a reality program from beginning to end was season 14 of the *Bachelor* because the contestant was from Dallas, which made it easy to relate to him and that she found that because she had such an attachment to him, she was ultimately upset by his final choice at the end of the season.

In terms of competition style reality programs, participants agreed that they tend to choose favorites during the season, which one participant said is “because they become your friend” and another compared the support of a particular contestant to “like supporting a political candidate.” Another participant explained, “I think that’s the thing with reality shows, you tend to identify more with someone or have more sympathy for one person rather than others” so when the contestant the viewer supports leaves the show it can be upsetting for the viewer. Participants were asked later in the session if they continue to watch a competition style reality show once their favorite contestant has been voted off and once again the answers were divided evenly between yes and no. Some participants who agreed that they keep watching, stated that they are able to pick up a new favorite while the others lose interest after the contestant they have connected with is gone.

Relating to Reality Programming

When asked about how they feel about “reality stars” and how the media capitalizes on them for tabloid magazine and shows, one participant attributes this to the

fact that having “reality stars” is still a new concept because in the past we’ve only had bona fide stars. “We just expect that at least one a year, a (traditional) celebrity is going to go to rehab, and we just expect that now, whereas these are real people, so when they screw up we just want to judge them.” Another participant added that the reality participants lives are more affected by the shows they partake in than professional actors who have chosen this as a career. The character that they play is the character that they have created for themselves, while traditional actors play the part and then go home to their own lives. Most participants did however admit to following these “reality stars” after their show by following them on Twitter, gossip blogs, and even in certain cases buying books that the stars wrote. One participant noted that “when they [reality stars] do something horrible, you can’t not hear about it” because even if you are not searching for the information it appears on news programs and search engines. The majority of participants agreed they are more interested in what reality stars are doing rather than traditional celebrities are doing because it relates more to their lives.

A participant described why she felt reality stars were relatable because, “it could happen to us, we could end up on *Jersey Shore*” and this is the key difference that separates the reality genre from others. Traditional celebrities will never appear in these shows (unless as a host or judge) because they target people who live everyday lives until selected for the program. Therefore, more sympathy is felt for people on reality programming because their lives get put on display “especially the really young ones who go on a reality program when they are 18 and don’t realize once you sign up for this, your life is on display, you are under scrutiny” and “the only ones I feel bad about are the

children” because its not acting as a character, but displaying your “reality” to the whole world.

When asked if participants had ever had a desire to be on a reality show, several did admit they had thought about auditioning for reality programs at some point in their lives. One participant even stated that she had auditioned for *The Real World* as an undergraduate. Another participant stated the reason why she wants to be on a reality show was because “I want fans.” Others adamantly stated that they would never want to take part in a reality program, but all agreed that they believe the main reason people choose to participate in reality programs is to “get noticed, and have fans” that its “the easy way to fame.” Two participants shared stories of people they know who had been on a reality program, but that they did not get much airtime because they weren’t creating enough “good television” in their actions while on the show.

The concept of exploitation of participants of reality programs was brought up and participants were asked if they thought that because people voluntarily signed up for reality shows, if they were “exploited” on the show. Participants felt that “some of the people who sign up don’t realize that they’re being exploited and other people play it to their advantage.” Participants on reality programs don’t realize that the editing may portray them differently than they anticipated which is evident through reunion shows when cast members share that they did not agree with the portrayal of their character during the season. Some participants in the focus group admitted they do enjoy watching shows in which people don’t look their best. For example, the bad auditions during *American Idol* and when celebrities on *Dancing with the Stars* have no talent.

Reality vs. Scripted

When participants were asked if they watched more reality than scripted television, the ratio did lean slightly in reality's favor. Participants felt as if they followed scripted shows more closely, but overall watched more reality programming. Participants were then asked what specific reasons they have for initially engaging in a show. "I like things with unique ideas like *RuPaul's Drag Race*" and then once you start watching a show you "develop this kind of loyalty to it." Another reason tended to be programs that relate to one another, such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* as well as all of the *Real Housewives* franchise. Programming schedules are big factors as one participant noted: "the networks do a good job of sucking you in because I was addicted to *Project Runway* and then they started airing *Top Chef* right after." Another participant agreed with this statement because she first began watching *American Idol* because it followed a show she was already regularly watching.

When asked what does not appeal to them about reality television, participants responded that the lack of fantasy and creativity is what keeps reality television from completely taking over scripted television. People still want to see unreal things happen. There are taboo subjects that can't be touched on reality but that scripted dramas can still incorporate into their plot lines. A participant acknowledged that she enjoys the artistic quality of scripted shows on premium channels such as HBO and Showtime and that reality programs "will never have that cinematic appeal." The quality of some reality shows is so low because there are so many of them. Some programs are just really bad because it seems like any reality program will make it to air, even if it only lasts one

season. The participant admitted that while she creates a high art/low art distinction, she still watches both types of programming because, “I can be all elite if I want to but the fact is, you can’t not watch them because of that trash factor.” Another participant rebutted that the plethora of reality programs “can be a positive because you can find something that appeals to you because there are so many choices”

Another question asked was whether or not they follow more reality shows regularly week-to-week than scripted shows. One participant said the reason she watches more reality shows is “while scripted shows take their hiatus between seasons, you can count on reality shows to come on during those breaks.” Another point that was brought up is that reality television is talked about more often as “water cooler talk” because it is covered (especially network programs) on news shows, late night shows and morning shows immediately following an elimination of a cast member and so there is a sense of urgency to not let it sit on your DVR, but rather to watch it so you can “share the experience” with other people as they talk about it the following day. While another participant stated that she follows more scripted shows on a week-to-week basis because “they’re meant to be followed, while with most reality programs you can watch them at any time and know what’s going on, you’re not going to miss as much of the plotline.” However, reality programs really have a sense of a “shared experience” where one participant admitted that she “knows way too much about reality shows I don’t watch because of everybody talking about it that you have to be in the know when it comes to reality tv” stating that reality television has more of a cultural value because they are what everyone is choosing to engage in conversation about as if it were news.

How Real is Reality

Some participants in the group who were Radio, Television and Film undergraduate and graduate students were skeptical of the “realness” of reality, but did acknowledge that the general viewing public is not aware of what role the producer plays during the show, and how editing can effect the outcome of a program. These participants stated that they believe that the general population feels that what they are viewing is the actual reality of what is happening. While the participants feel that while these things that are occurring on the program are actually happening, and these people are not actors, they are skeptical of that fact that the producers do have their hand in the action of the show. They are able to keep people around who “make good television.”

However, subjects did agree that the shows that felt most real were competition style reality programs, like *Top Chef*, *House Hunters* and other similar programs. *True Life* on MTV was mentioned by one participant as a show that feels more real than other shows. By looking at the shows that they feel are more “real” are those which change cast members every episode because there isn’t as much motivation by producers to hype up particular characters by intervening. Another “real” feeling show brought up by participants was *Intervention* and *Hoarders*, which again fall under the style of new participants on every episode. One participant said it really invokes emotion from her while she watches these programs; it makes her sad to watch what people are going through.

Why Reality Works

Participants then were asked for their opinions on why certain shows such as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *The Biggest Loser* or *The Real World* have been around for 5 or more years, and what characteristics of these shows can their longevity be attributed to compared to reality programs that last only a season or two. A common feeling is that shows like *American Idol* and *The Biggest Loser* have a “Cinderella story appeal” and that they are “inspirational” with every season. With other shows, like *Survivor* and *The Real World* the change of location and new rules added to the mix are what keep the shows fresh and engaging for viewers which is why they’ve been around for so long.

Male Focus Group

The second focus group with male participants followed the first focus group with female participants. The participants were initially asked what reality shows they watched or had come into contact with. Some of the shows mentioned were, *The Amazing Race*, *American Idol*, *The Biggest Loser*, and “the shows where you can laugh at the trashy people” such as *Tool Academy* or anything with drama or “just crazy people so I can laugh at their misfortunes.” Also identified were shows such as *Top Chef*, *The Ultimate Fighter*, *The Next Food Network Star* and *Iron Chef*. One participant talked about how he used to regularly watch *Jon and Kate Plus 8* and how “it started at a really good place, like it was a really interesting portrait of a real family, and then it got into a really scary territory.” All participants but one watched reality programming on a regular basis.

Reality TV Viewing Habits

Further along into the focus group one participant stated that there were shows he probably would have never watched, but now does watch because they are “girlfriend induced” programs. Many other participants agreed that a lot of their television viewing habits are dictated by what programs their significant others watch and by bringing this up, the list of reality shows that they watched as a whole grew significantly to include shows such as *America’s Next Top Model* and *RuPaul’s Drag Show*. These were shows that had been mentioned in the previous female focus group. The male participants agreed that for the most part they dislike the shows that they watch with their girlfriends, however they do watch them on a regular basis.

When participants were asked why they watch reality programs, they referred back to the “girlfriend induced” watching as a primary reason as to why they watch because it becomes habit after watching it so long with a significant other. “I didn’t watch any reality television before I met my fiancée, and now there are shows that I watch religiously like *Top Chef* and also other shows I watch just because I watch them with her.” Another participant said that in his relationship it worked the opposite way. He was already watching *American Idol* and *The Amazing Race* and they were shows that “she refused to watch, but since I had them on she has gotten sucked into them” and it was agreed that no matter which way it worked, television viewing was an experience you want to share with those around you which is why participants figure that people adapt their viewing habits to those in their lives. Another reason that male participants attribute to watching reality television is to watch shows that “have a goal” rather than

surveillance type reality programs such as *The Real World* and *Big Brother*, so often participants chose to view competition style programs.

Relating to Reality Programming

Finding shows in which you can “relate to the characters” is important and for that reason one participant said he doesn’t understand “who cares” about the women on *The Real Housewives* series’ because they are not people that most viewers can relate to. When asked why they think people do watch shows such as *The Real Housewives* one participant mentioned that he thinks it has to do with “partial jealousy, not that a viewer wants to be those people because obviously they are tacky... but they do have certain comforts that you wish you had” and this participant elaborated by saying he watches programs in which it can give him an idea of something that he wants but doesn’t have. “I’ve always wanted to live in California... so any show that’s based in California I will almost always watch. So that includes *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, not religiously, *Flipping Out* which has to do with California real estate, and so every time it just makes me wish that I could be there when I watch.” Other participants agreed with this statement by mentioning that location is a factor for them when watching shows like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* and that “the location has a lot to do with a number of programs” because “it allows you to take a mental vacation.” Participants then brought up shows that they could see themselves participating in, and one subject stated that “*The Amazing Race* is a show I could see myself being in and having fun so it’s almost like wishful thinking when I watch it.”

When asked if they feel that the general public or themselves feel as if they can relate to reality television characters more than scripted characters, one participant responded that he thinks the general population can relate to a lot of reality programs because people are cast on these shows in order to relate to as much of the viewing audience as possible. As stated before in the case of *The Real World* in a season they try to cast a person who will fit all “stereotypical” Americans so that there is something for everyone. Another participant said on the reality programs he watches he does always find himself choosing a favorite contestant because of the contestant’s personality and demeanor on the program, while another participant said, “if there is someone from my hometown (Dallas/Fort Worth) on the show, I’ll almost always root for them.” However, another participant brought up that the purpose of scripted shows is to create characters that feel real even if they don’t necessarily relate to the viewers own personal experiences; they have been so developed that they seem and are “being written to be relatable” to a large audience.

Participants were then asked to discuss if they choose a favorite character while watching a reality program and if they continue to watch the program after that contestant has been eliminated. This generated mixed responses. Some participants agreed that they do continue to watch and sometimes pick a new contestant to root for, while others said it strictly depends on what show it is. One participant said that sometimes he will stop watching if he really doesn’t care for any of the other contestants, but “sometimes its such a hornet’s nest, I just want to stick around and see.”

Participants were then asked if they felt any sort of emotional attachment to their favorites when they get eliminated from the programs and if they emotionally invest themselves in the show. Answers that followed were “no, I just get annoyed in a cynical way...I’ve never been moved emotionally because somebody got kicked off a show that I liked” while another participant stated that “I know a lot of people that do get emotionally involved when someone they are rooting for leaves, but for me its just kind of like an ‘aw’ and then I move on.” “If I don’t like someone...yea I’ll be mad if they’re rewarded with one million dollars, that’s when my emotions show, but you let go of it real quickly.” Several participants agreed that they are however, profoundly upset when someone leaves a scripted show because they really grow to like the characters. In response to this comment another participant suggested that maybe the difference is that “you know every week on a reality program someone is going to leave, and you only deal with the same people one week at a time, while with scripted you spend 3, 4, 5 or more seasons with the same people and you don’t expect them to leave.” This prompted an almost unanimous agreement from the participants in the focus group.

Reality vs. Scripted

Participants then discussed what is appealing about reality television. One participant responded that “It’s fun to get into the characters” and to see the rivalries on the show and the personalities of the people. Another participant stated that its appealing because “it’s what’s on” and because there is so much reality programming now that it is “easy to fall into” . . . [reality TV] is mindless programming that doesn’t require you to

think while watching it like some scripted shows do, “it is something to watch without having to put any effort into it.” Also, participants noted that some reality programs have unique concepts to them. One participant stated “there is no other show like *The Amazing Race* so it is the only option if you want to watch a show with that concept.” Scripted shows require you to continually watch in its entirety because each season builds upon one another while with reality television you can watch one season and “get the full experience.” While most of the male participants did not state “drama” as being a main appeal of reality television, one participant said “while some do not initially come for the drama, if there is not some sort of excitement or conflict there’s nothing to really be gained by watching it.”

An aspect of reality programming that the male focus group participants found to be different than scripted is the amount of “fluff” built into episodes when they “obviously did not have enough quality material to fill their timeslot” which is avoided in scripted shows by having a definitive plotline, and writers. Participants especially noticed this during the results shows of competition style programs because the programs have a one-hour long results show like *American Idol* or *Dancing with the Stars* “to milk the ratings and ad dollars” which to the participants made sense as to why the program would do this. These programs are the most highly rated and most expensive to advertise on but most participants agreed that most of the hour-long program was unnecessary. Participants also described their disliking the “commercialization” of reality shows.

How Real is Reality

When asked what they looked for in a reality program, one participant responded “Its important to me that the characters feel believable, if at any point I start to feel that things are scripted or don’t feel real...I completely tune out” and shows that are “inspirational and enjoyable to watch” with a “fair amount of drama.” Other participants stated they watched shows that mirrored things they enjoy in their own life, for example the participant who mentioned *Top Chef* and *The Ultimate Fighter* said he watched those because he enjoys cooking, and regularly watches UFC. Participants also agreed that they look for something new and fresh, “I used to think *Survivor* was cool, but it’s the exact same thing ever season” and that with some shows, once you’ve seen two episodes “you’ve seen them all.” Participants did agree that some reality programs feel more “real” than others. One participant described that he feels a show is more “real” depending on the style of the show is done. If it is shot in documentary style then it feels more “real” whereas many reality shows have “blended a traditional television style with an observational style so it begins to feel like a mix between fictional and reality.” One participant said that early on in *Jon and Kate Plus 8* it felt very real and felt like a legitimate documentary style program and you can watch it transition from feeling real to feeling fictional.

Why Reality Works

In the discussion of why the participants think that shows such as *The Real World* work, one of the first responses was “because its so cheap to make and people watch it”

and because “there are still so many people that want to be a part of it.” In shows like *The Real World*, one participant alludes to a paper he had read that described how “each character represents a teenage stereotype, it represents all of humanity from an American perspective” so this allows there to be one cast member that any viewer can relate to. “When your goal is to create as much drama as possible, that’s a fairly easy task to accomplish as a producer” and these shows thrive on the drama.

The male focus group participants then discussed *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* and other dating style reality programs and tried to figure out what these shows were all about. “I just don’t understand trying to find a working relationship on a reality tv show” and many of the male participants felt this way. Participants acknowledge that there is a demographic for these shows, but questioned whether or not viewers felt that the “bachelor” or “bachelorette” would actually find true love at the end of the show. “It has nothing to do with love, it has to do with what happens on the show” and some of the male participants shared insight on what they have heard females discuss about these dating shows and one participant described it as “its almost as if the purpose of this show is so they can be judgmental of the characters on the show.”

Participants were then asked to explore whether or not they feel a need to watch and know what’s going on in reality television because of the traditional media coverage that it gets after contestants leave a show. Reality participants make the media circuit beginning with late night shows the evening they get eliminated and morning shows on the next day. Many of the male participants agreed that they do not feel the need to watch the shows based on the large amount of media coverage they receive. Participants said

that because reality television shows get so much coverage they are able to participate in the “cultural water cooler talk” with people who do watch reality programs. Participants did acknowledge that some people watch these shows in order to be able to talk to people about them and feel as if they are culturally relevant. One participant noted that while he doesn’t watch reality programming for the most part, “they are everywhere on the things I read” so its unavoidable. However, male viewers do not often seek out more information from other sources such as blogs and social media, only from media outlets that they already use such as late night television and websites.

At the end, the male participants were asked for any thoughts that they feel sum up reality television and/or why people watch reality television. Why people watch reality television was compared by one participant to the question of the chicken and the egg: “people say they watch it because it’s the only thing that’s on, producers make it because people keep watching it.” One participant summed up reality television as, “girls like it, guys don’t” and “I don’t know anyone who thinks reality television is good, in terms of quality or this is good for our culture to watch or to consume, but everybody consistently watches it, with few exceptions.” In the debate of quality of television a participant stated that, “I’ll defend it as fun television, but not as quality television.” However, many participants agreed that “I absolutely think the voyeurism is an important part of reality television” and that another reason one participant watches is “the idea that someone, somewhere is a worse human being that you are.”

Focus Group Observations

There was a very interesting divide between how the male and female focus group participants react towards reality television. The females were generally more accepting of the genre, while the male participants expressed much skepticism towards the genre as a whole. However, both groups of participants watched reality television at least on a moderate basis.

It appeared that women tended to watch more of the cable reality programs on a regular basis because a large portion of why they stated they watch reality television is for the drama, which is far more present on cable programs. The male participants stated that they don't tend to initially watch a show for the amount of drama involved, but that the drama is what tends to pique their interest in the program. The male participants tended to watch for specific themes that interest them, such as cooking shows and major network primetime reality programs.

It appeared through these two focus group that female participants are likely to form deeper para-social relationships with characters on reality television programming than their male counterparts. However, the males seemed to also pick a favorite contestant that they relate to more so than other contestants, and that could be seen as a form of para-social interaction. Female participants seemed to admit to being emotionally invested in the outcome of reality programs, while male participants deny any emotional attachment. However, comments by male participants that suggest there is a slight emotional attachment seen through examples such as anger when a contestant they don't like wins, or when their favorite contestant is eliminated.

It was difficult to gauge the level of para-social interaction between reality programming and scripted programming in the scope of this study. It appears that female participants lean slightly towards reality television relationships, but it is still difficult to confirm due to the small number of participants used in this study. Male participants did suggest that more para-social interactions are formed in scripted programming rather than reality programming. In both focus groups, more attachment and para-social interaction is felt during competition style reality programs, and dating style programs (female only). This is when participants most often find themselves on the side of one contestant over the others.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

This study was based on four research questions as outlined in Chapter I. Through the use of two focus groups and economic data, this study has been able to find some answers to the posed research questions. Reality television appears to have grown, if not just by amount of programs available but by number of viewers, since earlier this decade. With this upward trend, advertising revenues have also increased for reality programming with slight downfalls that occur simultaneously with general economic recession. Shows such as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *Dancing with the Stars* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* have shown much consistency in their placement of advertising revenue since 2004 (see Tables 1-4). While reality programming has not eliminated scripted programming and its successes, it is apparent that reality programs can compete alongside scripted programs and continue to be successful. However, it is also noteworthy that even though certain scripted programs out-perform reality programs in terms of advertising rates, it must be taken into consideration that the production costs vary drastically and both items must be taken into account when determining which programs have a higher profit margin.

Through the two focus groups, this study examined what types of relationships viewers form with reality characters. It was thought that para-social interaction theory would play a part in the formation of friendship or acquaintance-level

relationships between the viewers and the characters they watch on television. This study did not definitively answer these questions, however the focus group participants did suggest that these para-social relationships are likely to form in reality programs as much, or even more than relationships formed with characters from scripted programs. However, a few participants did show signs of detachment to certain programs because they felt that reality programs are not in fact reality, and thus they alienated themselves from forming para-social relationships with the characters.

Another research question the focus groups addressed was why 18-35 year old viewers watch reality programming. Participants in the focus groups offered many suggestions as to why they watch specific reality programming. These reasons included: that the excitement of the drama compelled them to follow the program, the competitive nature of reality programs, and the ability to relate to characters on reality programs. However, the drama in reality programs was also stated as a reason why certain participants did not enjoy watching reality programming. Also, the competition format that many reality programs follow was said to be a reason that participants watched these shows because this allowed viewers to feel engaged with the program as they chose their favorite contestants and are able to vote towards who continues in the competition. The competitive nature of reality programs seemed to be the main component of why participants viewed these particular programs. Also, viewers acknowledge the fact that the characters on reality programs are not actors. For this reason, there is a higher level of being able to relate to these characters for some viewers, which can also contribute to why viewers continue to watch reality programs.

Gender did seem to play a significant role in the formation of para-social interaction in viewers of reality television based on the results of the focus groups used in this study. The male and female participants were separated during their discussions and offered very different reactions to reality television. The female participants were more willing to discuss how they felt while watching reality programming as well as discuss how they saw their relationships with the characters on the programs they were watching. The female participants acknowledged that they felt empathy towards certain reality characters and that they often watched programming on a more emotional level. The male participants however, initially denied any emotional attachment to characters on reality programming. These claims were made as they stated that they only watch reality programming due to their significant others and their viewing habits. However, as the conversation progressed it became slightly more apparent that male viewers did form mild para-social relationships with characters on reality television in some cases. However, because of the unwillingness to acknowledge these emotional attachments, males did not seem to grow as strongly as those with their female counterparts.

While this focus group sample was small in scale, it can be suggested that this distinction between gender and para-social interaction may be due to inherent emotional traits between men and women, which may carry over into larger studies. In an article by Simon and Nath (2004), an analysis of previous literature on gender and emotion shows that there are suggestions that expressions of emotions are more likely from socialization rather than the experience of emotions and that “from a developmental perspective, these findings also suggest that males learn to conceal their feeling relatively early in life,

whereas females learn to express their emotions more freely” (Simon & Nath, 2004, p. 1142). This can be seen in the focus groups conducted here in the aforementioned willingness for females to discuss their emotional attachment to certain genres of television versus the male participants need to downplay their emotional attachments.

Who knows what direction reality TV may move in the near future? Researchers and critics alike are saying reality TV is here to stay (at least for a good while), because reality TV is beneficial for the networks as a way to create programming that is cheap to produce allowing the network to invest more money in their scripted shows because “reality shows cost anywhere from a quarter to half as much to produce as scripted shows. The money saved on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the logic goes, allows ABC to pay for additional gruesome medical emergencies and exploding ferries on *Grey’s Anatomy*” (Hirschorn, 2007). And while reality television is being used in the economically trying times as a way to cut costs of production, these shows are also making big money for the networks through their advertising revenue. Making the benefit of reality programming two-fold. Reality programs are saving money in order for networks to invest in their costlier scripted programs while also bringing in an impressive amount of advertising revenue. Reality TV has appeared to be particularly relevant during the current recession because of budgetary reasons “but reality TV is also the liveliest genre on the set right now” (Hirschorn, 2007).

Reality programs have become a successful hybridization of scripted programming and documentaries by taking elements from many different genres. “Reality TV can place real people in artificial surroundings designed for maximum

emotional impact” (Hirschorn, 2007). This has become a successful model for long running programs such as; *The Real World* that has now aired 24 seasons; *American Idol* has completed its 9th season, and *Survivor* begins season 21 in September 2010. New “celebrities” will continue to walk on red carpets worldwide and there will always be critics that debate the lack of substance that accompanies reality TV but what we must always remember is that television is a commercial industry; it always has been and always will be. Network executives will always stick to what makes the maximum profit and for the time being, reality television is the main ingredient for success.

Viewers will continue to create relationships with reality television characters because “the secret thrill of many of those viewers is the thought that perhaps next time, the new celebrities might be them” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2001, p.53). Reality television intervenes in viewers’ self-observation as a “format that allows selected members of the audience to learn about themselves by participating in the rarefied realm of cultural production” (Andrejevic, 2009, p. 338). So for as long as audiences continue their fascination with reality television, this programming will continue to exist.

With further research, it will become clearer as to why and how people are viewing reality TV. Reality TV has become more than just simply a genre of television but a cultural trend. It has changed the way television is being made and viewed.

Contributions of the Study

This study is one of the first studies using para-social interaction theory to examine relationships formed during viewing of reality television. Previous studies have

used local news viewing and soap opera viewing. This study is also different from previous studies because it offers a dual-theoretical approach by using economic theory as well as para-social interaction theory and combining both quantitative and qualitative components in order to offer a more complete analysis of why reality TV has become so successful since the early 2000s. With the focus groups providing insight to para-social interaction between viewers and reality television programs, this study covers a genre that hasn't been studied extensively in regards to this theory. In addition this study also uncovers gender differences in the formation of para-social relationships.

This study offers data that suggests reality television programming is an economically successful product. The audience reception part of this study however, is important because it lets those in the industry understand why people are watching certain reality television programs. This study is beneficial for the advancement of successful reality programming and the longevity of that programming.

Limitations

There were limitations faced while conducting the focus group portion of this study. Because of lack of funds and a shorter timeline, the diversity and sample size of the focus groups were not ideal. The recruiting process posed a limitation due to having to rely on family and friends to participate as well as help gain more participants. The main commonality between the majority of the participants were that they were University of North Texas students (with a few exceptions), however, those students ranged from undergraduate to graduate and varied in age, gender and race. Another

limitation of the sample was that many of the subjects had a background in Radio, Television and Film from the University of North Texas, and their viewpoints on certain aspects of reality television were not what could be described as the general public's depiction of the programs.

The use of focus groups was also limiting because it restricted those who could participate based on the set time and location of the focus group. Had surveys been used, they could have been dispersed over a wider population and completed at the convenience of the participant. A survey would have provided a definitive answer for the level of relationships formed by viewers on the para-social interaction scale used by Rubin, Perse, & Powell (1985). The focus group scheduling proved to be a conflict for several possible participants who had to withdraw from the study.

Due to the small scale of this study, it was difficult to gain substantial evidence to support the idea that para-social interaction is more present while viewing reality programming over scripted programming. This study only depicts how a small group of people relates to reality programming in a narrow demographic.

Suggestions for Further Research

It is suggested that future studies be conducted with a more diverse and larger sample in order to more closely define the relationships that viewers are forming with characters on reality television programs. Also, it is suggested that with the apparent difference between the relationships that male and female viewers are forming with reality television characters, that a survey be used in order to create a scale for the level

of attachment of reality television characters in order to get a more specific idea of the difference in interaction between male and female audiences.

It is suggested that future studies examine more closely the gender differences in the formation of para-social relationships, as this study suggests that gender may play a role in the depth of the relationships formed. It would be beneficial in future research to see how the different sub-genres of reality television played a part in the para-social interaction that the viewer formed with the character. Possibly the reason that female viewers are more apt to forming para-social relationships than male viewers is due to the subgenre that they more often watch.

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