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# Uses and gratifications of game show reality programs

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USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF GAME SHOW REALITY PROGRAMS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Sudeshna Sen Gupta

May 2007

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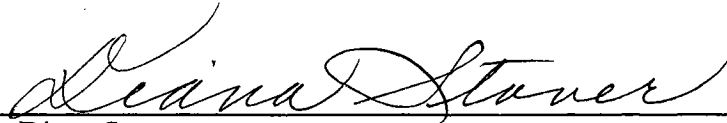
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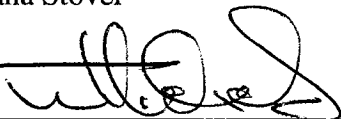
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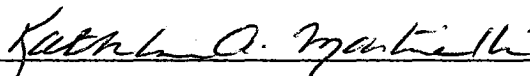
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## ABSTRACT

### USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF GAME SHOW REALITY PROGRAMS

by Sudeshna Sen Gupta

Game show reality programs are a substantial part of television programming today. This thesis analyzes gratifications of the programs and whether interactivity increases these gratifications. A qualitative exploratory study consisting of intensive personal interviews of 35 undergraduate mass communications students at San Jose State University was conducted to determine the appeal of these programs.

Research showed that diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance were the usual uses and gratifications of these programs. The study also found that interactivity increases these uses and gratifications. Moreover research showed that some viewers are using new media tools to watch the programs, commercial free, at their convenience. Though not widely popular yet, these interactive tools and technology might eventually change the way television is accessed by viewers and used as an advertising medium.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Rahul, my father, Biplab, my grandmother, Nilima, and to the loving memory of my mother, Sanjukta. Thanks Rahul, for holding my hand through all the trials and tribulations of graduate school. This would not have been possible without your words of encouragement. Thanks Baba, for being there for me and for all the motivational talks that helped me through these years. Thamma, you and your constant thirst for knowledge have always been an inspiration to me, thank you. And Ma, I know that you are always there with me in spirit, and I can never thank you enough for all the ways that you help me everyday. Thanks also to all my family and friends for always encouraging me every step of the way.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
Uses and Gratifications Approach .....	5
Early Research .....	6
The Revival of the Uses and Gratifications Research in the 1970s .....	7
Contemporary Studies in Uses and Gratifications .....	11
Reality-Based Programming: Its Advent, Evolution, and Appeal .....	13
The Interactivity Element of Reality Television .....	23
Overview and Conclusion .....	25
CHAPTER 3: METHOD .....	
Study Design .....	27
Question Development .....	28
Selection of Respondents .....	29
Research Categories .....	30
Diversion .....	30
Personal Relationships .....	31
Personal Identity .....	32
Surveillance .....	32
Interactivity .....	33
Interview Questions .....	33
Diversion: Escape From the Constraints of Routine and Burden of Problems .....	33
Diversion: Emotional Release .....	35
Personal Relationships: Relationship With Participants .....	35
Personal Relationships: Relationships With Other Viewers .....	35
Personal Identity: Personal Reference, Reality Exploration, and Value Reinforcement .....	36
Surveillance .....	36
Interactivity .....	37
Demographic Information .....	37
Overview of the Interview Process .....	38
Respondent Profile .....	38
Analysis .....	39
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .....	42
Viewing Habits of the Students .....	42
Results by Research Category .....	43
Diversion .....	43
Diversion: Escape from constraints of routines and burden of problems .....	43
Diversion: Emotional release .....	47
Personal Relationships .....	49

Personal relationships: Relationships with show participants. ....	49
Personal relationships: Relationships with other viewers.....	52
Personal Identity: Personal Reference, Reality Exploration, and Value	
Reinforcement.....	57
Surveillance.....	64
Interactivity.....	69
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION .....	71
Contributions to the Study of Television Media.....	75
Limitations of the Study.....	76
Directions for Future Research .....	76
REFERENCES .....	78

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

During the last decade, reality television has emerged as the nemesis of the sitcoms and soap operas of yesteryear and has become an important part of contemporary, international television culture. A plethora of shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, *The Osbournes*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Wedding Story*, and *Cops*, to name just a few, have deluged television to the point that scripted shows and paid actors appear to be things of the past.

Although research on reality television is a new area in mass communications research, scholars have begun to report their findings on the genre. Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003), and Metcalf (2005) sought to determine viewer appeal of the genre by using the uses and gratifications perspective. These researchers have looked at the genre as a whole, although reality television programming includes subtypes that are now broadly divided into two categories. One category consists of formats that include a game show element, also known as reality competition programs (such as *Survivor*), and the other includes shows (such as *Cops*) that seek to entertain by showing dramatic incidents from real life (Andrejevic, 2004).

Thus, Nabi et al. (2003) suggested that future research should determine the uses and gratifications of specific program types since the diverse gratifications of *Cops* versus *Survivor* imply that there are important differences between these programs that should not be disregarded. Hence, this study focuses on the viewer appeal of game show reality programs, also known as reality competition programs. This subtype includes

shows which have emerged since the late 1990s such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *American Idol*. Although this subtype itself has several variants, the primary common trait of these shows is that they feature ordinary people—albeit selected carefully by the program makers—competing against one another (Von Feilitzen, 2004).

Another salient feature of these game-based, competitive reality shows is that an element of interactivity has become a part of the program formatting. Audience participation is clearly structured in the text since the audience can vote out contestants by telephone and by sending SMS messages (Von Feilitzen, 2004). The programs can also be followed and discussed on the Internet.

According to Andrejevic (2004), the promise of customization that is given by new media and the promise of reality television overlap and—with the help of interactive technology—offer to make the viewer the star. However, Andrejevic noted the lack of research on the effect of interactivity promised by the new media in the realm of reality television.

Thus, a qualitative exploratory study featuring 35 intensive personal interviews was conducted to determine the viewer appeal of game show based reality television and whether interactivity increases the gratifications derived from these shows. The interviews were analyzed with respect to an analytical framework based on previous uses and gratifications research.

The study is important because it will help explain the popularity of game show reality programs. Furthermore, an understanding of what viewers seek and perhaps receive from this particular form of mass media is necessary to study its effects on social

behavior. Additionally, since research in this area is still in its formative stage, the study will add to the existing literature.

Chapter 2 is the literature review, which is divided into four general sections: uses and gratifications theory; the advent, evolution, and viewer appeal of reality-based programming; interactivity in reality television programs; and a concluding section that discusses the research framework and the research questions. Chapter 3 describes the research method. In this section the key variables of the study are operationalized, and the qualitative design of the study, data collection methods, research questions, overview of the interviews, and method of analysis are detailed. Chapter 4 details the findings of the study and Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, summarizes the study and offers suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Contemporary reality programming has been in existence for nearly a decade. Yet, despite the apparent popularity of the genre, detractors of reality programming have often criticized and have written off the shows. There has been widespread public debate verging on moral panic regarding the dangers of reality television (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). In fact, according to Calvert (2000), these shows are indicative of the nation becoming a voyeuristic one. Researchers Nabi et al. (2003), however, have refuted the theory that voyeurism prompts the audience to tune into reality programming. They also reported that the various subtypes of reality programming make it difficult to support or reject such statements about the genre as a whole. Further, as programs of this genre become more and more interactive within the changing media landscape, researchers need to determine whether interactivity increases viewer gratification from these programs.

Hence, the first section of this literature review explains uses and gratifications theory, a theory used to analyze audience behavior. This section is divided into three parts. The first part deals with early research, the second with the revival of the uses and gratifications theory in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third deals with more recent research.

The second section discusses the literature on reality-based programming and provides details on its advent, its evolution, and its appeal. This section also records contemporary research on the uses and gratifications of reality-based programming.

The fourth section deals with interactivity, which is thought to be a key element of game show reality programs. Thus, recent literature on interactivity and its effect are discussed, followed by a concluding section in which the research questions are discussed.

### *Uses and Gratifications Approach*

Uses and gratifications is a generic label given to a body of theoretical viewpoints that are linked together by a shared emphasis on an active media audience as opposed to the notion of a passive media audience (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Researchers have depicted individuals who comprise a mass media audience as active selectors and interpreters of media messages who utilize media messages to gratify individual needs (De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982).

Uses and gratifications theory attempts to explain why mass media is used and the types of gratification it generates. Adherents postulated that individuals selectively use mass media to satisfy human needs (Lull, 1980). Hence, the central question that researchers studying uses and gratifications try to answer, according to McQuail (2000), is “why do people use media and what do they use them for?” The uses and gratifications theory postulated that media use depends on the perceived satisfaction, needs, wishes, or motives of potential audience members. These needs could have a social or psychological origin, with some typical ones being those of information, relaxation, companionship, and diversion.

### *Early Research*

Research related to the gratification that mass media provides their audience dates back to the 1940s, even before the conceptualization of a formal uses and gratifications perspective. These studies (McQuail, 2000) showed that daytime radio soap operas provided a source of advice and support, a role model of housewife and mother, or an occasion for emotional release through laughter or tears, to its listeners, who were primarily women. Rubin (2002) explained that in the 1950s and early 1960s studies on quiz programs found that they appealed to their listeners because they were competitive and educational.

Some of the common features of this early research were, first, a similarity in the methods in which statements about media functions were elicited from respondents in an open-ended way (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Second, researchers used a qualitative approach to group gratification statements into categories. Third, these researchers did not try to explore the links between the gratifications ascertained and the psychological and social origins of the needs that were satisfied. Fourth, they were unable to determine the interrelationships among the various media functions, either quantitatively or conceptually, such that an underlying structure of media gratifications could have been detected (Katz et al.).

Thus, this early research, according to Rubin (2002), was largely descriptive and unsystematic and failed to form a detailed picture of media gratifications that could have led to the eventual formulation of theoretical models. As these early researchers merely



identified motives instead of explaining the effects of media use, they are viewed as precursors to research depicting typologies of media motives.

*The Revival of the Uses and Gratifications Research in the 1970s*

Uses and gratifications research gave way to studies of personal influence and media functions during the 1950s and 1960s, but was revived in the 1970s when attempts were made to answer questions that had been raised in the late 1940s (Rosengren, 1974). In the 1970s, a revival of direct, empirical investigations of audience uses and gratifications occurred, not only in the United States, but also in Britain, Sweden, Finland, Japan, and Israel. According to Katz et al. (1974), these researchers had a common focus: they all tried to assess media consumption in audience-related terms instead of technological, aesthetic, ideological, or any other terms. This later research, according to Rubin (2002), was also more systematic, and researchers also started raising questions about the consequences of media use. According to McQuail (2000), the basic assumptions of the approach in the 1960s and 1970s were as follows:

1. Media and content choice are usually rational and aimed toward certain specific goals and satisfactions (thus the audience is active and audience formation can be logically explained).
2. Audience members are aware of the media-related needs which arise in personal and social circumstances and can voice these in terms of motivations.
3. In general, personal utility is a more significant determinant of audience formation than cultural or aesthetic factors.

4. All or nearly all factors for audience formation—motives, satisfactions, media choices, and background variables—are, in principle, measurable.

In the early 1970s, the single concept that had assumed prominence in discussions of mass media experience, with regard to both the main character of mass media content and the motives of the typical audience member, was “escape” (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). The researchers questioned this practically all-embracing application of the concept of escape and suggested that interest in mass media experience was possibly related more to a diverse range of content appeal, motivation, satisfaction, and experiences. McQuail et al. (1972), after studying a number of different radio and television programs in Britain, provided a typology of viewer gratifications, which was as follows:

1. Diversion: (a) escape from the constraints of routine, (b) escape from the burden of problems; (c) emotional release;
2. Personal relationships: (a) companionship, (b) social utility;
3. Personal identity: (a) personal reference, (b) reality exploration, (c) value reinforcement;
4. Surveillance (information seeking): It should be noted that McQuail et al. suggested that further empirical research might make it necessary to subdivide the category.

McQuail et al. (1972) noted that their typology had certain evident weaknesses such as the fact that it was probably incomplete, given that it was based on a limited number of program types and used rather small samples of respondents. The researchers

noted that the typology required more validation, both with respect to the meaning attributed to discrete categories and to the distinctions drawn between category boundaries. But McQuail et al. also felt that further research along the reported lines would result in more precision but not necessitate any fundamental revision of the pattern that they located and described.

Katz et al. (1974) also based their uses and gratifications research on certain assumptions that are, in brief, as follows:

1. As assumed by McQuail et al. in 1972, the audience was seen as active and an important part of mass media use was considered to be goal directed.
2. In the mass communications process, the initiative to link need gratification and media choices lay with audience to a great extent.
3. The media competed with other sources of need-satisfaction.
4. People are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases.
5. Value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communications should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms.

Based on these assumptions and McQuail's typology, Katz et al. (1974) formulated their central notion that mass communications are used by individuals to connect or disconnect themselves with others such as self, family, friends, and nation. Moreover audience-gratifications can be derived from at least three distinct sources:

media content, exposure to the media, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media.

Thus the basic premise of the uses and gratifications theory is that the audience is active; however, the degree to which an individual's interpretive activities are conceived to be unconditional vary according to theorists. According to Ball-Rokeach (1998), Katz's (1974) version of the theory is less constrained than Blumler's 1979 version, in which the constraining effects of social category membership and roles are given greater emphasis.

Katz et al. (1974) acknowledged that the then prevalent study of mass media use suffered from a lack of a relevant theory of social and psychological needs. They also stated that a clustering of groups of needs was required and that there had not been any substantial theoretical or empirical effort to connect gratifications and effects. Katz et al. as well as Rosengren (1974) suggested that the hierarchy of human needs as proposed by Maslow in 1954 might help future research, although Katz et al. mentioned that the relevance of Maslow's categories to expectations of communications had not yet been explored in detail. According to Elliott (1974), however, the concept of need is the root of most of the difficulties to be found in the uses and gratifications research and thus this study does not delve into this aspect of the theory.

McQuail (2000), commenting on the uses and gratifications research carried out in the 1970s, stated that the prevailing approach was criticized not merely for its behaviorist and functionalist leanings, but also because it had not provided much successful prediction or explanation of media choice and use. The poor prediction,

according to McQuail, was partly because of the difficulties of measurement and also because media use is often rather circumstantial and weakly motivated. He stated that the approach worked best in relation to certain specific types of content where motivation might be present. McQuail thus observed that typologies of “motives” often failed to match patterns of actual selection or use.

Some other criticisms that the uses and gratifications research of this period was subjected to initially, as recorded by Rubin (2002), were (a) the compartmental nature of typologies, which made it difficult to predict beyond those studied or to consider the societal or cultural implications of media use; (b) the absence of lucidity of central constructs and the fact that researchers attached different meanings to concepts such as motives, uses, gratifications, and functional alternatives; (c) the nature of the audience and whether the audience was being treated as too active or rational in its behavior; and (d) the reliance on self-report data.

#### *Contemporary Studies in Uses and Gratifications*

Rubin (2002) stated that a number of the above criticisms have been addressed in later studies and uses and gratifications research has progressed systematically in the last 30 years. Research has helped explain media behavior and media uses and effects. And, according to Rubin, contemporary uses and gratifications research has taken a multidirectional approach as compared to earlier research. The new approach and research directions taken by contemporary uses and gratifications scholars are as follows:

1. Typologies of communication motives have been created based on studies of the links among media-use motives and their association with media-attitudes

and behavior. Rubin (2002) noted that in a 1977 study, Lometti, Reeves, and Bybee identified surveillance/entertainment, affective guidance, and behavioral guidance as media-use gratifications dimensions.

2. Motives across media have been compared, and comparative analyses of the appropriateness and effectiveness of channels, including that of evolving technologies such as the VCR and the Internet (LaRose & Eastin, 2004) are also being studied.
3. The different social and psychological circumstances of media use such as lifestyle, personality, and loneliness are being examined.
4. The links between gratifications sought and obtained when using media or attending to media content are also being studied.
5. Research in another direction has assessed how variations in background variables, motives and exposure affect outcomes such as perceptions of relationship, cultivation, and involvement.
6. Yet another research direction focused on the method, reliability, and validity for measuring motivation.

Despite these advances, some mass communications scholars have argued that uses and gratifications is not a rigorous social science theory. For example, Williams, Phillips, and Lum (1985) noted that, given the range of choice, utilitarian functions, and the phenomenon of personalization that new media offers, a general model of uses and gratifications would become less useful for examining audience gratifications. However, Palmgreen et al. (1985) stated that uses and gratifications theory has the potential to

provide insights into media-related social changes although researchers would have to adapt and mold the conceptual framework to deal with new media technologies. Hence, Ruggiero (2000) suggested that contemporary and future models of uses and gratifications must include new concepts such as interactivity. He contended that the emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications theory. He also stated that uses and gratifications theory has always provided an avant-garde theoretical approach in the preliminary stages of research related to new mass media such as newspapers, radio and television, and the Internet.

*Reality-Based Programming: Its Advent, Evolution, and Appeal*

Reality programming includes a variety of programs such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, *The Osbournes*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Wedding Story*, and *Cops*. This abundance of reality-based programming, along with the hybrid nature of the programs themselves, have made defining reality television rather complex (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). Earlier attempts to define reality programming focused on real life, real people, and the technological forms through which this was mediated. Researchers Nabi et al. (2003) defined reality programming “as programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives as these events occur” (p. 305). The salient features of the shows are the fact that (a) people are portraying themselves (i.e., actors are not performing roles), (b) the shows are supposed to be unscripted, (c) the shows take place in an environment that may have been developed for the purpose of the show, or could be the natural habitat of the person(s) being filmed, (d) events are placed

in a narrative context, (e) and the primary purpose of the show is viewer entertainment (Biltereyst, 2004).

Thus, although this definition excludes talk shows and those that feature reenactments, the parameters are wide enough to contain shows ranging from *Cops* to *Survivor*. Holmes and Jermyn (2004), however, provided a simplified definition of this genre of programming by describing it as programming that is marked by its “discursive, visual and technological claim to ‘the real.’”

Allen Funt’s *Candid Camera*, a show that premiered in 1948, was a step toward modern-day reality programming. The show not only set the industry standard for capturing individuals in indiscreet moments, but also helped reduce its audiences’ Cold War surveillance anxiety (Clissold, 2004). *Candid Camera* parallels elements of some of the prevalent-day reality programming: surreptitious observation, recorded activities, and public broadcast.

According to Huff (2006), the roots of the reality show genre are planted throughout television history although the term started being used only after the broadcast of *Survivor* in 2000. There were some steps toward this form of programming during the 1950s as well, with the advent of audience participation shows such as *I’d Like to See, You Asked for It, The Original Amateur Hour, Truth or Consequences, People Are Funny, The Price is Right, and Queen for a Day* (Hoerschelmann, 2006). These shows used viewer suggestions and sometimes showed nonactors doing different things.

In 1972 PBS’ *An American Family* (1972) went on air. According to Hill (2005) this is an antecedent of latter-day docusoaps. *An American Family* documented the daily



life of the Loud family in which the parents were going through a divorce. The airing of the show triggered responses common to modern day laments about reality television since it was viewed as leading to a decline in the private sphere (Landrum & Carmichael, 2002).

The genre morphed over the next few decades, and MTV's 1992 broadcast of *The Real World* is often heralded as the precursor to contemporary reality programming of the docusoap variety (Moorti & Ross, 2004; Wei & Tootle, 2002). Reality shows such as *An American Family* and *Cops* entertained viewers by showing incidents from real life (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). On the contrary, *The Real World* was a created television experiment. *The Real World* took seven people in their 20s from around the nation and showed them living in a New York City apartment. Camera crews followed the inhabitant's every move and the cultural conflicts and the socio-economic difference between the housemates made it appear as if it were like real life (Huff, 2006).

The genre in its latest avatar of multimedia programming emerged in 1996 when college student Jennifer Ringley gained international repute when she turned a digital camera on herself and started a Web site called *Jennicam*. Ringley's use of this alternative media model is viewed as revolutionary as it was in many ways a realization of a decade old vision of media critics: communication technology should be able to transform the passive individual consumer of mass media messages into an active and creative producer/consumer (Andrejevic, 2004). Since the advent of *Jennicam*, the parallel development of reality programming on television and online has often converged in programs such as the *Big Brother* series.

But the first reality game show is said to have been *Expedition Robinson*, broadcast in 1997 in Sweden. In the United States the show was renamed *Survivor* and was broadcast in 2000. *Survivor* brought in a dimension of competition to reality shows that had been missing in earlier reality television programming such as *An American Family* or *The Real World* (Smith & Wood, 2003). According to Hoerschelmann (2006) competition-based reality programs have their roots in earlier quiz and game shows and essentially are about eliminating contestants one by one until the winner of the program has been identified.

Thus, the most important feature of this new type of programming was “ordinary” people—carefully selected by program-makers—competing against one another. *Big Brother* and other variants followed *Survivor*. These shows had different formats but common to game show reality programs was the fact that the audience viewed ordinary people competing against one another in a carefully constructed environment (Von Feilitzen, 2004; Zinkievich, 2004).

According to Rapping (1987), reality programming is based on conventions and principles that have made local news important in people’s lives. The appeal is identical, given that people who watch these shows in voyeuristic fascination are the same people who avidly watch the spectacle of newscasters joking around, caring, sharing community trivia, and commiserating with local victims. According to Rapping, the reasons are the same: a craving for a sense of community, human intimacy, and sharing that is absent in contemporary life.

In his analysis of reality television—its “voyeuristic” content, and its appeal—Calvert (2000) defined mediated voyeurism as the consumption of revealing images and information about others’ supposedly real and unguarded lives, generally for entertainment and frequently at the expense of privacy through the means of mass media. According to Calvert, mediated voyeurism historically transcends both the broadcast medium and reality-based content and dates back 1,000 years to the legend of Lady Godiva. The legend goes that, when Lady Godiva rode naked on a horse through the city of Coventry to protest taxes, a young man named Tom dared to gaze at her. For this, depending on the version of the legend being studied, Peeping Tom was either killed or blinded. According to Calvert, Tom’s voyeuristic gratifications would have been far less risky today since he could turn on the television or the Internet to catch his favorite reality show or visit its Web site. Diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance are said to be some of the uses and gratifications of reality-based shows, and voyeurism is said to be a part of the surveillance aspect of these shows, which are often alluded to as “voyeur television”(Calvert, 2000; Metz, 2004).

Patkin (2003), however, stated that viewers watch game show reality programs to construct their own identities and not merely for voyeuristic gratification. The mediated entertainment of watching people compete on these shows helps viewers construct their own identities—both as individuals as well as culturally. Patkin also noted that participants in the programs appear to be carefully selected to represent various ethnic and social groups in American society. However, minorities and women were less visible in these programs and were usually portrayed in relatively stereotypical and low

status ways. Edwards (2004) also stated that gender role stereotypes were prevalent in game show reality programs.

Recent research on why reality television is watched by people has drawn on the uses and gratifications theory and sensitivity theory, a variant of uses and gratifications theory.

Nabi et al. (2003) noted that their research on reality television programming and the psychology of its appeal showed that the role of voyeurism in the appeal of reality programming is rather questionable. They discussed the uses and gratifications paradigm and its basic assumption: a media channel cannot influence an individual unless that person has some uses for the medium or its particular message. The assumptions they relied on for their research were the ones laid down by researchers in the 1970s. In brief, they assumed that individuals are aware of their needs, appraise various channels and content, assess functional alternatives, and select the media or interpersonal channel that they believe will supply the gratifications they seek.

As extant literature on uses and gratifications of reality programming was unavailable at that point, Nabi, et al. (2003) worked with two lay hypotheses that were prevalent in the popular press, one of which was, “reality-based TV appeals to the increasingly voyeuristic nature of the U.S. population” (p. 312). The researchers noted that voyeurism in the strict sense implies watching an unknown victim for sexual gratification, a sexual pathology that warrants medical treatment, but also noted the colloquial usage of voyeurism, the harmless, yet guilty pleasure of secretly peeking in on others for personal enjoyment. However, the researchers said that calling reality-based

television programming voyeur television was perhaps inaccurate. Thus one of their research questions was as follows: “Do consumers of reality-based television programming receive voyeuristic pleasure from their viewing?”

The researchers also applied the uses and gratifications paradigm of potential gratifications that could be achieved, including those related to diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance, to media selection. Hence another research question asked by the researchers was as follows: “What gratifications do regular consumers of reality-based television programming receive from their viewership?”

In general, the study showed that in the minds of the viewers, reality television is a vaguely defined genre consisting of programs that are viewed as only moderately real (Nabi et al., 2003). Further, research showed that, although respondents did view these programs often for apparently voyeuristic reasons of peeking into someone’s life, there was no evidence of salacious motivations. Thus, the researchers questioned the use of the term voyeurism as a viewing motivation for the following reasons: (a) the viewers watch with some knowledge that the targets are aware of being viewed; (b) constraints on network television content preclude the broadcast of explicit sexual material, thereby limiting the voyeur’s sense of illicit pleasure; (c) the open-ended research data showed that viewers watch not because they expect to see sexual behavior but to see interpersonal behavior because they are curious about other people’s lives; and (d) data also showed that regular viewers watch these programs for personal identity reasons, primarily that of

self-awareness, thereby making generalizations regarding voyeuristic motives inconsistent.

Zinkievich (2004), in her research on the effects of reality television on community involvement, noted that not only did viewers watch reality shows to interact with other viewers, they also enjoyed watching the social interaction among contestants.

Sensitivity theory, also known as the theory of 16 basic desires, was formulated by Reiss in 2000. This theory states that people pay attention to stimuli that are relevant to the satisfaction of their most basic motives and that they tend to ignore stimuli that are irrelevant to their basic motives (Mendible, 2004). Reiss and Wiltz (2004) stated that this theory might provide insight as to why certain categories of television programs such as reality television appeal to many people. The theory leans on Aristotle's philosophy to some extent; thus Reiss and Wiltz discussed how Aristotle distinguished between means and ends by stating that means are motivational merely because they produce something else, whereas ends are self-motivating goals desired merely because that is what a person wants. Under sensitivity theory, these end motives are called basic desires.

The assumptions of this approach are as follows: (a) media use is motivated; (b) people select media based on their needs; and (c) media compete with other activities for selection, attention, and use (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). But, compared with previous uses and gratifications theory, sensitivity theory (a) connects media experiences to 16 basic (end) desires (as postulated by Reiss), and (b) does not predict that gratifications leads to increased global satisfaction. Sensitivity theory, instead, predicts that gratifications lead to the experience of joys specific to the basic motive that is gratified (Reiss & Wiltz).

To identify the basic desires, Reiss and Havercamp in 1988 asked thousands of people to rate hundreds of probable life goals and mathematical factor analyses of these ratings showed that the participants' responses expressed 16 basic desires. The assumption is that these desires are universally motivating although individuals differ in how they prioritize them. These are, namely, power, curiosity, independence, status, social contact, vengeance, honor; idealism, physical exercise, romance, family, order, eating, acceptance, tranquility, and saving. These desires can be experienced as a consequence of direct or vicarious activities, such as by watching television (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004).

The study showed that status is the main motivational source that drives interest in reality television (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Reality television may gratify this need in two primary ways. The first is that viewers feel they have higher status—and are more important—than the ordinary people featured on reality shows. The second is that the very notion of reality shows—that millions of people are interested in viewing the life experiences of ordinary people—implies that ordinary people are important. The next important basic motive is that of vengeance; people who watched and enjoyed reality television placed a higher value on vengeance than people who did not watch such shows. As the desire for vengeance is associated with the joy of competition, people who avoid conflict, anger, and competition, will probably avoid viewing these as the shows often portray competition and interpersonal conflict.

Social contact, honor, and order were other motives observed in the data although their statistical effects were small but significant. The researchers further explained this

result by stating that people who liked two or more reality shows on their list tended to be more motivated by social life, less motivated by honor, more concerned with order, and more motivated by romance, as compared with those who did not watch the reality shows on the researchers' list.

The results of the Reiss and Wiltz (2004) study regarding the psychological appeal of reality-based television were consistent with those reported by Nabi et al. in 2003. Since voyeurism was not considered to be one of the 16 basic motives, Reiss and Wiltz did not include it in their study. Instead they used the variable curiosity, one of the 16 basic motives. However, their study showed that curiosity was not a significant motive for watching reality television. Thus, similar to the findings of Nabi et al., Reiss and Wiltz concluded that voyeurism did not motivate reality television viewing.

Reiss and Wiltz (2004) stated that results of their study should be interpreted cautiously as many different shows are classified as reality television, and thus future, as well as some current, shows may have appeals different from the ones they discussed. Nabi et al. (2003) also suggested that future research should determine the uses and gratifications of specific program types as the diverse gratifications received from *Cops* versus *Survivor*, and the dissimilar traits associated with viewership of particular programs implies that there are important differences among these programs which should not be disregarded. Therefore, a need remains for a more specific analysis of the viewer appeal of game show reality shows in particular.



*The Interactivity Element of Reality Television*

The concept of interactivity has gained phenomenal popularity in relation to game show reality programming, suggesting a more participatory relationship between the audience and the screen (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Cover, 2004). According to Carter, as cited in Andrejevic (2004), for a show to be defined as reality television, it must incorporate an element of interaction. Such a definition of reality television would perhaps exclude a number of programs that are considered to be part of the reality television genre today. However, Tincknell and Raghuram (2004) also noted the presence of such an element of audience interaction in reality shows such as *Big Brother*. In *Big Brother* the public was invited to vote to evict from the house one of two inhabitants compulsorily 'volunteered' by the other inmates every week (Baker, 2003). Regular activities to be carried out by the inhabitants were also set by the audience. Audience participation was thus clearly structured in the text. In these programs that feature an element of interactivity, producers have to relinquish some measure of control and the audience gains this control to a certain extent (Andrejevic, 2004).

Additionally, Andrejevic (2004) noted that there was a similarity between reality programming on television and online, particularly in the way in which they both portrayed submission to forms of monitoring as a form of empowerment and self-expression. He also stated that the promise of customization that is given by new media and the promise of reality television overlap in a way as both offer to make the viewer the star, with the help of interactive technology. He also noted the lack of research on the effect of interactivity promised by new media in the realm of reality television.

Mundorf and Laird (2002) stated that research focusing on the effect of new media and the social and psychological effects on individuals is at a nascent stage. They noted that interactivity has received attention since 1986 when it was identified as a key function of new media by Everett Rogers and his colleagues. Interactive media demands that users act as communicators as well as the audience (Sundar, 2004; Butler, 1995). Hence, the concept of interactivity implies the shift from one-way communication prevalent in traditional media to interchangeable roles of senders and receivers.

The end user, according to Mundorf and Laird (2002), has a high level of control over access, timing, sequencing of information, entertainment, or services. They cited Bryant and Love's 1996 typology of probable differences between interactive media and its traditional counterpart that included the dimensions of selectivity, diet, interactivity, agency, personalization, and dimensionality. They also cited Goertz' 1995 attempt to identify the underlying dimensions of interactivity: (a) the degree of selectivity; (b) the degree to which a given content may be modified by the viewer; (c) the quantity of different content that can be selected and modified; (d) the degree of linearity/non linearity; and (e) the number of different senses that are activated while using the media. Perse (2002) stated that interactivity might have on impacts on media effects and that interactivity might increase arousal, which might enhance the likelihood of arousal-based media effects. She also stated that interactivity might lead to more overt behavior such as catharsis or acting out emotional responses to unleash them. Thus it needs to be determined whether interactivity increases the gratifications of viewers of game show reality programs.

### *Overview and Conclusion*

The literature review showed that uses and gratifications research has been used over decades as a theoretical approach in the preliminary stages of new media research. However, it also showed that a general model of uses and gratifications would have to be adapted to examine gratifications of game show reality programs since new media provides a range of choice, utilitarian functions, and the phenomenon of personalization. Therefore a uses and gratifications model used to study the appeal of game show reality programs should include the concept of interactivity.

A study of research on the uses and gratifications of reality-based programming showed that Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) analysis of why people watch reality television on the basis of sensitivity theory is consistent with the findings of the uses and gratifications study of reality television carried out by Nabi et al. in 2003. Yet the researchers have categorically stated that results of their study should be interpreted cautiously as many different shows are classified as reality television.

Therefore studies of various subtypes of reality programming need to be done. Although there is some research literature available on the appeal of shows such as *Cops* that seek to entertain by showing incidents from real life (Fishman & Cavender, 1998), this researcher was not able to find any reported studies of game show reality programming.

Thus a need arises to analyze why reality shows with a game-show format are so popular and what are the uses and gratifications that viewers receive from watching these shows. The importance of the study is not only in contributing to the literature on uses

and gratifications in general, but also making an initial contribution in the area of game show reality television viewing. Regarding interactivity, the study was designed to determine whether interactivity increases the gratifications of these programs.

The research questions are as follows:

1. Why are game show reality programs viewed and what are the general gratifications that viewers derive from these programs?
2. Does interactivity increase the gratifications of viewers of these game show reality programs?

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

A qualitative exploratory study of 35 intensive personal interviews was conducted to answer the study's research questions. The interviewees were initially selected through a purposive sampling of students in undergraduate mass communications classes at San Jose State University based on their knowledge of game show reality programs such as *American Idol* and their willingness to participate. Later, more volunteers were gathered by revisiting the classes that had been visited initially and by visiting other undergraduate mass communications classes. Snowball sampling of undergraduate mass communications students with similar interests in game show reality programs was also carried out during the course of the research to gather more interviewees.

### *Study Design*

This section describes how research on viewer appeal of game show reality programs and the effect of interactivity was conducted for this thesis. The following sections have an outline of the data collection method, a description of the development of the questions, an overview of the interview process, and a detailed account of the analysis method pursued for this study.

### *Data Collection*

According to Schutt (2004), a richer and more intimate view of the social world is obtained through qualitative research than by more structured surveys or highly controlled quantitative experiments. Qualitative methods are also more appropriate for the exploration of new conceptual issues. Hence, a qualitative study was conducted for

this research. The method involved interviewing participants with open-ended questions. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), the primary distinguishing characteristic of respondent interviews as compared to ethnographic interviews, informant interviews, or narrative interviews is that respondents are asked to speak only for themselves. Unlike in informant interviews, where informants are asked to comment on the world surrounding them, respondents are asked about a particular issue or situation, or about what they think about their social world.

One of the chief strengths of a qualitative study is that it provides a more in-depth understanding of an issue than a quantitative study (Schutt, 2004). But a probable weakness is that the results could have multiple possible interpretations. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), the interpretations could change with any difference in the researcher's persona, background, value system, or theoretical orientation. Thus the challenge was to analyze and interpret the data in this study in an objective way.

#### *Question Development*

The questions were based on the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review. To determine the viewer appeal of these programs, a typology with four categories was formed, based on the findings of McQuail et al. (1972) and results from other studies. The questionnaire used by Metcalf (2005) in her study of the appeal of reality television was also referred to while developing the questions. The questions were designed to explore the categories of (a) diversion, (b) personal relations, (c) personal identity, and (d) surveillance. Another aspect of this form of programming explored by the questions was the element of interactivity of reality programs. The particular

variables that this study analyzed are further discussed in the section on research categories.

### *Selection of Respondents*

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), researchers generally choose interviewees based on the interviewees' experiences being central to the research problem in some way. As this exploratory research is an investigation of the appeal of game show reality television, the respondents were selected from viewers of such shows. The student respondents were chosen based on their knowledge and interest in game show reality programs and their willingness to participate. Appropriate consent of class professors was sought before the undergraduate mass communications students were approached.

For this study, 35 interviews were conducted, since it had been decided initially that at least 30 interviews would be done and that the precise number of interviews would be decided during the course of the study. This decision was based on the statement made by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) that research criteria such as data quality, redundancy, and abundance should help the researcher determine the number of interviewees. Lindlof and Taylor also suggested some tests to help the researcher determine when to stop interviewing.

The first test, the taken-for-grantedness test (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), implies that the researcher is no longer surprised by the respondents' answers. The second test, theoretical saturation, implies that the research has reached a point of diminishing return; that is, the field notes become repetitive. Thus the number of interviews planned

remained flexible until the taken-for-grantedness and theoretical saturation tests were satisfied. Interviews were carried out until an overall answer to the research questions was determined and it was felt that negligible information would be added by subsequent interviews.

### *Research Categories*

For the purpose of this study, reality programs, as in earlier studies such as that of Nabi et al. (2003), were deemed to have the following characteristics: (a) people are portraying themselves; (b) the shows are not scripted; (c) the shows take place in an environment that may have been developed for the purpose of the show, or could be the natural habitat of the person(s) being filmed; (d) events are placed in a narrative context; and (e) the primary purpose of the show is viewer entertainment.

As this study specifically focused on game show reality programs, it is to be noted that, as discussed in the literature review, game show reality programs are reality-based programs that give away a prize and feature ordinary people, who have been carefully selected by program makers, and who compete against one another (Huff, 2006).

To explore the research questions, a framework of key research categories was developed based on the literature review. These research categories are defined in the following sections.

#### *Diversion*

McQuail et al. (1972), when providing their typology of viewer gratifications, separated this category into three subgroups: (a) escape from the constraints of routine,



(b) escape from the burden of problems, and (c) emotional release. Thus the interviews were designed to determine whether:

1. Viewers watch game show reality programs to escape from their constraints of routine.
2. Viewers watch game show reality programs to escape from their burden of problems.
3. Game show reality programs help the viewers in emotional release.

### *Personal Relationships*

McQuail et al. (1972) divided this category into two subgroups:

(a) companionship and (b) social utility. They stated that audiences build relationships with characters in shows and with other viewers. Based on McQuail et al.'s typology, Katz et al. (1974) formulated their central assumption that mass communications is used by individuals to connect with or to disconnect themselves from others such as self, family, friends, and nation. Thus the study explored the following areas:

1. Whether watching game show reality programs is a social event for viewers.
2. Whether viewers discuss what they see on these shows with their family and associates.
3. Whether the viewers associate themselves with the show participants.
4. Whether it is easier to connect with people on these shows than with celebrities.

### *Personal Identity*

McQuail et al. (1972) divided this category into three subgroups: (a) personal reference, (b) reality exploration, and (c) value reinforcement. The interviews thus investigated the following areas:

1. Whether viewers of game show reality programs measure themselves against participants of these shows.
2. Whether viewers of game show reality programs derive pleasure from seeing contestants being humiliated.

### *Surveillance*

McQuail et al. (1972) categorized surveillance as a form of information seeking. Calvert (2000) stated that voyeurism is a part of the surveillance aspect of reality shows. In this particular context, the term voyeurism was not being used in the strict sense of a sexual pathology; a more colloquial usage of voyeurism as that of the harmless, yet guilty pleasure of secretly peeking into others' lives for personal enjoyment was utilized. Thus questions were designed to determine whether:

1. Viewers of game show reality programming think they learn anything from these shows.
2. Viewers of game show reality programs look forward to getting to know more about the contestants of such shows.
3. Voyeurism in its colloquial implication plays a role in viewer appeal of game show reality programming.

### *Interactivity*

The effect of interactivity, a key element of these programs, was also studied. The concept of interactivity implies the shift from one-way communication prevalent in traditional media to interchangeable roles of senders and receivers (Mundorf & Laird, 2002). The end user has a high level of control over access, timing, sequencing of information, entertainment, or services. Mundorf and Laird also cited Goertz' 1995 attempt to identify the underlying dimensions of interactivity: (a) the degree of selectivity, (b) the degree to which a given content may be modified by the viewer, (c) the quantity of different content that can be selected and modified, (d) the degree of linearity/non linearity, and (e) the number of different senses that are activated while using the media. Thus the set of questions explored the following areas:

1. Whether interactive program formatting of game show reality programs gives viewers more control over selectivity.
2. Whether the interactivity element of game show reality programs increases viewer control over program content.
3. Whether this interactive element and the resultant vicarious experience makes the viewer feel more involved.

### *Interview Questions*

#### *Diversion: Escape From the Constraints of Routine and Burden of Problems*

1. Are you a regular viewer of any game show reality program?
2. If so, please check the ones that you watch in the following list (*this was on a separate card*).

The list of game show reality programs included in the study are as follows:

- *The Amazing Race* (2001-present)
- *American Idol* (2002-present)
- *The Apprentice* (2004-present) and *The Apprentice: Martha Stewart* (2005)
- *American Inventor* (2006-present)
- *America's Got Talent* (2006-present)
- *Big Brother* (2000-present)
- *Dancing With the Stars* (2005-present)
- *Fear Factor* (2001-2006)
- *Last Comic Standing* (2003-present)
- *Project Runway* (2004-present)
- *Survivor* (2000-present)
- *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005-present)
- *Solitary* (2006)
- *The Ultimate Fighter* (2005-present)

3. Is there any other game show reality program that you watch and would like to mention?
4. Which game show reality show do you look forward to the most?
5. Is it important that you not miss the show, or do you watch it because you happen to be free at that time?
6. If you miss an episode, do you feel you missed something?
7. What do you think is your main reason for watching these shows?

8. Do you do anything else while watching these shows? If yes, what do you do?
9. Do you feel that you have to concentrate hard while watching these shows?
10. About how many hours do you watch television shows each week?
11. How many hours of your television viewing are devoted to game show reality programs?

*Diversion: Emotional Release*

1. Does watching these game show reality programs affect your frame of mind?  
If yes, explain.

*Personal Relationships: Relationship With Participants*

1. Do you identify with any of the participants in game show reality programs?  
If yes, which participants?
2. What do you think attracts you to the participants of game show reality programs?
3. Why do you think that these people are selected for the shows?

*Personal Relationships: Relationships With Other Viewers (Friends, Family, Co-Workers)*

1. Do you watch these game show reality programs alone or with other people?
2. If yes, with whom do you watch the show?
3. Is watching game show reality programs an important social event for you?
4. Does your family watch the same shows as you do?
5. Do your friends watch the same shows as you do?
6. Do your co-workers watch the same shows as you do?

7. Do you talk about game show reality programs with your family, friends, and/or your co-workers?
8. If yes, how much time during an average week do you spend talking about the shows?
9. Do you think that you need to know what happens in these shows in order to interact with other people?
10. Do you hear people discussing game show reality programs? If yes, explain.

*Personal Identity: Personal Reference, Reality Exploration, and Value Reinforcement*

1. Have you ever thought about participating in any game show reality program? Why or why not?
2. While watching do you ever think of how you would react in a similar situation?
3. Do you ever compare yourself with the show participants?
4. How do you feel when a show participant wins?
5. How do you feel when a show participant loses?
6. Does this depend on whether you like the person in question?
7. How do you feel when a show participant is humiliated in the show?
8. Do you think that this is one of the reasons why you watch these shows?
9. What do you think of people who participate in game show reality programs?

*Surveillance*

1. Do you think you learn anything from game show reality programs?
2. If so, what do you think you learn?

3. Do you look forward to getting to know more about the contestants in such shows?
4. Do you think these game show reality programs give an opportunity to peek into someone else's life?
5. If yes, do you think this is one of the reasons why you watch these shows?

*Interactivity*

1. Do you vote after viewing the game show reality program?
2. Do you feel that you are playing a role in the selection process of these shows?
3. Do you think that you have control over program content because of this element of interactivity that is part of game show reality programming?
4. Do you go online to check on these shows? If yes, how often?
5. Do you go online to chat about these shows? If yes, how often?
6. Do you feel more involved in these game show reality programs because of this element of interactivity?

*Demographic Information (this was on a separate card)*

1. Interviewer to note gender
2. Interviewer to note ethnicity.
3. What is your age?
4. What is your major?
5. How many units are you taking this semester?
6. How many hours do you study each week?

### *Overview of the Interview Process*

The respondent interviews were based on the set of questions discussed above and a standard order was followed for all interviews so that the researcher could compare the interviews. The questions were at first pretested on volunteers who were not a part of the study but matched the profile of the respondents. These pretest interviews were timed and the volunteers were requested to comment on the flow of the questions and to critique them. These suggestions helped refine the set of questions before the actual interviews.

The interviews were scheduled in person or by telephone and were held at a time and location convenient to the interviewee, usually at the listening rooms and meeting rooms in the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library. The interviews varied in length depending on how comfortable and knowledgeable the respondent was but were always less than an hour during which the interviewer took notes; the sessions were also tape-recorded.

The respondents generally answered the questions in the order in which they were asked but were also encouraged to share any pertinent information or anecdotes that they wanted to. This not only helped build interviewee-interviewer rapport but also helped elicit relevant information that might have been overlooked otherwise.

### *Respondent Profile*

The common criteria for all the respondents were that they were all enrolled in an undergraduate mass communications class at San Jose State University, had viewed game show reality programs, and were willing and able to be available for give an hour for an



intensive personal interview. The respondents differed on a host of other demographic variables such as sex, age, and ethnicity.

Of the 35 respondents interviewed, 25 were women and 10 were men and their ages ranged from 18 through 28 years. Since the respondents were from undergraduate mass communications classes, they were primarily from the fields of journalism, public relations, and advertising. However, several respondents were international business majors and one respondent was a justice studies major.

Only two of the respondents were part-time students; the remaining 33 were full-time students. The respondents also came from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds such as white, African American, Hispanic, and Asian. Although a majority of the respondents were born or had grown up in the United States some had immigrated to the United States in recent years.

### *Analysis*

Since the purpose of a qualitative study is to gain a conceptual understanding of the variables, qualitative research tends to be an inductive process (Lichtman, 2006). Qualitative data analysis also tends to be an ongoing and circular process. Thus, according to Schutt (2004), qualitative data analysis tends to be an iterative and spontaneous process that begins with data collection, rather than a linear process following data collection.

Therefore the researcher noted asides, commentaries, and in-process memos about ideas and interpretations on the interview transcripts. This helped the process of progressive focusing that refined the focus of the study further during the course of data

collection. According to Schutt (2004), initial research questions may also be modified or replaced at some point by the researcher if progressive focusing indicates such a need. However, the researcher did not feel a need to modify or replace the research questions during the study.

Data analysis in qualitative research, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), has three phases: data management, data reduction, and conceptual development. Lindlof and Taylor also suggested that researchers alternate intensive data collection with analysis so that the data is controlled and so that the researcher is continuously focused on the study's theoretical questions. During the course of the interviews, data was thus collected, managed, and analyzed according to these guidelines.

The students had all viewed at least two of the game show reality programs on the list, and some had viewed more than 10 of these shows. After ascertaining which shows were watched by a particular respondent, questions covering the individual research categories as discussed earlier were asked. The results have been recorded in these same categories to aid the process of analysis.

One of the primary ways to conceptualize qualitative research is to identify themes (Lichtman, 2006). Hence, to identify themes the responses were coded and categorized. A process of constant comparison was used for coding the data. During this process of coding, new data was compared to earlier data, and as theory emerged, later data was compared to the emerging theory (Dick, 2005).

As all data was not determined to be useful, in the data reduction process, the use-value of data was prioritized. The results were then interpreted to recognize dominant patterns and themes that helped answer the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

#### *Viewing Habits of the Students*

The interviews showed that time spent by students viewing television varied greatly, as did time spent viewing game show reality programs. The time spent by the 35 students watching television ranged from 1 hour to 40 hours per week, with an average viewing time of 12.4 hours. Although slightly more than 30% (11) of the students said they watched more than 15 hours of television per week, the vast majority (24) watched 15 hours or less.

In discussing game show reality programs, some students said they watched only a few episodes each season, but others said they had never missed an episode of a particular show. The game show reality program viewing hours of the students ranged from 15 minutes to 14 hours a week. Most (29) watched 5 hours or less, but about 17% (6) were avid viewers, watching more than 5 hours a week.

Apart from the shows mentioned initially in the interviews, some of the other game show reality programs that were named by students during the interviews were *Flavor of Love*, *Making The Band*, *Rock Star: Supernova*, *Real World/Road Rules Challenges*, *Who Wants To Be A Superhero*, *The Contender*, and *Celebrity Duets*. The following section has quotations from these interviews, carried out during Fall 2006, to show the appeal of these programs and the effect of interactivity.

*Results by Research Category**Diversion*

As discussed in the literature review, diversion is one of the gratifications of viewing game show reality programs. Students said one of the reasons for viewing these shows was to escape from their routines and problems or to find emotional release. Most students said they looked forward to these shows to relax, unwind, and be entertained. Students also said, although they often found these shows engrossing, the low level of concentration required to view them was appealing. The format of these shows, the reruns, and their online presence also added to this appeal. These shows, in general, positively affected the students.

*Diversion: Escape from constraints of routines and burden of problems.* Nearly all students regularly viewed at least one game show reality program. Three students said they never have to miss an episode of the shows they watch since they use TiVo to record them. One student said she did not mind missing an episode of *American Idol*, the show that she looks forward to, as she can catch program clips on YouTube. A few students said they downloaded episodes of CBS's *Survivor* from the Internet and watched it on their computers later. Students who used these new media tools said recording episodes ensures that they can skip commercials and can rewind and look at things they had not noticed earlier. Of students who were regular viewers of these shows, one said she did not have access to Bravo, the channel that airs her favorite program, *Project Runway*. But she checked it out online frequently and downloaded episodes from iTunes to watch in her free time.

Even the few who did not regularly view any of these shows had a favorite show and said they could not watch them as much as they wanted to. One student who looks forward to *Project Runway* the most said: “With school it’s difficult at times as I commute and don’t reach home before 7 p.m. Then with homework etc., etc., sometimes I just don’t get the time.” Another student said he watched *Amazing Race* if he happened to be free, but finds it difficult to watch it with college and work.

When asked whether these programs were a part of their routine, or an escape from it, only a few said they tried to build viewing reality shows into their routines. Two students said they put their favorite shows on their calendars so as not to miss them. Another said that “I plan on watching it.” This student also said she would have to ask someone about the show if she missed an episode. Another said, since she was traveling during a part of the first season of *Rockstar: Supernova*, her mother regularly emailed her and sent instant messages to keep her updated about the show. And students who watched these shows with family or friends said they usually never missed an episode.

Some students said they felt they missed out on the drama if they missed an episode of their favorite show. A student who views *American Idol* said she would feel as if she had missed something if a consistent contestant got voted out after an episode that she had missed. A majority of students said they would not want to miss their favorite shows, but knew that they could catch reruns since these shows were often repeated.

Of students who said they would not mind missing an episode, one said: “There’s always someone I know who watches these [shows] or I could go online.” Another

student said he would not mind missing an episode of *American Idol*, his favorite show, since he usually watches particular performances and the judges' reactions: "It seems like each episode stands on its own. I might just watch [the] final rounds and not feel like I missed anything at all."

Among students who said they watched the programs to unwind, a regular viewer of *America's Next Top Model* said she watched the show to take her mind away from things—to unburden. One student said viewing *Project Runway*, her favorite show, helped her relax, unwind, and got her away from all the stress of school life. Another student said that viewing these shows helped her relax and forget what she is doing momentarily at least. Another student said: "Watching TV is like an escape from whatever's going on [in life]." A student who watches a number of these shows said she watches them because: "[They are] very entertaining, very relaxing, helps me unwind. [It is] just nice to see how crazy somebody else's life is when you think yours is crazy enough."

Many students said they watched some of these shows mainly to be entertained, but this also depended on the show they watched. A student who watches *America's Next Top Model* said she watched it for its entertainment value. Speaking about *American Idol*, another student said: "It's pretty shallow but it kept me entertained. Most of these shows are about eliminating people and that's why people watch it. It's fun seeing people get eliminated." Another student said he watched *America's Next Top Model*: "I don't have to put a lot into it. It's simple to be entertained. It's interesting to

watch the drama unfold as these people compete. It's just entertaining." Yet another student, talking about *American Idol* said:

The other entertainment part is the people who come on it who can't sing and how other people react to it, that's funny. And it's like you'll know that there'll be people who can't sing but will be on air.

A student who watches *America's Next Top Model*, *American Idol*, and *America's Got Talent* said that she watches them because she finds them funny: "All of these shows are a basic study in human behavior—in a controlled environment. It is so funny to watch them [the contestants] act like little children." Most students who watched *Flavor of Love* said they watched it for its entertainment value.

Students were also asked to discuss other reasons for viewing the shows to determine whether they watched game show reality programs merely to escape from their routines and problems or whether other factors were also involved. Among the reasons mentioned by students, the important ones were personal interest in a specific skill, because their friends or family watched them, a need to see people interacting, and curiosity.

Some students said they multitasked while watching reality programs; they tried to fit watching the shows into their routines rather than build their routines around the shows. Some said they did their homework while watching, while others said they did household chores, ate, emailed, or called their friends while watching. One student explained: "I never just sit and watch TV. I study, do needlework, write poetry. I'm always multitasking." But most students tried not to combine watching their favorite shows with other activities. One said: "Usually I'm so engrossed in the show that I don't



get anything else done so I try to separate the time.” Another student who watches *Project Runway* said she does not like multitasking while watching it and just sits and watches the show and doesn’t really worry about “school and stuff.”

A majority of students said they felt there was no need to concentrate while watching these shows. One student said that “this [lack of a need to concentrate while watching] I guess is part of the appeal.” Another said: “Most of these shows are made in a format that anyone can look at the screen and know what’s going on.” Some students said they concentrate while watching their favorite game show reality programs and do not want to miss any action, drama, or performance. One student said she liked to concentrate while watching her favorite show as she feels that this helps her understand the judging. A few students, however, said that although they did not feel a need to concentrate while watching the shows, they would be extremely absorbed in the show while watching it.

*Diversion: Emotional release.* To determine whether game show reality programs help viewers in emotional release, students were asked whether watching these programs affected their mental states. Since many game show reality programs are based on a specific talent, personal interest often prompted students to view them. Most students said viewing their favorite program usually affected them positively, albeit temporarily, as they were watching something in which they were interested. Some students who view *American Idol* said they watched it because of their interest in music. A number of students who watched dance shows such as *Dancing With The Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance* said they watched these shows because they were interested in dancing.

Quite a few students who watched *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model* said they watched the reality shows because of their interest in fashion. A student who watched *Amazing Race*, a game show based reality program that takes contestants to different countries, said he liked watching it because of his interest in travel. Another student said: "*Rockstar: Supernova*, and *American Idol* inspire me, because if everyday people can get that kind of opportunity maybe I can too, if I try hard enough."

Some students preferred talent-based game show reality programs over shows that do not require contestants to have a specific skill, like *Fear Factor*, *Big Brother*, and *Survivor*. One student said: "Shows like *Survivor* you can't watch season after season. [It] gets repetitive; shows like *Dancing With The Stars* are different."

Few students said their mental states were adversely affected by these programs when their favorite contestant lost. One student said shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* annoy her, because as a mass communications student, she realizes that editing changes everything about the way people are portrayed on television. Another student said:

On some shows like *Flavor of Love*, I think they portray a negative image of women, especially African-American women. There could be people in like Nebraska who have never probably met African-American women and now that's probably their image of an African-American woman.

Some students, however, said they were usually unaffected by these shows, primarily because they did not feel emotionally involved.

In summary, few students said they had actively built viewing game show reality programs into their routines; but most acknowledged looking forward to at least one program as part of their weekly television viewing. Some students also mentioned using technology to watch the shows at a later, more convenient, time. And many students said

they viewed some of these shows to relax, unwind, and to be entertained. However, there were several other reasons why students viewed these shows. Since some are based on a specific talent, students also mentioned their preference for talent-based game show reality programs over other game show reality programs. And most students reported that the shows, especially the talent-based ones, usually positively affected their mental states, although this was usually temporary.

### *Personal Relationships*

Another gratification of viewing game show reality programs as discussed in the literature review is personal relationships. McQuail et al. (1972) said audiences build relationships with characters in shows and with other viewers. Katz et al. (1974) found that mass communications is used by individuals to connect with or disconnect themselves from others such as self, family, friends, and nation.

*Personal relationships: Relationships with show participants.* The students were asked to discuss whether they identified with any of the show participants. Most students said they could identify with the participants. Some said they could identify with participants who appeared to have personalities similar to their own; others said they identified with people on the shows based on their ethnicity. One such student said: “Living in America with so many people of different ethnicities, it’s hard not to connect with someone of your own ethnicity.” A Vietnamese-American student mentioned that he had identified with Dat Phan, a Vietnamese-American participant of *Last Comic Standing* because of his ethnicity. He said he identified with Dat Phan because many of

his jokes were rooted in his ethnicity: “We are second generation Vietnamese and have to understand where our parents come from.”

Age, interests, backgrounds, career choices, and situations also helped students identify with show participants. One student also said she identified with the competitive nature of some participants: “I’m a competitive person so I can relate to that.”

Most students who said they identified with participants also said this would depend on the show. One student said she found it difficult to identify with people on *America’s Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*, and *The Apprentice*, but participants in *Flavor of love*, *American Idol*, and *Survivor* appeared to be more identifiable as average Americans trying to reach their dreams.

However, many students said they could not identify with show participants. One such student said: “People on TV are really outrageous. And most of the time they are putting on an act.” Another said: “All of the women, especially because they are in contrived situations are girly, wimpy, dumb, the antithesis of me. Once in a while they’ll have strong female characters but most of the time, no.” Another student said she was unable to identify with participants of her favorite shows, *Project Runway* and *The Ultimate Fighter*, although she did not view them as actors and actresses.

A student who emigrated from Lebanon said she could not identify with participants in these shows as she had not grown up in the United States:

There is a misrepresentation and under representation of Middle Eastern people and people of different colors. This place is more diverse than these shows show. People need to learn more about these cultures, like about Middle Eastern people, that it’s a different culture but same values.

Other students also complained about the dearth of participants from different ethnic backgrounds. One student who views *Project Runway* said: “You’ll almost never see a Mexican contestant.” An Asian student said that “even people of the same ethnicity are too Americanized.”

When asked what attracted students to a particular participant, most said that this varied between shows. Students were usually attracted to participants based on their personalities and looks. One student said: “You are not going to meet a person on TV in real life so it’s based on looks. That becomes most important, male or female.” Another said she was attracted to obnoxious participants: “They are really humorous and funny to watch and then talk about. They are good entertainment.” Additionally, some students said they were drawn to participants for their novelty.

Most students said that they were aware that producers of such shows select participants for their looks or personality so that viewers will be attracted. One student said:

Looks are main criteria in the selection process. If not looks, their body, if not their body then their personality. In actuality I don’t like that . . . the unrealistic part of reality TV, sometimes personalities are mixed up but [they have] perfect teeth and perfect bodies.

Another student said: “No one’s going to watch people who are not good looking so you need aesthetically pleasing people on TV and, if characters clash, that’s going to give you high ratings.” And many students mentioned that conflicts on these shows appeared to be contrived. Some students also said the shows tried to have various types of people participating so that most people could identify with someone to ensure a wide audience base. Speaking about *American Idol*, a student said:

They kind of put a melting pot of people in. You put a crazy person who loves partying, then a person who is going to clash with this person because they like to cause drama. In *American Idol*, they'll put a country singer and an R & B singer, not so much for a clash, but two different styles to make it a well balanced show.

However, many students said the criteria for the selection of participants might vary between shows since talent might be a more important criterion for participant selection in shows such as *Project Runway*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Last Comic Standing*, and *American Idol*. Some students mentioned Ruben Studdard as an example and said that, although looks appeared to be more important in the initial rounds of even talent-based shows, in the final rounds talent becomes more important.

*Personal relationships: Relationships with other viewers (friends, family, co-workers).* When asked whether they watched the shows with anyone, most students said they watched them with family or friends. A student who watches a number of the shows said she watched them because "my boyfriend is a big reality TV person." Many students who watched the shows with their partners said that they looked upon the viewing experience as a bonding experience. Some students said they watched these shows mainly because they were viewing them with family and friends who wanted to share their viewing experience with them. Few said they watched these shows alone.

Most students said viewing game show reality programs was a social event for them, although of varying importance. A student who gets together with her friends on Wednesday evenings to catch *America's Next Top Model* said: It's a social event like going out for dinner with friends in the middle of the week, something to look forward to." Another student said watching *America's Next Top Model* with her roommates was an important social event and she did not bond as much with roommates who did not

watch it: “Even if people don’t talk all the time during the show, it sort of brings them closer.” A student who watched *American Idol* at the International House with her friends said they would pick their favorite and root for the person as a group.

However, some other students did not consider watching these shows with friends or family as a social event. One such student said: “[I] would rather go out to a bar or somewhere and actually meet real people.”

Most students said their family members watched the same shows and these were often discussed. And students who had emigrated in recent years from Asian countries such as Japan and Indonesia said their families did not have access to the American TV shows but that similar shows were being aired in their native countries.

Nearly all students said their friends watched some of the same game show reality programs. Students often influenced or were influenced by their cohorts to watch some of the shows. One student who watches *Project Runway* said: “All my friends watch it; we are all big fans of the show.” A number of the students said that this was another topic of discussion with their friends. A student, who watches *Flavor of Love* and is on San Jose State University’s football team, said that he did not like missing an episode of the show:

Everybody watches it on the football team and that’s what everybody talks about. So when a new episode comes on you want to watch it because the next day you’ll have something to talk about. It’s kind of like soap opera, a guy version.

Few students said that they had not talked about these shows with their friends or that their friends did not watch the shows they watched.

Some working students said they had not discussed the shows with their

co-workers. But nearly as many students said that their co-workers watched the same shows and that they talked about them. One student said that her co-workers get together to watch *America's Next Top Model*. Another student said everyone in the studio she worked in watched *America's Next Top Model*. Yet another who works in a Bay Area start-up said many of his co-workers watched a lot of these shows: "It's a major lunch time conversation. [If you don't watch these shows] You are sort of left in the dark. The engineers are sort of really into reality TV shows such as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, and *The Apprentice*."

Students said that conversations about the shows ranged from a few minutes to a few hours every week and were held with either those they had viewed the show with or other friends or family members. A regular viewer of *Project Runway* said she discussed the creations, what happened on the show, and how she felt about it with friends who watched the same show. A few students interested in dancing said they discussed steps seen on dance shows with friends with similar interests. Another student who watched *Survivor* with her husband said they talked about the show "all the time." Other students who watch some of these shows with their partners said they spend a lot of time discussing the shows and this was part of a bonding experience. One student said he talked about his favorite shows for hours during the week: "It's kind of like chit chat, conversation while you are waiting for something—on the bus, while you are waiting for the bus."

A few students said they hardly ever discussed the shows. One such student said she found it difficult to talk about them with school, work, and family. Another student



said: “Only if something big happens, like the William Hung thing on *American Idol*. So usually not, unless I am watching with someone else.” Another student said everyone he knows watches the shows but he does not discuss them with too many people since he thinks that “it’s not exactly a very manly thing to do.”

But students also said they did not feel any need to know about the shows to interact with other people. One student said conversations about the shows did not last long enough for her to feel like she had missed out on anything. Another student said: “It’s fun to talk about but there’s a lot of other things to talk about if I didn’t watch them.” Another said: “Back when they first started, everybody was talking about it, but nowadays I don’t think they are as popular. I think that people are getting sick of watching the same type of shows over and over again.”

Some other students said they needed to know about what happens in these shows. One student said that at work, for the sake of conversation with his co-workers or customers, he needed to know what had happened in *The Apprentice* the night before. Another student said: “When people want to have shallow conversations and not talk about themselves, it makes sense to talk about these shows and other people’s problems.” Yet another student said she needed to know about these shows to interact with friends as they did not share her other interests like reading.

Most students said they regularly heard people discussing a number of these game show reality programs. Some students said some shows appear to be discussed more than others, such as *American Idol* and *The Apprentice*, perhaps because they are on major networks. One student who has heard people talking about these shows, especially in the

last few years, said: "I can see how everyone is getting on the bandwagon." Another hears conversations between people during her commute and on the radio about *American Idol*: "[I hear about it] so much so that I don't feel the need to watch the show anymore." The student who watched *American Idol* in the International House said people discussed it all the time there.

However, another student who hears about these shows every now and then said that television is not a primary thing in peoples' lives anymore since people are so much busier. Some other students also said they did not hear too many people discussing these shows now. A few said they did not pay much attention to other peoples' conversations. Others said they did not hear people talking about the shows much at the time of the interviews but this could also be because it was not *American Idol* season. Since many of these shows are in prime time, one student said, not too many students can catch them as they usually watch late night television.

In summary, many students said they could identify with the show participants. But several students said, although they did not view the participants of these shows as actors and actresses, they still found it difficult to identify with them as they seemed to be in contrived situations. Students also said that conflicting personalities and looks appeared to be the main criteria for participant selection by the producers of these shows. However, they also said that the criterion for participant selection varies from show to show since many of the programs are based on a specific talent. Most students said they viewed these shows with friends or family and looked upon the viewing experience as a social event. Students also said some or all of their family, friends, and co-workers

watched the shows and that they were often a topic of discussion. Although most students said they regularly heard people discussing the shows, few students said they needed to know about the shows to interact with people.

*Personal Identity: Personal Reference, Reality Exploration, and Value Reinforcement.*

Another gratification of viewing game show reality programs as discussed in the literature review is personal identity. Viewers are constructing personal identities by using these programs for personal reference, reality exploration, and for value reinforcement.

When asked whether they wanted to participate, most students said they would not want to participate in any of the game show reality programs. Some said they were especially hesitant at the thought of participating in these shows as compared with other reality shows since these shows were competition based. Many students also said they did not have the necessary talent to participate in shows based on a specific talent.

Others said they would not participate in the shows since a number of participants were portrayed in a bad light; they would not want to go through a similar experience for fear of public humiliation. Others said they were either not good looking enough or dramatic enough to participate. Several students said the traveling and time commitment needed for attending auditions was another deterrent. Students also said they would not want to forfeit their privacy to participate. One student said that "I prefer watching and making comments about the things that happen."

Some students said they wanted to participate in some of the programs since they often felt they could do a number of the things participants were doing. One student said

he might want to participate in *The Amazing Race* as opposed to *Survivor*: “There seems to be more bickering [in *Survivor*]. They are not accomplishing much. *The Amazing Race* is more about you, rather than about you screwing someone.” Other students said they would rather participate in shows such as *Survivor* or *Fear Factor* as these did not require a specific talent.

When asked whether they ever thought about how they would react in situations similar to those faced by participants, most students said they thought of this while watching some of the shows. Some students also said they felt this was rather usual and easy to do while viewing the shows. One student said:

That’s what happens whenever you watch TV, though. When I’m watching *The Ultimate Fighter*, I don’t think of how I’d feel if that guy hit me on the head, but whenever they play pranks on someone, I think that that would be funny to do.

Another student said she thinks of how she would react in similar situations but realizes participants cannot be blamed: “They [the producers] make them get into stressful situations. If it were boring you wouldn’t watch it.” Students said they thought how they would handle dramatic situations and conflicts in these shows differently. A few students said, although they thought of how they would react in situations shown in *Fear Factor*, they usually do not think similarly when viewing *American Idol* or *Dancing With The Stars* since they do not have the necessary skills.

However, some students said they do not think of how they would react in a certain situation since they view these as television shows. One such student said: “I feel the reality in those shows is not my reality. So I do not really compare their [situation] and my situation or even put myself into their situation.”

Most students said they did not use the shows to measure themselves. One student said: "I don't really compare myself with the people [on the show] but I do a judgment call on how they react like, oh, you shouldn't have done that." Another said he does not compare himself with participants as he realizes that their circumstances are very different. Since some of these shows are talent based, one student said she finds it difficult to compare herself with participants because "it's hard to compare yourself with a fashion designer if you are not [one]."

But some students did compare themselves to show participants. One student said she compared herself with participants all the time, at a subconscious level. A student who compares himself with singers on *American Idol* and comedians on *Last Comic Standing* said this seemed natural: "[But I] don't use them to measure myself." Another said: "I wouldn't compare myself on a talent level with other people because I think I am realistic about my own abilities, but I would compare myself with girls, especially on *Flavor of Love*." Yet another student said she compares herself with participants in a superficial way, but does not put herself down too much as she realizes that "if it is on television, it is not real."

To further determine how students related to participants, they were asked to discuss how they felt when a participant won or lost and if that would depend on whether they were rooting for the participant. The majority said they were happy and excited when a participant won. One student said, from watching them throughout the show, she realized they had been through a lot and have actually worked hard to win. But many students said they would be happy only if they had been rooting for the participant. One

student said, if the person he was rooting for won, he felt excited since “part of you kind of claims ownership on the person.” Some students said game show reality programs were similar to sports, both because of the element of competition and the option of choosing a favorite and rooting. One student said that she feels proud when someone she was rooting for wins: “It’s kind of like rooting for your favorite basketball team or hockey team.” Another student said: “When you start watching these shows, you pick a person and gravitate towards a person for whatever reason and you want them to win.”

Yet another said:

“[It’s] kind of like the feeling you get from gambling. Like, oh, I picked the right one. [I] get a real satisfaction out of picking or guessing who is going to be kicked out next or who is going to win.”

Some other students said they would be happy for the participant who won only if the participant seemed to be a deserving one. Students also said this excitement was rather momentary and they usually did not think about it after the show.

Most students said how they felt when a person lost or was eliminated from one of the shows would depend upon whether they liked the person. One student said: “The mean or rude people, when they are kicked off, there is a sense of relief that you don’t have to watch them anymore.” But others said they felt bad for participants who lost since, at times, it could be for no fault of their own. Another student said, when a participant lost in a show he watched, he felt sorry for the person depending on whether the participant had competed ethically. Many students said they felt upset if the person they were rooting for lost, even if only momentarily.

Some students said they do not feel too bad for a person who loses since they feel that the individual has at least received the publicity from participating. One student said: "It's tough luck but they've got a springboard to go off." Another said: "Clay [Aiken] seems to be more in the news although Ruben [Studdard] is the one who won the title."

When asked whether they liked watching participants being humiliated and whether this was a reason for viewing, most students answered in the negative. Some appeared to find it more disturbing than others. A few students said this was a reason why they did not like the shows at times and might even want to turn off their televisions, especially if the remarks were racially or sexually offensive. Some students also found this humiliation aspect more upsetting because the programs were often on national television.

But many students said these situations were to be expected. One student said: "They [the producers] exploit people's vulnerabilities and these situations are bloated to get more viewers." Another student said: "That's the point of the show, that's the risk that they take when they sign up for a show like that." Yet another student said: "If good things happen to people it wouldn't be seen as real, even though this is television and there are control aspects to it." Students said they would feel upset only if the person being humiliated did not seem to deserve it. One student said: "If they brought it upon themselves, then I feel apathetic but if it's because of no fault of their own, then I feel justice should be served." Another student said later seasons of *American Idol* had more participants who could not sing so that they could be on television, so he sometimes felt

they deserved the criticism and humiliation. Yet another student said he found these situations humorous, although he did not look forward to them: “If it’s funny, then I laugh. If it’s pretty inappropriate, I’ll probably still laugh. They are in that show for a reason; it’s their 15 seconds of fame.”

Some students also said that harsh feedback given by some of the judges were not deliberate attempts at humiliation but were suggestions that might help participants improve. Other students said humiliation did not appear to be an important aspect of game show reality programs that are talent based.

A student who looked forward to seeing such instances said: “It might not be upsetting if they deserve it. It’s often done for ratings to spice up the shows.” Another student said, although she does not look forward to participants being humiliated in talent-based shows, she looks forward to participants being humiliated in *Fear Factor*: “In some ways it is fascinating to watch people in *Fear Factor* humiliating themselves for money.” Another student said: “[I’m] embarrassed for them and then I think well you asked for it, you signed up. It’s almost sick how people enjoy other people’s pain. It’s almost as if other people’s pain builds us up.” Yet another student said:

I think they set themselves up for that. When you are on TV and the production company wants some things from you, then either way you are going to be humiliated. This is the whole point of reality shows. If you can’t laugh at people, it wouldn’t be good entertainment.

When asked to discuss their thoughts on the contestants, several students said they thought some participants had a lot of courage, confidence, ambition, and talent. One such student said seeing the participants pursuing their dreams made her feel like working even harder to succeed. Students also said they thought that some participants



were aspiring actors and entertainers who were using the shows to further their careers. But most students said, although they respected participants of talent-based shows like *American Idol*, *Last Comic Standing*, and *Project Runway*, they did not hold participants of shows like *Flavor of Love* and *Fear Factor* in similar regard. One student said:

It's all about the participants getting their 15 seconds of fame. In the musical shows people know how tough it is to get into the business so they take that opportunity. In *Fear Factor* these people are doing it for the money and maybe they need it.

Another student said participants of *Survivor* and *Big Brother* were also in it for the challenge, but other students doubted that. Some students also said they could not relate to the aspect of exposing oneself on television. One such student said:

A lot of people are attention hungry. Even on *American Idol* as they are still talented but not quite humble people. I think they like the cameras. Otherwise why would they subject themselves [to] this? People like to hear their voices or see their faces on national television.

Students used these shows for reality exploration as well. Some said they watched *The Apprentice*, *Project Runway*, and *America's Next Top Model* to get an idea of how people function in a purportedly real business environment; however, most said they did not perceive these scenarios to be completely real. One student also said she enjoyed the shows because they were about everyday people: "When you see like in *American Idol* people from small towns living their dreams, it's just nice to see that that can happen to people."

In summary, most students said they would not want to participate because they feared public humiliation, because many programs are talent based, or because they were not good looking or dramatic enough to be selected. Students also said they often

thought of how they would react in situations similar to those faced by the participants, although they were aware that the situations were often contrived. Thus, although most students said they do not compare themselves with show participants, these shows are being used by students to measure themselves. Students also spoke of being happy or sad when someone won or lost in one of these shows, especially if they had been rooting for that person; some students compared this aspect of these shows with sports. Students also seemed to be aware that participants were risking humiliation when they signed up for these shows—although most students did not appear to enjoy this aspect. Some students said they admired participants in shows based on talent for their courage, confidence, ambition, and talent. But participants in the other shows were not held in such high regard as they appeared to be there for their few minutes of fame and most students could not relate to this. And, although students usually did not view these shows to be completely real, these shows are being used by some students for reality exploration.

### *Surveillance*

As discussed in the literature review, surveillance is another gratification of viewing game show reality programs. McQuail et al. (1972) categorized surveillance as a form of information seeking. And Calvert (2000) stated that voyeurism in its colloquial usage—as the harmless, yet guilty pleasure of secretly peeking into others' lives for personal enjoyment—is a part of the surveillance aspect of reality shows. Thus interviews were analyzed to establish whether viewers think they learn anything from them. Also, whether voyeurism in its colloquial implication plays a role in the viewer

appeal of these shows was determined by asking students whether the shows give them an opportunity to secretly peek into contestants' lives and whether they, as viewers, look forward to this.

Most students said they did not look upon watching the shows as a learning experience; however, they did learn various things from talent-based shows and were inspired by participants' talents and drive. One student said: "I don't think I learn like a moral thing, but from *The Apprentice* I might learn how to do business." Another said: "When I see the contestants' designs [in *Project Runway*] or the beautiful photos [in *America's Next Top Model*], I feel like I am getting inspiration and learning the way that they execute creative work." Another student said she learned from *Project Runway* that she needed to have a vision and was inspired to apply to a fashion school. Yet another student said he learned from these programs that "if you work hard enough, you might win." Many other students said they learned how to take criticism by watching the participants of these shows. A student who recently emigrated from a South Asian country said she feels she learns about American life from these shows.

Although some students said they learned about how various industries operate from some of the shows, most said they usually learned only trivial things. Some students also said, although there might be something to learn from talent-based programs, shows like *Fear Factor* and *Survivor* do not have any moral or educational value. A few students, however, said they felt they learned life lessons and how to strategize and be enterprising from *Survivor*; watching *Fear Factor* helped them overcome their fears.

Of students who said they did not learn anything from the shows, one said: “I believe that these programs mean to entertain and not to educate.” Another said he did not learn anything since the shows are a leisure activity such as playing video games. Yet another student said: “I don’t think I’ve ever sat down for a television program to get a lesson out of it. I watch it just for entertainment—just to laugh.”

Most students said they were curious about show participants. One said she likes to know more about people on the shows as they are real people and thus easier to relate to than actors. Another student said:

I am more interested in what they create and show to the audience [in *Project Runway* and *America’s Next Top Model*]. However, when I find someone in the show interesting and lovable, I like watching him or her on TV and want to know about the person.

Some students said they looked forward to getting to know more about people they can identify with on the shows, and a few students said they use online tools such as YouTube to find out about their favorite contestants. One such student said she checked *So You Think You Can Dance* winner Benji Schwimmer’s performances on YouTube. Another student said she looks forward to getting to know more about participants since this helps her gravitate to one person. Yet another student said she likes to get to know about the favorites in these shows, their families, and personal things. Some students said whether they wanted to know about participants would also depend on the show and the participants.

Although many students said the shows allowed viewers to peek into someone else’s life, they were usually aware that these shows were not documenting real life. One student said, unlike in reality shows like *The Newlyweds*, game show reality programs

show mere fragments of a participant's life and are thus rather inaccurate. Another student said, as many of these talent-based shows do not follow participants all the time, they are less invasive than some other reality shows. Yet another student said whether these shows give a peek into someone's life varies from show to show:

Yes and no, because at times I feel it does like in *Amazing Race* they capture people under pressure. It's very real. *Big Brother* and *Survivor* are rather scripted and edited. Everyday life is not so special; they have to spice it [up] to make it interesting.

Another student said she did not feel the shows give people an opportunity to peek into someone else's life since "producers create the personalities." Yet another said: "Yes, a little bit of their lives is there for us to see but I still feel they are acting in front of the camera." Still another said: "Reality TV is kind of an oxymoron where they create a fake situation and so you are not getting a glimpse into their lives but [seeing them] in a contrived environment."

Most students said this aspect of the shows, that they allow viewers a peek into the participants' lives, was often a reason for viewing these shows. One such student said:

Yes this could be a reason as opposed to some of the other shows I watch that are scripted and structured. These shows are structured as well because of the editing, even if it doesn't have a script, but these seem like regular people in front of a camera and that makes it interesting.

Another student said she enjoyed watching because of the opportunity to peek into someone else's life and see someone having an even more difficult time than she was having. Yet another student said this opportunity to watch people made him feel like a

voyeur although he was aware that this was part of a production and thus very formulated.

Some other students said this was not a reason for them to watch reality programs since most of the shows were more about people competing for a prize than about individual lives. One student said she did not look forward to this aspect of the shows as she thought these portrayals could be misleading as editing might make people look really different from what they are. Another student said: “No, I do not want to know about them much and sometimes I feel bad about peeking at their personal life since it is a private thing that should be protected.”

In summary, game show reality programs, especially the ones based on talent, are serving as a form of information seeking for many students although most students do not consciously view watching these shows as a learning experience. Most students said they merely learned trivial things. But some students said the shows had a more profound effect on them, and seeing participants realize their dreams helped them learn that they could fulfill their aspirations too if they worked harder. Many students also said they looked forward to getting to know more about their favorite participants and some students mentioned that this aspect made them feel like voyeurs. Students also said talent-based game show reality programs appeared less intrusive than other reality shows and were more about people competing for a prize than about individual lives. Moreover, most students did not view what they saw as an actual documentation of reality and knew that participants were aware of being on camera.

*Interactivity*

Whether interactivity, a key element of these programs, increases the gratifications of viewers of game show reality programs was also examined. Interactivity allows the end user to have a high level of control over access, timing, and sequencing of information, entertainment, or services. Students were asked a set of questions to determine whether interactivity and the resulting vicarious experience made them feel more involved.

Slightly more than 30% (11) of the students said they voted after watching any of the game show reality programs that have such an option. Most students said they did not vote as it involves calling or text messaging and they did not want to spend the required time or money. Some students also said they were not passionate enough about the programs to vote. One male student said: "I feel that the shows that offer voting are geared towards high school girls and not college boys who watch sports, CNN, stuff that actually matter." Another said: "I'm more interested in being entertained than in participating."

Of students who voted, one said that, although she voted, she did not feel she was playing a role in the selection process since so many other people voted as well. But she realized that, if she did not vote, then she could not complain later so she voted multiple times for her favorite contestant. Other students who voted said they felt every vote counted and that they were playing a role in the selection process in a way. Another student who voted said: "Only if the person I voted for wins [do I feel that my vote counted] but, if they don't, then I feel that my vote got cancelled out by someone who

voted 30 times for the same person.” Few students said they felt they had more control over program content because of this element of interactivity. Others said producers were the ones who had control over the programs, and, by voting, they were merely ensuring that the shows had more ratings and would run for another season.

Many students (20) said they checked online for their favorite game show reality program. Some also said this was only to check on their favorite participants. The frequency of students going online to check on their favorite shows varied from every day in a week to occasionally. Some students also said they chatted online about these shows either during the show or later.

Students who used the interactive elements of the programs said they were more involved in the shows although the degree of involvement varied. One student said: “Yes [I feel more involved], because that makes us—the audience—feel like the show’s producers. It’s not the judges who are doing everything.” Another student said the extra knowledge that she received online made her feel more involved. Another student said: “The interactivity that helps determine the outcome can be pretty involving.”

In summary, the interviews showed that some viewers of the game show reality programs were using the interactive features of the programs to become more involved. These students said they had more control over program content because of this element of interactivity. But, in general, most students said they were not using this particular element of game show reality programs.



## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

What viewers seek and possibly receive from reality television as well as the resultant effects and social behaviors need to be understood since this genre of programming has become a substantial part of prime time television in the past decade. Literature on reality programs is still evolving and there is little or no reported research on the viewers of game show reality programming, a subtype of the genre. These shows also have an element of interactivity that promises the audience greater control; this aspect of the shows also needed to be studied.

This study's findings showed that the sample of college student viewers of game show reality programs see the shows as distinct from other reality programming and are using the programs to relax, unwind, be entertained, build relationships, construct personal identity, and as a learning experience of varying significance. Thus diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance are the uses and gratifications of these programs.

Earlier uses and gratifications studies of the full spectrum of reality programs (Nabi et al., 2003; Metcalf, 2005) showed that diversion was an important viewer gratification. Many student participants in this study also said they watched game show reality programs to unwind, relax, escape from whatever was going on in their lives, and for entertainment and enjoyment. Although few students said they had actively built viewing the shows into their routines, most said they found the time to watch them. Since the shows did not need much concentration, viewers multitasked while watching

and this added to their appeal. Students also said that, since reruns of the shows were easily available and the shows could be checked online, viewers could choose to watch or miss an episode at their convenience. Some students also mentioned using technology tools like TiVo, YouTube, and iTunes to watch their favorite programs at a more convenient time than when they were aired. These new media tools helped them skip commercials and focus on specific parts of the program.

Since many game show reality programs are talent based, students often watched the programs that featured a skill they were interested in so watching the shows usually made them feel better, at least momentarily. Some students also mentioned they preferred talent-based game show reality programs to game show reality programs that were not about a specific skill.

Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) analysis of the appeal of reality television, based on sensitivity theory, mentioned that social contact was a gratification of reality shows; their research showed that people who liked two or more reality shows tended to be more motivated by social life. Zinkievich's (2004) research on how reality television affects community involvement showed that viewers not only enjoyed interacting with other viewers, but also enjoyed watching the social interaction that was displayed on the shows.

Similarly, the results showed that personal relationships were another important viewer gratification of game show reality programs; viewers build relationships with show participants as well as with other viewers. Game show reality program viewers said they identified with show participants often, and that the experience of watching

these shows with friends and family and talking about them was in many ways a bonding experience for many of them. Some students compared these programs with sports and said they often rooted for participants along with friends and family. As discussed in the literature review, this apparent craving for community, of human intimacy and sharing, as mentioned by Rapping (1987), suggests that reality programming may be serving this role.

McQuail et al. (1972) wrote that another gratification of media use was personal identity; this included personal reference, reality exploration, and value reinforcement. This research also showed that students used these programs to construct personal identity and, at times, measured themselves against the show participants. This finding supports Patkin's statement (2003) that viewers watch game show reality programs to construct their own identities.

Most students said that, in general, the participants selected for these shows by the producers were better looking than average people and had personalities that caused conflicts so as to make the shows more interesting. Students also mentioned the death of participants from different ethnic backgrounds in the shows. This finding is similar to Patkin's report that minority representation is limited in game show reality programs (2003). Some female students also noted that female participants of these shows were difficult to identify with since the portrayals were usually stereotypical. These findings also support statements made by Patkin (2003) and Edwards (2004) that gender representation in these game show reality programs is often stereotypical.

Especially since many of the game show reality programs are talent based, students often felt unable to compare themselves to participants on a talent level. Findings also showed that, in general, students admired participants in the shows based on talent for their courage, confidence, ambition, and talent and were at times inspired by them. But participants in some other shows such as *Fear Factor*, *Flavor of Love*, and *Survivor* were not held in such high regard. Some students also said they watched these game show reality programs to get an idea of how certain industries functioned although they were conscious that the reality presented in these shows was not an accurate one. Students also said, although they did not consider watching these shows to be a learning experience, they did learn various things from the talent-based shows.

Additionally, the study showed that most student viewers of the programs were aware that the participants were competing in contrived situations. Viewers mentioned that game show reality programs did not provide the opportunity to peek into the participants' real lives to the extent that other reality shows might. Students also said that talent-based shows were less intrusive than other game show reality programs. Therefore the statement made by Calvert (2000) that voyeurism—as the harmless, yet guilty pleasure of secretly peeking into others' lives for personal enjoyment—is a part of the surveillance aspect of reality shows does not appear to hold true for game show reality programs.

Research also showed that slightly more than 30% (11) students were using the interactive features of the programs. Students who used these features said that they had greater control over program content because of the element of interactivity. This was

consistent with the statement made by Andrejevic (2004) that in the programs that feature an element of interactivity, producers have to relinquish some measure of control and the audience gains this control to a certain extent.

Thus the element of interactivity built into some of these programs does increase viewer gratifications but, in general, the interactive features of game show reality programs were not widely popular with this sample of college students. Students said that the interactive voting process that the programs often used to eliminate participants was cost prohibitive. Most students also said they did not want to spend the time trying to vote because as many others were voting at the same time and because people also had the option of voting innumerable times for the same participant.

#### *Contributions to the Study of Television Media*

There is a growing body of literature on the decade-old phenomenon of reality television. However, in studies on reality television by Nabi et al. (2003), Reiss and Wiltz (2004) and Metcalf (2005), the researchers had observed that a limitation of their studies had been that reality television as a genre is extremely diverse. The researchers thus suggested that the uses and gratifications of specific program types should be studied as the diverse gratifications received from programs as diverse as *Cops* and *Survivor* should not be disregarded.

In the literature review, it was discussed that reality television as a genre is often divided into two categories, one that includes shows (like *Cops*) seek to entertain by showing dramatic incidents from real life and a second that includes shows that have a game-show element (like *Survivor*). The review also showed a dearth of literature on the

latter type of reality television, game show reality programs. Additionally, many game show reality programs have an element of interactivity built in and the researcher did not come across any studies on this aspect of the shows during the literature review.

This study therefore focused on the viewer appeal of game show reality programming and whether interactivity increases the appeal of modern-day game show reality programs. This research provides a foundation for future research in this area.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

Since results of this study apply to the sample of undergraduate mass communications students at San Jose State University, the results can not be generalized. As mass communications students living in Silicon Valley, this group was probably more sophisticated than other reality television viewers. However, the results of this qualitative uses and gratifications study could be tested in a large-scale survey.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

As discussed earlier, talent-based game show reality programs emerged as a program format discerned by viewers to be distinct from other game show reality programs. Future research could determine the varied uses and gratifications of these distinct subtypes of game show reality programs.

A narrowed down program specific study could also be carried out to find out the specific viewer gratifications of particular shows such as *Survivor* or *American Idol* which have been consistently popular for the past few years. The gratifications of reality programs for immigrant viewers could also be studied.

Another aspect of these shows that needs to be analyzed is, although interactivity is being built into the formats of these shows, the usage seems to be limited to a comparatively small number of viewers. Research needs to be carried out to find out how the interactive features of these shows can be popularized so that television as a medium can continue to compete with other forms of media that are more interactive in nature such as the Internet.

Additionally, the effect, technology tools such as Tivo, YouTube, and iTunes are having on viewing patterns needs to be checked as research showed that people now have the option of viewing these shows commercial free. As this might eventually change the way television is used as an advertising medium and might also have long-term economic implications; this phenomenon needs to be evaluated and analyzed.

Television is one of the principal forms of mass media that viewers all over the world access, and although often criticized, game show reality programming is one of the most popular forms of television programming today. Therefore this study tried to ascertain what viewers seek from the programs.

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