

Perceptions of the Authenticity of Reality Programs and Their Relationships to Audience Involvement, Enjoyment, and Perceived Learning

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This survey study investigated whether viewer perceptions of reality programs' authenticity were associated with involvement, enjoyment, and perceived learning. Four dimensions of perceived authenticity were identified: cast eccentricity, representativeness, candidness, and producer manipulation. Perceptions that the cast was not eccentric, that they were representative of people the respondents could meet, that they were behaving candidly, and that the producers were manipulating the show were associated with cognitive involvement. Cast representativeness was also positively associated with social involvement. Each form of involvement was associated with enjoyment. Perceptions of the cast members' representativeness, candidness, and lack of eccentricity were associated with perceived learning.

Reality programs are now a staple of television programming. The programs have obvious advantages for broadcasters. They are inexpensive to produce, offer considerable scheduling flexibility, and are less dependent on actors than scripted programming. The nature of the appeal that these shows hold for the audience, however, is less clear. Several researchers have begun to investigate the program features and viewer attributes that are associated with enjoyment of or exposure to reality programs (e.g., Hall, 2006; Hill, 2005; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). The current study contributes to research in this area by considering the impact of perceptions of a reality program's authenticity on viewer involvement, enjoyment, and perceived learning.

The term "reality program" has been applied by scholars to a range of material that varies widely in format, theme, and subject matter. Many of the early definitions were broad, including news programs and traditional documentaries (e.g., Hill, 2005; Potter et al., 1997). In recent years, however, a narrower understanding of

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reality programs as a distinct genre has emerged in the press and in public opinion (Hill, 2005; Mittell, 2004). What unites understandings of these shows within a single conceptual category is not their setting, format, or subject matter. Nor is it the perception that the shows are “real” in the sense that they present real life as most people experience it. Rather, audiences define these shows in terms of a focus on real people playing themselves. For example, after a series of interviews with British reality program viewers, Hill (2005) concluded that audiences equate the programs with “cameras following people around” (p. 50). Hill notes that although programs of the genre deal with a diverse range of topics and vary widely in their perceived informational value, they have in common the “capacity to let viewers see for themselves” (p. 55). Hill (2006) carried out a series of focus-group interviews about reality programs with U.S. undergraduates and came to a similar conclusion. Hill found that these viewers did not define the category of reality programming by content or theme, but rather by the notion that the behavior of the cast members is unscripted, and was, therefore, an expression of their true character, skills, and personality. The current study works from this cultural category of the genre of reality programs and defines them as shows that feature real people whose words and behavior are not presented as predetermined by a script.

These guidelines, however, leave room for considerable variation in perceptions of the “reality” or authenticity of what viewers see on these programs, both across shows and across viewers. Audiences are aware that the settings and situations can be contrived, know that the people and stories featured on the shows are carefully selected, and suspect that many of the events presented on the shows are staged or manipulated by producers (e.g., Andrejevic, 2004; Hall, 2006; Hill, 2005; Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008). Viewers are perhaps even more sensitive to the authenticity of the cast members’ behavior on the show. Hill’s (2002; 2005) surveys and interviews led to the conclusion that the public believes the cast members routinely play up for the cameras and for other cast members. Hill suggests that this is such a central aspect of viewers’ understandings of reality programs that one of the ways in which viewers engage with the shows is to monitor the cast for moments when their artifice breaks down and they reveal their “true” selves, as discussed in more detail below. Similarly, Nabi et al. (2003) found that viewers mildly disagreed with the notion that the people on reality programs were unaffected by the cameras. One of the goals of the current study was to investigate whether different aspects of a reality program’s perceived authenticity, or how well it is believed to allow viewers a true and unmanipulated window onto the lives and characters of real people, contribute to audiences’ responses to the program.

The Appeal of Reality Programming

The question of why audiences choose to watch reality programs has been approached from several perspectives. Some scholars considered the appeal of reality programs by investigating the values and personality of audience members who

favor the genre (e.g., Crook et al., 2004; Oliver, 1996). For example, Reiss and Wiltz (2004) found that individuals who watched and enjoyed more reality programs tended to value status more highly than those who watched fewer of these shows. They argued that this contrast indicates that an element of reality programs' appeal is that they help viewers to feel important because seeing ordinary people on the shows allows them to "fantasize that they could gain celebrity status by being on television" (p. 374).

Other researchers have examined the nature of the programs' appeal more directly. Hill (2002) investigated the features of a specific program, the British version of *Big Brother*, that were most liked by viewers. Hill found that watching cast members cope with the privations of the Big Brother house and watching conflict among the cast were the most popular aspects of the show. Nabi et al. (2003) investigated the motivations and gratifications of watching reality programs within a sample of U.S. viewers. The respondents tended to agree that they enjoyed watching real people rather than actors, the unscripted nature of the programs, and that the people on the shows had something at stake. The respondents also tended to endorse a variety of specific reasons for finding the shows enjoyable, including that they featured real people and were unscripted. The researchers report that viewers tune into the shows because they "like to watch interpersonal interactions and because they are curious about other people's lives" (p. 324). A later study (Nabi et al., 2006) found that voyeurism, or feeling that one was getting a peek at others' lives, was associated with enjoyment of reality programs and tended to distinguish the appeal of reality programs from fiction programs. Hall's (2006) focus-group participants also advanced a number of reasons that they enjoyed reality programming, including that they were unpredictable and engaging. Another element of their appeal was emotional engagement with the cast, including both feelings of superiority when a cast member behaved badly, and inspirational identification when one did well. Hall suggests that both of these responses might be enhanced by the viewers' understandings that the individuals on the program were real people rather than scripted characters. In another focus-group study (Lundy et al., 2008), participants reported watching because the programs provided entertainment and an "escape from reality" (p. 214) in that they could project themselves into the situations portrayed on the show and figure out what they would do.

One issue that has received relatively little attention in these studies is how audience members actually involve themselves with these programs and their casts. Successful reality programs seem to be strikingly effective in engaging their audiences. Many programs have garnered substantive followings on the web, for example, where viewers detail the events of each episode, debate the character and motivations of the cast members, and attempt to predict what will happen next (e.g., Foster, 2004; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2004). The audience can directly affect the outcomes of programs such as *American Idol* by calling in to vote. Even relatively casual viewers may be active and sophisticated analysts of both the events featured on reality programs, and the conventions through which they are presented. The undergraduates who took part in Hall's (2006) study described talking about

programs with friends and playing along with competition programs by trying to guess who would be eliminated next. Hill (2005) suggests that audiences tend to view reality programs from a critical stance in that they critique the programs as they view. Hill argues that one important aspect of this critique, at least with long-form competition programs such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, is suspicion about the authenticity of the cast members' behaviors. Hill suggests that viewers engage in an ongoing assessment of when the cast members are being true to themselves, and when they are "acting up," or pretending to be something other than who they are for the cameras.

Previous work examined the antecedents of cognitive engagement in reality programs. In a study of a sample of reality program viewers recruited from program discussion boards, Hall (2004) found that perceptions that the people on a reality program are real were associated with greater feelings of suspense, which was associated with greater cognitive involvement. Hill's (2002, 2005) work suggests that one of the issues that engages viewers in reality programs is that of the candidness of the casts' unscripted behavior within the contrivances of a show. Audiences' interest in the people on the programs also seems to be raised by the perception that the shows offer a clear window into the lives and character of other people. This view may be seen as clouded when producers manipulate the program's events or the casts' behavior. The current study, therefore, investigated the influence that various aspects of a program's perceived authenticity, such as perceptions that the cast members were behaving candidly or that the producers were manipulating the program outcomes, may have on audience members' involvement in the program as well as on their level of enjoyment.

RQ₁: Are perceptions of the authenticity of a reality program associated with involvement with the program?

RQ₂: Are perceptions of the authenticity of a reality program associated with members' enjoyment of the program?

Audience involvement is worth considering, in part, because it may contribute to audience enjoyment of reality programs. The idea that becoming engaged or involved in a media text is, in itself, enjoyable, has been proposed in a variety of contexts. Within the field of narrative theory, Green and colleagues advanced the idea of transportation, in which the attention of the audience of a narrative is absorbed by the story, they feel strong emotions about the story's characters and events, and they become less aware of their physical surroundings (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). They suggest that becoming involved in a story in this way is a desirable state that can contribute to enjoyment by distracting audience members' from personal concerns or stress, allowing them to learn new things, and fostering a sense of connection with characters (Green et al., 2004). A related idea is Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow, which has also been applied to media reception (see Sherry, 2004). Flow is conceptualized as an intrinsically rewarding state that is achieved when the difficulty of the task that one

is engaging in matches one's skill level, allowing one to meet one's goals for the task while being completely involved in the activity. Sherry (2004) suggests that the interpretation of media texts such as television programs may lead to a rewarding sense of flow provided that piecing together the story and identifying its nuances is difficult enough to challenge the viewer without being overwhelming. Each of these concepts suggests that if audience members become engaged in a television program, either in the sense of becoming absorbed in the narrative or of being drawn into the activity of following the competition and guessing what will happen, it will contribute a sense of the program as enjoyable.

The idea that reality programs specifically are enjoyable because they allow for active audience involvement has perhaps been addressed most explicitly by cultural critic Johnson (2006). In a defense of popular culture, Johnson suggests that prime-time reality programs like *The Apprentice* are popular because they function like games and provide viewers with a cognitive challenge. Viewers are given an opportunity to vicariously engage with the show by anticipating, interpreting, and second-guessing the casts' decisions and behavior. They can "play" the show by trying to figure the cast members out, evaluating their behavior, and predicting the outcome. Although the intensity of viewers' involvement in reality programs has often been noted, the relationship between involvement and enjoyment of non-fiction media has been relatively little examined. One exception is a study by Tsay and Nabi (2006) that examined viewers' responses to *American Idol* over the course of a season. They found that cognitive involvement in the program was associated with enjoyment in the latter part of the show's run. The current study sought to explore this relationship further by testing the proposition that involvement in a reality program will be associated with enjoyment. It sought to determine whether the association between involvement and enjoyment, which has been found in other media, also holds in the case of reality programs.

H₁: Involvement in a reality program will be associated with enjoyment of the program.

The final variable considered in this analysis was perceived learning. Although most contemporary reality programs are not intended to teach, they have the potential to inform audiences about a variety of topics, including about the way people behave and interact with each other. As perceptions of the programs' authenticity increase, viewers' judgments of the programs' real-world relevance are likely to increase as well. This suggests that authenticity perceptions would be associated with the sense that one has gained valid insights about the world. Hall (2005) found that perceptions of a reality program's "candidness," or the extent to which the cast members were able to do and say what they wished and were not affected by the cameras, was positively associated with perceived learning from the program. The current study sought to replicate and expand upon this finding by investigating whether this and other aspects of reality programs' perceived authenticity were associated with greater perceptions of learning from the programs.

H₂: Perceptions of the authenticity of the program will be associated with perceptions of learning from the program.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes in a Midwestern, urban university, to complete an online survey that asked them to name the reality program they watched most frequently, and then answer a series of questions about it. Five respondents who did not nominate any show or who nominated a program that did not meet the definition of a reality program (see below) were eliminated from the sample. Of the 240 remaining respondents, 74% were women. The mean age was 23.62 ($SD = 6.10$) and the median age was 22. Nearly 67% of the respondents identified themselves as White, whereas 20% were African American, and 5% were Asian. The remaining respondents were either of some other race, of more than one race, or declined the question. Hispanic or Latino respondents constituted 3% of the sample. The mean number of hours the respondents reported viewing television per day was 4.02 ($SD = 3.34$), and the median was 2.86.

A reality program was defined for the respondents as a “show intended primarily for entertainment that features real people whose words and behavior are not predetermined by a script.” After identifying the reality program they watched most frequently, respondents completed a series of questions about this program, including measures of whether they considered themselves to be a fan of the program, whether they made a special effort to watch the program, and a single bank of Likert-type items that included measures of authenticity, involvement, enjoyment, and perceived learning on 7-point scales that ranged from 1–7. The order of these items was randomized by item for each respondent. The next items dealt with the respondents’ viewing habits. Respondents were asked to estimate how much TV they watched on an average weekday, an average Saturday, and an average Sunday. Their weekday viewing estimates were weighted by 5, added to the weekend estimates and divided by 7 to arrive at a measure of average daily television viewing. The survey concluded with measures of the type of programs the respondents preferred and their demographic characteristics.

Measures

Authenticity. Fifteen items were either adapted from previously-used measures (e.g., Hall, 2004, 2005; Nabi et al., 2003) or drafted for the study in order to measure program features that previous work suggested contribute to viewers’ perceptions of the authenticity or realism of reality programs (e.g., Hall, 2003; Hill, 2002, 2005; Nabi et al., 2003). They included items designed to capture the perceived typicality

of the cast members, candidness or spontaneity of the cast members' behavior, and degree to which the program is contrived or manipulated by the producers. The wording of the new items was informed by the language used by viewers in open-ended interviews and survey questions about their perceptions of reality programs (e.g., Hall, 2003; Hill, 2002, 2005).

A factor analysis determined whether judgments about the characteristics of the show that were measured by these items clustered together to contribute to perceptions of particular dimensions of perceived authenticity. Of the 15 items, 7 loaded off the first factor in the un-rotated matrix, indicating that the items captured more than one dimension of the viewers' perceptions of the program. There were four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 that accounted for 58% of the variation in the model. The factors were rotated and the final indices were created by reversing the direction of the items where necessary, and then taking the mean of the items with primary loadings of at least .60 without any secondary loadings greater than .40. Each index, therefore, had the same range of 1 to 7. Four items that did not load cleanly on a single factor were excluded from further analysis. The wording and factor loadings of the items that were included in the final indices are presented in Table 1. The first factor, "eccentricity," consisted of two items that captured perceptions that the cast members were atypical in the sense of being extreme and bizarre, $M = 4.59$ ($SD = 1.57$). The second factor, "representativeness," consisted of three items measuring perceptions that the cast members were like people the respondent knew or was likely to encounter, $M = 4.34$ ($SD = 1.51$). The third factor, "candidness," consisted of three items measuring perceptions that the program presented the characters as they actually were without being affected by the cameras, $M = 4.13$ ($SD = 1.11$). The fourth and final factor, "manipulation," consisted of three items that dealt with how audience members' reactions to the program may be manipulated by the editing or by the producers, $M = 4.57$ ($SD = 1.40$). Some of the indices were significantly correlated with each other. As reported in the Appendix, the manipulation and eccentricity indices were positively correlated with each other. Candidness was positively associated with representativeness, as well as with both eccentricity and manipulation. This suggests that the most eccentric cast members were often considered to be behaving candidly but tended to be on programs that viewers felt were manipulated by the producers.

Involvement. Audience involvement with the program was measured through nine items. Five were adapted from a scale developed by Hawkins et al. (2001), and four additional items were crafted for the study to measure the respondents' information-seeking about the program and the extent to which the show is used in social interactions with others. The new items were included because engaging with a program via the Internet has become easier and more common since the Hawkins et al. measures were developed. Furthermore, social interaction through both face-to-face and computer-mediated channels seems to be particularly common in relation to reality programs (Andrejevic, 2004; Foster, 2004). If these forms of

Table 1
Summary of Rotated Factor Loadings of Authenticity Items

| | Eccent. | Repres. | Candid. | Manip. |
|---|------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| The behavior of the people on this show is extreme. | .75 | -.02 | .09 | .15 |
| The people on this show are bizarre. | .77 | -.06 | -.01 | .11 |
| The people on this program are likely the people you would see walking down the street. | -.14 | .69 | .30 | -.12 |
| I personally know people who are like the people on the program. | .09 | .77 | -.03 | .20 |
| I don't know anyone like any of the people on this program. | -.07 | -. 75 | .26 | .11 |
| You get to see people as they really are on this show. | -.16 | .29 | .67 | -.09 |
| The behavior of the people on this show is not affected by the cameras. | -.17 | -.02 | .70 | -.17 |
| The people on this show are not self-conscious about the presence of cameras. | .21 | -.14 | .61 | .00 |
| The people who make the show provoke or encourage people on the show to act in a particular way. | .37 | -.05 | -.21 | .61 |
| The editing on this program pushes the audiences' impressions of the people on this program in particular directions. | .30 | .04 | -.16 | .72 |
| The producers intended for me to feel a particular way as I watched this program. | .04 | .04 | .01 | .76 |

Note. Varimax rotation.

involvement had not been addressed, the study would have overlooked potentially important ways in which audiences engage with the programs.

A factor analysis of these items produced three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 that together accounted for 60% of the variance. Two of the nine items loaded off the first factor in the un-rotated matrix. The final indices were constructed by taking the mean of the items that had a primary loading of at least .60 without any secondary loadings greater than .40 after rotation (see Table 2). The first factor, "social involvement," consisted of four items that referred to respondents' tendencies to talk about the show or to try to predict the outcome of the program ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.51$). This factor seemed to capture the respondents' tendency to use the show as social currency, in part by trying to guess the outcome. The second factor,

Table 2
Rotated Factor Loadings of Involvement Items

| | Social Involvement | Cognitive Involvement | Online Involvement |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| When I'm watching the program, I talk back to the television. | .69 | .28 | .04 |
| I try to predict what will happen on the program. | .63 | .20 | .15 |
| I discuss the program with other people. | .68 | .33 | .16 |
| I often watch the program with other people. | .78 | -.17 | .07 |
| I often think hard about something I've seen on this program. | .04 | .63 | .34 |
| I often think about what I would do if I were in the situation portrayed on the program. | .18 | .77 | .03 |
| When I'm watching, I try to imagine how a person on the program is feeling. | .18 | .79 | -.10 |
| I've posted or chatted about this program online. | .03 | -.02 | .90 |
| I've looked for information about this show on the Internet. | .38 | .15 | .61 |

Note. Varimax rotation.

"cognitive involvement," consisted of three items measuring tendencies to think hard about or imagine themselves into the program ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.45$). The two items that made up the final factor, "online involvement," referred specifically to internet-based activities ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.46$). All three indices were significantly and positively correlated with each other (see Appendix).

Enjoyment. Enjoyment was measured via three items (I enjoy watching the program; I usually find this program amusing; This program entertains me). A factor analysis found all three items to load on a single factor. The mean of the items was used for the final scale; $M = 5.88$ ($SD = 1.24$), $\alpha = .90$.

Learning. A scale measuring learning was created by taking the mean of four items that were either adapted from Rubin's (1983) viewing motivation scale or drafted for the study (I learn about some of the problems other people have from watching the program; I learn something about what other people are really like

from watching the program; I learn how to do things I haven't done before from watching the program; This show provides useful information). A factor analysis found all the items to load on a single factor, and the mean of the items was used for the final scale; $M = 3.06$ ($SD = 1.36$), $\alpha = .74$.

Results

The respondents named 66 different shows as the reality program they watched most frequently. The most often cited show was *The Real World*, which was named by 45 (19%) of the respondents. *American Idol* was second (31 respondents), followed by *The Hills* (15 respondents), and *America's Next Top Model* (12 respondents). Other shows that were cited repeatedly included *The Amazing Race*, *Flavor of Love*, *I Love New York*, *Survivor*, and *The Bad Girls Club*. The respondents tended to be regular viewers of these shows. The mean number of episodes they reported watching in an average month was 4.79 ($SD = 3.56$), and the median number of episodes was 4. This suggests that most of the respondents watched the program they cited at least once a week. Many of the most popular programs were broadcast several times a week when one includes results programs, reruns, and "encore" presentations. About 79% of the respondents indicated that they considered themselves fans of the show they cited, and 70% reported at least "occasionally" making a specific effort to watch the program by, for example, recording the program or setting up their schedule so that they would be home to watch.

A preliminary correlation analysis, reported in detail in the Appendix, found all four authenticity indices to be significantly and positively correlated with the social involvement index. The representativeness, candidness, and manipulation indices were each positively associated with the cognitive involvement index. None of the authenticity indices were significantly correlated with online involvement. The eccentricity, representativeness, and candidness scales were positively associated with the enjoyment scale. Both the representativeness and candidness indices were positively associated with the perceived learning scale.

In order to investigate RQ₁, which asked whether perceptions of reality programs' authenticity were associated with involvement, a series of hierarchical regression analyses were carried out in which the four authenticity indices were entered simultaneously as predictors of each of the three involvement indices while controlling for the other two forms of involvement. The involvement measures were entered in the first step, so that the change in the R^2 of the model with the inclusion of the authenticity indices could be used to determine whether perceptions of authenticity explained variance that was unique to the type of involvement being considered. Collinearity statistics indicated that the independent measures were not so closely associated as to present problems with the interpretation of the model. As reported in Table 3, the authenticity indices in the model predicting online involvement did not result in a significant change in the R^2 and none of

Table 3
Final Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Involvement
with Reality Programs

| | Social Involvement | Cognitive Involvement | Online Involvement |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Step 1 | | | |
| Social Involvement | — | .23** | .36*** |
| Cognitive Involvement | .23*** | — | .14* |
| Online Involvement | .31*** | .12* | — |
| ΔR^2 | .24*** | .15*** | .17*** |
| Step 2 | | | |
| Eccentricity | .12 [†] | -.14* | .04 |
| Representativeness | .17** | .16** | -.07 |
| Candidness | .04 | .25*** | .00 |
| Manipulation | .04 | .15* | -.05 |
| ΔR^2 | .05** | .11*** | .01 |

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

the regression coefficients were significant predictors of this measure. Authenticity perceptions did not seem to be related to online involvement. However, adding these indices to the models predicting both cognitive and social involvement significantly increased each models' R^2 , suggesting that these indices explained variance in each of these two types of involvement that was not accounted for by their relationships to other types of involvement. The representativeness, candidness, and manipulation indices were significantly and positively associated with cognitive involvement after taking social and online involvement and the other authenticity measures into account. The eccentricity index was negatively associated with cognitive involvement. The respondents were more likely to indicate that they thought about a program when the cast members were seen as more candid in their behavior, like people the respondent knows, and non-eccentric. Perceptions that the program was manipulated also tended to be associated with an increase in this type of involvement. The representativeness index was also positively associated with social involvement, while the coefficient measuring the eccentricity index's relationship to social involvement approached formal significance, $\beta = .12$, $p = .06$. However, direction of the eccentricity index's regression coefficient differed from that of the model predicting cognitive involvement. Although judging the cast members as eccentric tended to decrease cognitive involvement, these judgments, if anything, were associated with an increase in social involvement.

Another hierarchical regression analysis was carried out in order to investigate RQ_2 , which asked whether perceptions of reality programs' authenticity were associated with enjoyment, and H_1 , which predicted that involvement would be associated with enjoyment. The authenticity indices were entered first. These perceptions of the nature and content of the programs were thought to precede viewers' responses to the programs by becoming (or failing to become) involved. The involvement indices were entered together in the second step. As reported in Table 4, the first step of the model was significant, which indicates that authenticity perceptions were associated with enjoyment. The representativeness and candidness indices were each positively associated with the enjoyment scale. Adding the three involvement indices in the second step resulted in a significant increase in the R^2 of the model. Both the social and cognitive involvement indices were significantly and positively associated with the enjoyment scale in the final model, providing partial support for H_1 . However, when the involvement indices were added to the model, the regression coefficients for the representativeness and candidness indices each decreased to the point where they became statistically insignificant. Only the manipulation index was a significant predictor in the final model. The direction of this relationship was negative, indicating that perceptions that a show was manipulated by its producers were associated with a decrease in reported enjoyment once the influence of involvement and of the other authenticity indices was taken into account.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that perceptions of authenticity would be associated with perceptions of learning, was tested via a final regression analysis that

Table 4
Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Enjoyment of Reality Programs

| | Enjoyment | | Learning | |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|----------|-------|
| Step 1 | | | | |
| Eccentricity | .12 [†] | .10 | -.18** | -.13* |
| Representativeness | .17*** | .02 | .22*** | .12* |
| Candidness | .19*** | .07 | .32*** | .18** |
| Manipulation | -.05 | -.12* | .03 | -.05 |
| ΔR^2 | .09*** | | .18*** | |
| Step 2 | | | | |
| Social Involvement | .43*** | | -.03 | |
| Cognitive Involvement | .22** | | .49*** | |
| Online Involvement | -.02 | | -.03 | |
| ΔR^2 | .24*** | | .19*** | |

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

is also reported in Table 4. The candidness and representativeness indices were significantly and positively associated with perceived learning, and the eccentricity index was negatively associated with the scale. When reality programs were seen as more authentic in the senses that the cast members were sincere, representative, and restrained, viewers tended to report learning more from the program. Perceptions that a program was manipulated did not seem to affect perceptions of learning. These associations remained significant when the involvement scales were included in the model. Cognitive involvement was positively and significantly associated with perceived learning. However, neither social involvement, nor online involvement was associated with this outcome.

Discussion

The results suggest that each of the four forms of authenticity were associated with viewers' reports of thinking hard about the program and imagining themselves in place of cast members. The findings in regard to perceptions that the cast members of reality programs were candid in their behavior, like people the respondents might know, and not bizarre or eccentric, are consistent with Hill's (2002, 2005) conclusions that one of the primary ways in which audience members engage with reality programs is through the people on the shows. These features may have made this type of engagement more likely by making the cast members' behavior seem more accessible and the respondents' personal experience feel more relevant. The regression analysis also found that perceptions that the show was *inauthentic* in the sense of being manipulated by the producers, were positively associated with reported cognitive involvement. A possible explanation for this relationship is that producer manipulation of a show essentially complicates the viewers' efforts to evaluate and interpret the behavior of the cast in that viewers are left to determine how the show is manipulated, and what this implies in terms of the nature of the cast members. Meeting the demands of this additional level of complexity may require a greater level of this type of involvement.

Specific types of authenticity perceptions also seemed to contribute to social involvement, or using the programs as a means of interacting with others. Evaluations of the cast members' representativeness were associated with greater reports of social involvement. There was also modest evidence that judgments of the cast members' level of eccentricity may be positively associated with this type of involvement. Audience members do not claim to spend much time thinking about the more outlandish doings of reality program cast members. Nevertheless, they may spend quite a bit of time talking about them. These cast members may be particularly likely to function as conversational currency.

Social and cognitive involvement were each strongly associated with program enjoyment. This is consistent with a model of enjoyment advanced by Nabi and Krcmar (2004), in which enjoyment is conceptualized as an attitude with affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements. In a cross-sectional survey, it is difficult to deter-

mine whether involvement contributes directly to enjoyment or whether enjoyment, over the course of a series, contributes to viewers' willingness to involve themselves in the show. However, the current results indicate that some of the perceived characteristics of reality programs were related to these forms of involvement more strongly than they were related to enjoyment. If emerging theoretical perspectives that suggest that involvement can contribute to enjoyment are correct (Green et al., 2004; Sherry, 2004), then reality programs may be enjoyed, in part, because the nature of the programs' authenticity encourages audiences to think and talk about programs.

However much thinking audience members are engaging in when watching these programs, they did not strongly endorse the idea that reality programs give them the opportunity to learn. Whereas the mean of the enjoyment scale was well above the scale midpoint, the mean of the learning scale was below the midpoint. However, perceptions of the cast members' candidness, representativeness, and lack of eccentricity were associated with respondents' perceptions that they learned something from the program. Beliefs that elements of a program were manipulated or contrived had no discernable relationship to the respondents' perceived learning. Viewers' perceptions that they learned from the show, in other words, seemed to be related to their evaluations of the authenticity of the cast members. These are, of course, measures of perceived learning rather than objective measures of viewers' skills or knowledge. They do not measure what, if anything, audiences are actually learning. Nevertheless, these findings have implications about what and how viewers feel they can learn from these shows. Viewers may feel that reality program cast members who are more representative and less extreme are more similar to themselves. What these cast members are shown to do and discover may, therefore, be seen by viewers as more relevant to their own lives. The importance of candidness to perceptions of learning suggests that one of the things viewers feel they may be able to pick up from the shows is a better understanding of human nature and behavior. The more the cast members are seen to behave in a way that reveals their true selves, the more likely viewers are to report that they have learned.

This study has some limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. One was the measures of perceived authenticity, which were treated as indices rather than as scales. In other words, the attributes measured by each item were conceptualized as distinct characteristics of the shows that tend to work together to contribute to perceptions of particular types of authenticity, rather than different measures of the same underlying concept. For example, one could believe that show producers tend to encourage particular types of behavior in reality program cast members, without necessarily believing that the way a program is edited has an effect on audience members' impressions of the cast, even though each of these factors could contribute to the impression that the show is manipulated. The factor analysis suggested that particular characteristics of the shows clustered together consistently in the respondents' ratings. However, the pattern may have been dependent on the sample of shows that the respondents cited and evaluated. These program characteristics may not group together in the same way with a

different sample of programs or with programs from a different stage in the genre's evolution. The structure of these respondents' perceptions of authenticity in this study should not be incautiously applied to perceptions of other groups of programs.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation is the sample of undergraduates. Another way in which the sample is unrepresentative is in the type of reality programs that the respondents evaluated. The programs nominated by the respondents tended to be popular shows targeted to a young adult audience, as one would expect given the nature of the sample. Most were prime-time programs that featured a specific set of characters for a season of a pre-determined number of episodes and many had a strong competition element. Furthermore, asking respondents to name and evaluate the program they watched most frequently is likely to have resulted in a sample of programs that were effective in capturing viewers' interest. Most of the respondents liked the shows they evaluated well enough to be regular viewers. Involvement and perceived authenticity may function differently among different types of viewers or in reference to shows with different themes or formats. For example, enjoyment of programs without a serialized plotline such as *COPS* or *Designed to Sell* may be less dependent upon viewer engagement. The current study did not have enough respondents evaluating individual programs, or even specific types of programs, to carry out complex statistical analyses. However, a worthwhile avenue of further research would be the investigation of how perceptions of authenticity and the role of viewer engagement vary across different types of reality programs.

However, as young, educated adults, the study participants represent one of the primary target audiences for many media outlets. Surveys have consistently indicated that young adults are more likely to watch reality programs than their older counterparts (Gardyn, 2001; Hill, 2007). Furthermore, the popular success of the programs that the respondents tended to cite suggests that these programs represent a particularly influential trend within the genre of reality programming. *The Real World* and *American Idol* are not typical of all reality programs. They reach a larger audience and are likely to be watched with more attention than many other shows. Yet, what makes them atypical is also what makes them interesting. The size of their audience base gives these shows the potential to affect a larger numbers of viewers, and the money they bring in means that they represent a model that networks seek to reproduce. The findings, therefore, can help strengthen understandings of the roles that perceived authenticity and viewer involvement can have in audience enjoyment of the leading program types within the reality programming genre.

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Appendix

Correlations between Authenticity Indices, Involvement Indices, Enjoyment Scale, and Perceived Learning Scale

| | Eccentric. | Represent. | Candid. | Manip. | S. Inv. | C. Inv. | O. Inv. | Learn. |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| Representativeness | -.01 | | | | | | | |
| Candidness | .26*** | .16* | | | | | | |
| Manipulation | .41*** | .03 | .13* | | | | | |
| Social Involvement | .18** | .26*** | .21** | .15* | | | | |
| Cognitive Involvement | .04 | .27*** | .32*** | .17** | .37*** | | | |
| Online Involvement | .10 | .06 | .12 ⁺ | .05 | .40*** | .25*** | | |
| Learning | -.09 | .28*** | .31*** | .01 | .18** | .55*** | .09 | |
| Enjoyment | .15* | .20** | .24*** | .03 | .52*** | .38*** | .22** | .27*** |

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

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