

Determining Dimensions of Reality: A Concept Mapping of the Reality TV Landscape

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This research examines the dimensions underlying reality-based TV programs as a first step towards uncovering the reality programming subgroups that might exist in viewers' minds and the themes that might distinguish them. Two samples—one of students and one of city residents—engaged in a sorting task of 33 reality-based programs. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) indicated two underlying dimensions along which audiences think about reality TV (romance and competitiveness), which were supported by subsequent analyses. These findings both help frame future theoretically driven research on reality-based programming and offer insight into how research interested in the effects of programming themes might proceed.

The increased presence of reality-based programming across the television landscape has generated not only millions of dedicated viewers but also waves of scholarly interest in recent years. Such interest comes from a range of perspectives, including empirical investigations based on contemporary media effects theories (e.g., Kooistra, Mahoney, & Westervelt, 1998; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Oliver, 1994) and more cultural, qualitative analyses (see Fishman & Cavender, 1998, and Murray & Ouellette, 2004). This growing body of research has generally taken one of two tacks: analysis of individual programs, like *Big Brother* (e.g., Couldry, 2002; Hill, 2002; Jones, 2003), *Survivor* (e.g., Haralovich & Trosset, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Schapiro, 2002), or *The Real World* (e.g., Kraszewski, 2004), or consideration of the emerging genre as a whole (e.g., Nabi et al., 2003; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). However, as the number of reality programs has proliferated, a new focus on subgenres within reality TV has emerged. Reality crime shows, like *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*, have received the most attention (e.g., Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Cavender & Fishman, 1998; Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz, & Chiricos, 2002; Oliver, 1994; Oliver & Armstrong, 1995, 1998), though reference to other categories, such as gamedocs (e.g., *Survivor*), dating (e.g., *the Bachelor*), and makeover/lifestyle programs (e.g., *A Wedding Story*), are becoming more common (e.g., Couldry, 2004; Everett, 2004).

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Although the interest in examining categories of reality TV programs reflects the development of both the programming style and related research, the nature of this research deserves more careful attention as it has implications for the theoretical scope and validity of the conclusions that might be drawn. For example, when lumping a range of reality programming together under the auspices of studying "reality TV," the implication is that all reality programs share some common features or themes that, regardless of the particular program, will explain why they are watched or the effects such viewing might have on perceptions of society. However, apart from "reality," which itself is not clearly defined, it is not obvious what unifying theme justifies the massing together of such diverse programs as *Cops*, *American Idol*, and *The Real World*.

Particularly troublesome for the study of reality TV subgenres is that scholars appear to group programs based on personal impressions of similarity rather than on either clearly defined program characteristics or, alternatively, viewers' subjective perceptions of common themes. Consequently, this type of inquiry is left vulnerable to inconsistency across studies, threatening comparability of research findings and, thus, the creation of a coherent knowledge base. Yet by exploring the systematic themes that might exist in the vast array of reality programming, researchers would be well-situated to consider the effects of viewing such programming on a range of theoretically relevant outcomes, including social reality beliefs and perceived norms as per cultivation theory (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), behavioral enactment as central to social cognitive theory (see Bandura, 2002), construct priming (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002), third-person effects (Perloff, 2002), and the like. This, in turn, would expand the range of theoretically based research on this still developing media phenomenon, allowing for a richer understanding of the processing and effects of this type of programming.

The purpose of this research, then, is to identify the most salient themes viewers perceive across reality-based programming, and to the extent possible, to identify reality TV subgenres and their defining attributes. In doing so, researchers may be better positioned to both study the themes most likely to be linked to theoretically driven, perception-based effects and bolster the methodological soundness of research on subgenres of reality TV by offering a coherent rationale for creating such groupings free of researcher idiosyncrasy.

The Genre (and Subgenres) of Reality-Based TV

Although people might have a sense of the programs that fall into the category of reality television, there is no clear industry standard or definition of the genre. With the range of various incarnations in mind, Nabi et al. (2003) offered the following definition of reality TV: "programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur" (p. 304). They further identify several key elements that characterize such programs: (a) people portraying themselves, (b) filmed at

least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment. In essence, reality programs are marked by ordinary people engaged in unscripted action and interaction.

Within this subset of television programming, there are arguably a number of subgenres. Although there has been no systematic attempt at developing a typology of reality programs, some efforts to identify subgenres are in evidence. For example, Couldry (2004) refers to gamedocs, or programs that blend qualities of documentaries and game shows, and are further characterized by their social processes. Everett (2004) focuses on what she terms "transformation TV" (p. 160), her label for the disparate group of home improvement TV programs like *Trading Spaces* and *While You Were Out*, which she contrasts with so-called "voyeur programs," like *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and *Big Brother* (see Poniewozik, 2000).

Based on their assessment of the range of reality programming, Ouellette and Murray (2004) identified six subgenres: gamedocs (e.g., *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*), dating programs (e.g., *Joe Millionaire*, *Blind Date*), makeover/lifestyle (e.g., *A Wedding Story*, *Extreme Makeover*), docusoaps (e.g., *The Real World*, *Sorority Life*), court programs (e.g., *Judge Judy*), and reality sitcoms (e.g., *The Osbournes*), along with miscellaneous other programs featuring celebrities (e.g., *Celebrity Boxing*). Similarly, Nabi, Stitt, Halford, and Finnerty (2006) identified six subgenres based on an exploratory factor analysis of the viewing frequency of 12 reality-based programs: romance (*The Bachelor*), crime (e.g., *Cops*), informational (e.g., *Trading Spaces*), reality-drama (*The Real World*), competition/game (e.g., *Survivor*), and talent (e.g., *American Idol*). These groupings are not unlike categories identified from an industry perspective, including talent and survival competitions, personal makeover, home makeover, get-rich-quick schemes, docudramas, and "Mr. Right" programs (Fitzgerald, 2003b).

While on their face these typologies have merit with several overlapping categories, including dating, game/competition, and drama/soaps, they suffer from notable limitations. First, the typologies, such as they are, fail to capture the full range of reality programming. Ouellette and Murray (2004) overlook crime dramas and talent programs whereas Nabi et al. (2006) omit makeover programs. In fairness, new programs are developed every season so typologies developed in one year might be out of date the next. Thus, this limitation may be easily overcome, but it does speak to the idiosyncratic nature of these endeavors.

Second, the current typologies do not articulate the qualities or program characteristics that define each category. What, for example, would qualify as a "talent" program? Clearly, *American Idol*, in which singers compete for a recording contract, would. But would *The Apprentice*, in which candidates compete in a series of business tasks to win a job with Donald Trump? Ouellette and Murray (2004) offer no insight on this matter. While Nabi et al. (2006) rely on viewing frequency for category development, making the assumption that viewers may choose to watch programs with similar characteristics, this sort of method is imprecise given the host of reasons

why people watch (or don't watch) what they do, including work or family commitments, viewing patterns of other household members, and so forth.

This feeds into a third and larger concern: What of programs that might straddle two or more categories? There are numerous examples. *Survivor*, the ultimate gamedoc, might also be considered a docusoap, given the intricate relational bonds that shift over the course of the season (see Haralovich & Trosser, 2004, and Schapiro, 2002). *The Bachelorette* revolves around dating, but there is a strong element of competition as suitors vie for a rose, the signal they will move on to the next round of evaluation. Indeed, Jagodozinki (2003) suggests reality game shows include not just *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, but also *Temptation Island* and *Love Cruise*. Further, Dhoest (2005) refers to *The Osbournes* as a docusoap whereas Ouellette and Murray (2004) categorize it as a docusitcom. Additional examples are readily identified. *American Idol* is a competition program based primarily on vocal talent just as *The Swan* is a makeover program with an element of competition to see which "ugly duckling" has transformed most dramatically. Further, *Cops* focuses on crime, but it is also informative as to police procedure just as *Trading Spaces* is informative about home decoration.

So, how might one handle these challenges to creating a typology for reality TV? One strategy is to continue to allow scholars to develop their own and look for points of cohesion among them—not the most efficient strategy to be sure. A second more viable approach might be to focus not on the groups the programs might fall into but rather to identify the dimensions that might underlie the wide range of current reality TV programs. Indeed, some passing references to this sort of approach exist in the literature. In her essay pointing out the difficulties that may arise in trying to distinguish documentary and reality TV, Murray (2004) suggested that gamedocs are the least like documentaries in terms of aesthetics and narrative structure whereas docusoaps are most similar as they lack the "game" setup. This suggests game or competition might be an underlying dimension. Although helpful, the strategy leaves open the question of whether the qualities scholars perceive are related to those perceived by the viewing audiences.

A third approach, then, might again forego focus on developing an objective typology per se and focus more on the program attributes that might ultimately define various subgenres from the audience perspective. By considering how viewers mentally map these programs, one would be able to tap into the dimensions underlying how audiences perceive reality TV programs. These dimensions might then be used as a starting point from which to develop theoretically driven hypotheses about the expected effects of viewing such programming. Further, there is the possibility that groupings along these dimensions might emerge, which might aid in the development of a typology of reality TV informed by viewer perception, to the extent that would be useful.

Only one study has sought to explore the cognitive mapping of reality programs (Nabi et al., 2003). However, no clear groupings emerged perhaps, as Nabi et al. argue, because the grouping task was based on a wide range of television programming, including news, game shows, situation comedies, evening dramas, and soap operas, that may have masked more fine-grained distinctions viewers might ordinarily make

among reality-based programs. This research, then, focuses exclusively on reality-based programs and seeks to answer the question: What dimensions, or program attributes, are most salient in viewers' distinctions among reality-based programs? In addressing this question, it is hoped the results will aid researchers in more systematic identification and study of subgenres of reality-based programming.

Method

Procedure and Participants

Two sets of data were collected in the Summer of 2004—one based on a sample of 170 undergraduates and the other on a sample of 131 city residents awaiting jury duty.¹ As reality-based programming is largely targeted toward younger audiences, and reality viewers are 40% more likely to be aged 18–34 (Fitzgerald, 2003a; Jubera, 2001; Mongrain, 2005), the undergraduate sample is reasonable and, perhaps, even preferable. However, the jury data will help to assess the generalizability of the student findings.

Both samples were asked to complete a sorting task in which they were to place 33 reality-based television programs, presented in alphabetical order, into groups based on similarity using whatever criteria they deemed appropriate (see Appendix for program list). To minimize error in the analyses and consistent with Nabi et al. (2003), only the responses of those familiar with 30 of the 33 programs in the student sample ($n = 63$) or 29 of 33 programs in the jury sample ($n = 30$)² were included—a suitable approach for the concept mapping, which is often based on as few as 10 sorters (Jackson & Trochim, 2002; see also McKeown & Thomas, 1988).

For the city resident data, 40% of the final sample was male, and 60% female. Their average age was 30 years old ($SD = 8.54$), and 50% were Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 7% African American, 3% Native American, and 6% Other. Fifteen percent of the sample had up to a high school degree, 35% had some college education, 39% had a college degree, and 11% had an advanced degree. On average, they watched 4.29 hours of TV daily ($SD = 2.54$). Those included in the analysis did not differ from those excluded in gender distribution or education level, but they were generally younger (30 years vs. 39 years, $p < .01$), were less likely to be White (50% vs. 73%, $p < .05$) and watched slightly more hours of television per day (5.05 hours vs. 4.07 hours, $p = .06$). These demographic differences between viewers and nonviewers of reality TV are similar to those found by Nabi et al. (2003), and are consistent with national data that suggests reality TV viewers are more likely to be under age 35 (Mongrain, 2005). On average, respondents created 8.1 groups from the 33 reality programs.

For the undergraduate sample, 16% of the final sample was male, and 84% female. Their average age was 21.6 years old ($SD = 2.66$), and 79% were Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 6% African American, 5% Asian American, and 2% Other. Nearly two-thirds of the sample were seniors (60%) and one-third were juniors (33%), and overall, they watched 4.84 hours of TV daily ($SD = 2.13$). In contrast to the jury sam-

ple, the undergraduates included in the analysis did not significantly differ from those excluded in terms of age, race, or daily hours of TV consumption, but did differ in gender distribution with more women being more familiar with the range of reality TV programs than men (84% vs. 39%, $p < .001$). On average, respondents created 7.4 groups from the 33 programs.

Comparing the city residents and students included in their respective analyses, the student sample included more women (84% vs. 60%, $p < .05$), were younger (21.5 years vs. 30 years, $p < .001$), and were more likely to be White (79% vs. 50%, $p < .05$), but watched a comparable number of hours of TV per day. These differences suggest separate analyses of their sorting results are warranted. From this point, unless otherwise specified, all analyses are based on only those participants who met the inclusion criteria for the sorting task (city resident $n = 30$ and student $n = 63$).

Instruments

In the survey, respondents were first asked to indicate how many hours of TV they typically watch during each of four time periods (6a.m.–noon, noon–6p.m., 6p.m.–midnight, midnight–6a.m.) during the average weekday and weekend day. These data were combined (weighting the “average week day” questions by a factor of five and the “average weekend day” by a factor of two) to create an “average TV viewing hours/day” measure. They were then asked to indicate on 4-point scales (0 = never to 3 = frequently) how frequently they watch each of 33 reality-based programs.

After indicating how enjoyable they generally find reality-based programming to be with four, 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) items: enjoyable, entertaining, pleasurable, captivating (jury = .93; student = .95) and how realistic they find such programs with five 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) items: realistic, true-to-life, accurate, plausible, unrealistic (reverse coded; jury = .88; student = .91), respondents were asked to complete the sorting task described below.

After the sorting task, the city resident respondents were asked to rate each of eight programs potentially representative of what appeared to be unique subgenres of reality TV (Nabi et al., 2006)—*Survivor* (competition), *The Bachelor* (romance), *Trading Spaces* (home makeover), *The Real World* (drama/soap opera), *The Swan* (personal makeover), *American Idol* (talent), *Cops* (police), *Punk'd* (hidden camera)—along 12 attributes on 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely) scales, including: competitive, romantic, unkind, realistic, socially acceptable, unfair, suspenseful, funny, unrealistic, intelligent, mindless, and ethical. These attributes were chosen based on Nabi et al.’s (2003) MDS results of a range of program genres, including reality, and augmented by additional attributes along which the programs might reasonably vary (e.g., competition, romance). Respondents were asked to rate only the programs with which they were familiar. For this reason, the data were not restricted to only those who were included in the sorting task analysis. Rather, any of the original 131 participants who indicated they were familiar enough with the program to rate it were included. Conse-

quently, each program was rated by between 52 to 109 participants. The survey concluded with demographic measures.

In contrast, a separate sample of students ($N = 49$) rated the eight programs identified above along the same 12 attributes offered to the jury sample. The sample was 61% female and 39% male, and their average age was 22 years ($SD = 2.11$). They were primarily seniors (82% seniors, 14% juniors), and they watched an average of 4.03 hours of TV daily ($SD = 1.64$).³ The students were first asked to report their TV viewing patterns (see above), demographic information, and frequency of viewing the same 33 reality-based programs included in the sorting task, and then to rate the eight programs. As students were asked to rate only those programs with which they were familiar, each program was rated by anywhere between 18 and 45 participants.

Sorting Task

As noted earlier, an exploratory factor analysis of the viewing frequency of 12 reality programs by Nabi et al. (2006) resulted in the following potential groupings of reality-based subgenres: reality-dramatic programming (*The Osbournes*, *The Real World*), romance (*The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*), game show/competition (*Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, *Fear Factor*), talent (*American Idol*), crime/police (*Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*), and informational (*Trading Spaces*, *A Baby Story*). Each of these programs was thus included in the sorting task along with 21 other programs either popular in the recent past or at the time of data collection representing a broad spectrum of network and cable reality-based programming (e.g., *Last Comic Standing*, *Punk'd*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The Restaurant*, *The Swan*; see Appendix for the complete list).

Consistent with protocols for concept mapping (Jackson & Trochim, 2002), respondents were instructed to group shows by writing the names of similar programs together on the lined pages following the program list. If unfamiliar with a program, respondents were instructed to circle the program name and not sort it.⁴ They were further instructed to use each program only once. Participants were also told that most people create 6–12 groups, but to create as many or as few as necessary to capture the similarities and differences among the programs that they perceived. The lists then served as the foundation for multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) analysis from which the concept map, and its underlying dimensions, emerged.

Results

Analyses

For each sample, the sorting data were converted to dissimilarity scores (see Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968) that were then used to create an MDS

configuration (with the software program SPSS 12.0) using a Euclidean distance metric. The stress plot was used to determine the appropriate number of dimensions to describe the data, and the stress measure was used to evaluate how well each configuration captured the observed distances, with smaller stress scores suggesting improved fit. For the jury sample, the stress plot indicated a sharp decrease in improvement in S-stress between the second and third dimensions ($s_1 = .23$, $s_2 = .17$, $s_3 = .16$), suggesting a two-dimensional solution is most appropriate. The variance accounted for also indicated a two-dimensional solution to be an acceptable fit of the data ($R^2 = .88$), with the three-dimensional solution adding 6% to the variance explained. The student sample demonstrated comparable results, with the sharp decrease in improvement in S-stress between the second and third dimensions ($s_1 = .19$, $s_2 = .14$, $s_3 = .13$) and an acceptable fit of the data ($R^2 = .92$), with the three-dimensional solution adding only 3% to the variance explained. Thus, the two samples converge in supporting the position that the range of reality-based programs distribute along two dimensions.

Following procedures similar to Roskos-Ewoldsen (1997) and Nabi et al. (2003), the data collected on the representative programs from the city resident and student samples were used to aid in the interpretation of the dimensions—a largely subjective process (Jackson & Trochim, 2002; McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The rated programs appeared distributed throughout the multidimensional space for both samples. The mean ratings for each program formed the foundation for two new data sets (one for each sample) on which a series of multiple regressions were performed with the coordinates of each program in the MDS as the predictor variables and the mean ratings for each dimension as the dependent measures.

Two criteria were used to identify likely dimensions: (a) high multiple R s to indicate the rated dimensions are well associated with the MDS dimensions (see Table 1), and (b) a low correlation between the two dimensions to indicate that they are relatively orthogonal (see Tables 2 and 3).⁵ Magnitude rather than significance is of primary concern given the small sample of programs rated. Given competing explanations with comparable fits, the most reasonable explanation based on the nature of the programs and their distribution will be selected. Of note, because the opposing attributes of real and unreal were highly negatively correlated ($r = -.95$), a real–unreal scale was created by subtracting the latter variable from the former within the pair.

Dimensions of Reality TV

Based on the analyses of both the student and jury data, the first dimension of the MDS solution clearly corresponds with the attribute of romance, with the bulk of the “dating” reality programs dominating one end of the spectrum, and the others sprinkled along the midrange to the opposite end of the continuum (see Table 1 and Figures 1–2). Based on statistical parameters, the second dimension arguably represents degree of suspense, unkindness, or competition. However, consideration of the pro-

Table 1
Multiple Correlations for the Television Program Ratings

Program Rating Scales	Multiple Correlation Student Sample	Multiple Correlation Jury Pool Sample
1. Romantic	.76	.82
2. Suspense	.75	.38
3. Unkind	.69	.53
4. Competition	.68	.74
5. Unreal	.65	.64
6. Real	.63	.67
7. Unfair	.59	.62
8. Intelligent	.56	.59
9. Mindless	.52	.52
10. Socially Acceptable to Watch	.51	.61
11. Ethical	.51	.53
12. Funny	.15	.48

gram distribution suggests that the term “competitiveness” is the best fit as programs in which contestants compete head to head dominate one end of the spectrum; programs that blend competition with elements of soap operas and dramas scatter through its midrange; and more docusoap, docu-crime, and lifestyle/makeover programs complete the other end of the continuum. Because all of these programs can arguably be suspenseful (e.g., the outcome of a competition for a recording contract may be as exciting as the outcome of a home or personal makeover), the quality of “suspense” would not represent this dimension well. Although “unkindness” might serve as an alternative characterization of dimension 2 based on the student sample data, its suitability based on the jury pool data is not as good, and the jury-based data set may be more reliable as the sample both sorted and rated the programs and the sample sizes for the ratings were larger. Indeed, in reflecting on the three attributes under consideration, it is likely that “competitiveness” is a more general category that subsumes the other two. That is, programs that are competitive may be inherently more suspenseful (as theoretically anything can happen) and more likely to capture people treating each other unkindly. Thus, the broader category of competitiveness best serves the interpretive process.

Subgenres of Reality TV

Although the MDS technique is not intended to identify categories of objects like, reality programs, it is still possible to examine the range and distribution of the programs such that the types of programs that audiences tend to see as more or less dis-

Table 2
Correlations Among Possible MDS Dimensions (Student Sample)

	ROM	S	UNK	C	UNR	R	UNF	INT	M	SA	ETH	F
Romantic (ROM)	—	-.16	.15	.40	.62	-.61	.19	-.63	.52	-.43	-.44	-.11
Suspense (S)		—	.92	.47	.32	-.18	.88	-.40	.42	-.54	-.57	-.05
Unkind (UNK)			—	.51	.57	-.41	.97	-.61	.69	-.74	-.82	-.03
Competitive (C)				—	.79	-.75	.48	-.47	.53	-.61	-.39	-.57
Unreal (UNR)					—	-.95	.53	-.61	.86	-.83	-.72	-.41
Real (R)						—	-.42	.52	-.80	.78	.60	.49
Unfair (UNF)							—	-.68	.72	-.78	-.82	-.10
Intelligent (INT)								—	-.82	.84	.84	.46
Mindless (M)									—	-.98	-.94	-.43
Socially Acceptable to Watch (SA)										—	.92	.54
Ethical (ETH)											—	.22
Funny (F)												—

Note: Correlations in bold are significant at $p \leq .05$

Table 3
Correlations among Possible MDS Dimensions (Jury Pool Sample)

	ROM	S	UNK	C	UNR	R	UNF	INT	M	SA	ETH	F
Romantic (ROM)	—	-.38	.22	.35	.66	-.68	.25	-.68	.55	-.58	-.43	-.46
Suspense (S)		—	.36	.36	-.24	-.38	.51	.16	-.18	.03	-.02	.03
Unkind (UNK)			—	.25	.77	-.57	.97	-.69	.83	-.69	-.76	.08
Competitive (C)				—	.24	-.29	.42	-.27	.07	-.23	-.16	-.44
Unreal (UNR)					—	-.93	.69	-.89	.97	-.83	-.82	-.16
Real (R)						—	-.51	.79	-.82	.74	.71	.23
Unfair (UNF)							—	-.65	.71	-.68	-.73	-.05
Intelligent (INT)								—	-.86	-.94	-.91	.49
Mindless (M)									—	-.79	-.80	.00
Socially Acceptable to Watch (SA)										—	.98	.56
Ethical (ETH)											—	.46
Funny (F)												—

Note: Correlations in bold are significant at $p \leq .05$

Figure 1
Multidimensional Space Configuration of Reality-Based TV Programs
(Student Sample)

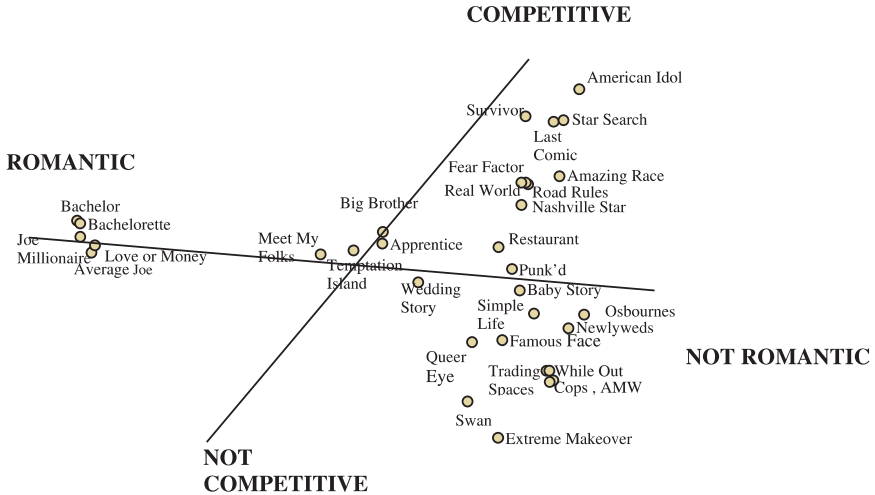


tinct might be identified. In doing this, it is clear from both the student and jury MDS configurations that programs that might be thought of as “dating-related” occupy a unique space distinct from programs of other possible subgenres. Further, this subgenre represents both strong romantic themes as well as moderate competition (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *Joe Millionaire*).

The distribution of the other programs, however, was not nearly as clear, though the distributions were somewhat similar across the two data sets. Generally speaking, the so-called talent and gamedoc programs were distinct from the makeover programs. However, programs that might reasonably represent the two types of programming (talent and game) intermingled along the competitiveness dimension (e.g., *American Idol*, *Survivor*). Similarly, the crime programs (e.g., *Cops*) did not occupy a unique space, but rather blended with both the personal makeover programs (e.g., *I Want a Famous Face*) and some docu-sitcom programs (e.g., *Simple Life*) in the student sample, and with home makeover programs (e.g., *Trading Spaces*) in the jury sample.

Stated another way, programs supposedly in the same categories were spread along the dimensions rather than occupying proximal spaces. For example, gamedocs, like *Big Brother*, *The Apprentice*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Survivor* were not grouped together. Neither were the “talent” programs (e.g., *Last Comic Standing* and *American Idol*), cosmetic surgery programs (e.g., *I Want a Famous Face* and *Extreme Makeover*), or docusoaps or sitcoms (e.g., *The Real World*, *The Simple Life*, and *The Osbournes*). In essence, though it might be concluded that reality-dating programs are identified most clearly as a unique subgenre, the others are intertwined to the point where it would be premature to conclude that any typology would represent clear distinctions among programs in the minds of viewers.⁶

Figure 2
Multidimensional Space Configuration of Reality-Based TV Programs
(Jury Pool Sample)



Discussion

The MDS results from both sets of data suggest that the two characteristics most salient to audiences when thinking about reality-based programming are romance and competition. Further, though dating programs are, relatively speaking, a unique type of reality program, no other clearly differentiated group emerged. This is not to suggest that subgenres of reality programs do not exist in the minds of viewers or cannot be studied, but rather that the boundaries between and among potential subgroups are generally fluid. Thus research must be sensitive to the ways in which the programs considered within certain groups are similar and different to one another as well as to programs in other subgroups. That is, the qualities of the programs are more important than the categories in which they might be placed.

If one accepts that competition and romance are key attributes that distinguish among reality programs, the psychological effects of consuming such programming can then be considered. From a cultivation standpoint, themes of romance or dating in reality programs might be associated with the development (or reinforcement) of more unrealistic beliefs about dating relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002) whereas themes of competition might feed into the "mean world syndrome" (see Gerbner et al., 2002). Indeed, the fact that "real" people (to the extent they are seen as such) are centrally featured in these story lines might intensify these effects (e.g., Busselle, 2001; Potter, 1986). Further, repeated pairing of these two attributes might create

and/or reinforce the view of potential mates as prizes to be won rather than cherished long-term relational partners.

Here it is important to note that accepting the argument that audiences do not reliably divide reality programs into mutually exclusive subgroups does not necessarily warrant lumping seemingly different programs together along only the two dimensions identified. The fact that, on average, the participants developed 7–8 groups of reality programs suggests they do indeed see more nuanced differences among them. They just tend to disagree as to the nature of those differences. In reviewing the sorting data, a range of criteria appeared to be used, as evidenced by the labels a few respondents (6%) spontaneously chose to attach to them. For example, one person's labels suggested sorting based on program content (e.g., crime, dating, home makeover) whereas another person focused on network of dissemination (e.g., MTV or A&E shows). In the future, closer attention to the labels placed on these groups by those who watch (or don't watch) this programming might prove helpful in fleshing out the attributes audiences see as most relevant. Indeed, subjects might also be asked to rate programs along a range of theoretically relevant dimensions, like degree of positive or negative content, which might relate to third-person effects; participant relateability or likeability, which could be linked to social learning effects; or even more specific themes, like transformation, that might relate to cultivation effects. As additional attributes begin to emerge, researchers might find a variety of ways to group reality programs to gain insight into the qualities that influence program consumption, enjoyment, and effects.

Clearly these findings are just a beginning and must be understood in relation to the limits of the method of data collection. First and foremost, the groupings are based on audience understanding of the programs to be sorted. As the inclusion criteria were set at 30 of 33 programs and 29 of 33 programs for the student and jury samples respectively, there is no doubt that some error was introduced into these mappings. However, analysis of the most commonly "missed" programs of the student sample showed that only five programs were not known by more than 10% of the sample: *Nashville Star* ($n = 27$, 24%), *The Amazing Race* ($n = 9$, 14% of sample), *A Baby Story* ($n = 8$, 13%), *Meet My Folks* ($n = 8$, 13%), and *The Restaurant* ($n = 7$, 11%). All other programs had less than a 10% miss rate. Indeed, 12 programs were rated by everyone, seven programs were missed by only one person, and another five were missed by only two people. For the jury sample, five programs were not known by more than 10% of the sample: *Nashville Star* ($n = 11$, 36%), *A Baby Story* ($n = 6$, 19%), *Meet My Folks* ($n = 6$, 19%), *The Restaurant* ($n = 6$, 19%), and *I Want a Famous Face* ($n = 5$, 16%). To investigate how, if at all, these programs might have altered the mappings, they were dropped from the data, and the analyses were rerun. The resulting MDS configurations reported were not meaningfully altered. Thus any error introduced by their inclusion is of minimal threat to the integrity of data.

Assuming the MDS data are reliable, additional concerns might arise from the data used to interpret the dimensions. Classification of the dimensions was partially reliant on those identified a priori, thus it is possible that had additional labels been included

(e.g., transformational, informational, individualistic, personal gain, etc.), different labels for the dimensions that arose might have emerged. Although this is theoretically possible, one should keep in mind that the dimensions identified—romantic and competitive—fit the interpretive process quite well, and even though the correlations among the dimensions were based on just eight programs, the patterns across the two samples are supportive of the interpretations offered. Still, had different attributes been included, it is possible that the opposing ends of each dimension might have been more aptly labeled. After all, the notion of a program lacking romantic or competitive themes is not particularly helpful in assessing the potential effects these sorts of programs might have on regular viewers. Indeed, were more nuanced characteristics included, perhaps a third dimension might have even been uncovered. This surely awaits future research.

Finally, it is important to note that the distribution of the programs is, in part, dependent upon the programs included in the sorting task. If, for example, the dating-oriented programs had been omitted from the set, a different second dimension (i.e., other than romance) might have emerged. Of course, to do this would discount a prominent and readily identifiable type of reality program. Moreover, removing these programs would not allow more defined subgroups among the other programs to emerge. That is, if clearly identifiable groupings of programs existed in the minds of viewers, they would have emerged, whether the romance-based programs were included or not. Indeed reconsideration of the data removing all but two of the romance programs resulted in very comparable distributions of the other programs as reported here whereas to include additional programs beyond the scope of reality would likely compress any differences that emerged in these data (see Nabi et al., 2003).

The identification of two dominant themes in reality programming is useful not just for research on reality TV, but may also have implications for a broader range of programming as well. Specifically, this research suggests that attention to programming themes in any sort of entertainment media, rather than categories per se, might be a more productive way to go about isolating effects. Cultivation-based research has begun to recognize this with its somewhat sporadic attention to genre, versus overall television, viewing (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Perse, 1986; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). However, there is still a tendency to consider categories of programming, like comedy, drama, sports, and the like (see Zillmann & Vorderer, 2005). Yet surely themes intertwine such that researchers may be better served stripping the programming of its "label" and considering the themes that label represents. For example, *Friends* is quickly lumped into sitcom, yet themes of dating are as prevalent as themes of comedy. Similarly, the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* has more obvious themes of romance than other medical dramas, like *ER* or *House*.

Indeed, in considering how effects-based research should move forward, scholars might contemplate alternative ways of measuring exposure to different themes in TV programming. Specifically, rather than focusing on genre consumption, researchers might consider asking about "theme" consumption (e.g., how much competition-based programming? romance-themed programming? self-improve-

ment-based programming?) or, alternatively, about both quantity of certain programming consumption as well as perception of that programming containing particular themes of interest.

Assuming many programs have multiple themes, future research might consider not only which themes tend to be most recognized but also what types of people are more predisposed to recognize some themes over others. For example, might gender, sports participation, or religiosity heighten perception of themes related to relationships, competition, or morality? This would not only explain why some people categorize programs, whether fiction or reality, differently, but might also inform research from a range of perspectives, including cultivation, agenda-setting, social cognitive theory, and third person effects, as it would offer an explanation for those perhaps more vulnerable, or conversely less vulnerable, to experience-related effects. That is, it suggests that personality traits, life experiences, and the like create a selective perception of programming that results in different people perceiving different themes in programming when multiple themes are present. Clearly this is speculative, but nonetheless a potentially interesting direction for the study not only of reality television, but entertainment fare more generally.

In sum, this research builds on Nabi et al. (2003), who found reality programs tended to cluster along the middle of the fiction-real dimension, which suggested not only that the genre seems to include programs that are not seen as particularly real but that clear distinctions among types of reality programs are not apparent. By asking respondents to group only reality programs, rather than a selection of shows that represent the gamut of television programming, this research found two dimensions of reality to emerge—romance and competition, and only romance-oriented reality programs were clearly identifiable as a group in the mind of viewers. Although the other programs may range in their competitive nature, any more specific categories did not emerge. Indeed, even programs that on their surface may seem quite different (*Cops*, *Trading Spaces*) were viewed similarly along both dominant dimensions. This is not to say that such programs do not have critical differences in content that would lead to different effects (e.g., perceptions of law enforcement versus learning about home decoration). However, they may have some similar effects linked to their underlying common theme of competition versus cooperation.

This research further suggests that the identification of subgenres of reality-based programs by previous researchers (e.g., Couldry, 2004; Nabi et al., 2006) may be premature in that such groupings may not be well-matched to the way audiences perceive these programs. Again, this is not to say that efforts to develop a typology cannot move forward but rather that researchers must be sensitive to whether or not their categories represent viewer perceptions, especially if these typologies are used as the foundation for effects-based studies. By considering both objective characteristics along with viewer perceptions, one could arguably study both the conscious as well as subconscious effects different groupings of programs might have on viewers, and given the prevalence of this type of programming, such research would surely prove to be a worthwhile pursuit.

Notes

¹Jurors are selected randomly from the master jury list of the county, which is created by merging name lists provided by the Motor Vehicle Department and the Pima County Voter Registration Department.

²The jury data had a lower inclusion criterion as only 22 respondents were familiar with 30 or more programs. Though lowering the criterion may introduce error, the sample on which the analysis is based increased by 32%, which seemed like a reasonable tradeoff.

³The student sample that performed the ratings contained more women and watched more hours of TV, on average, per day than the sample that performed the sorting task (both $p < .01$). These comparisons, however, are skewed as only heavy reality TV consumers (who also tend to be more female and watch more television per day) fit the requirements to have their data included in the sorting task analyses whereas any student who knew at least one of the reality programs to be rated could be included in the ratings analyses. Though some error is likely introduced as a result of using two different student groups, the fact that both samples were drawn from the same subject pool and only those familiar with the programs performed the sorting and the rating should minimize this error.

⁴Degree or source of familiarity (e.g., from actual viewing, exposure to commercials for the programming, conversations with those who had viewed the programming) was not considered a critical factor to ability to sort programs as only minimal cues (e.g., romance, competition) are sufficient to allow confidence in grouping.

⁵Despite sometimes strong correlations among attributes, factor analyses of the attributes for each program did not reveal clear or consistent patterns such that the number of attributes could be easily reduced without sacrificing conceptual clarity.

⁶Of note, a cluster analysis based on viewing frequency of the 33 reality programs among the entire jury sample ($N = 131$) also revealed no clear grouping of reality programs consistent with the typologies proposed in the literature. Further, an exploratory factor analysis on viewing frequency of the 33 programs was performed to see whether self-reported viewing patterns might evidence meaningful groupings. Results suggested 10 factors, 6 of which could be labeled with confidence. Factor 1 represented programs aired on MTV (e.g., *I Want a Famous Face*, *Newlyweds*, *The Real World*, *Punk'd*). Factor 2 suggested dating programs (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Meet My Folks*). Factor 3 suggested personal transformation programs, including both talent (e.g., *American Idol*) and personal makeover (e.g., *The Swan*). Factor 4 suggested competition programs (e.g., *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*). Factor 5 focused on home makeover (e.g., *Trading Spaces*), and Factor 7 focused on law enforcement (e.g., *Cops*). The remaining factors reflected combinations hard to characterize. For example, Factor 6 grouped *The Simple Life*, *The Apprentice*, and *Temptation Island*, and Factor 8 grouped *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Road Rules*. In essence, while this analysis suggests some sense that programs might be grouped into themes, it also suggests that audience viewing may be based on a host of other variables (e.g., favorite channel, work schedules, access to cable, competing preferences of other household members, etc.) that are tangential to the programming themes.

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Appendix

Reality-Based Programs in Sorting Task

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|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. THE AMAZING RACE | 18. NASHVILLE STAR |
| 2. AMERICA'S MOST WANTED | 19. NEWLYWEDS |
| 3. AMERICAN IDOL | 20. THE OSBOURNES |
| 4. THE APPRENTICE | 21. PUNK'D |
| 5. AVERAGE JOE | 22. QUEER EYE FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY |
| 6. A BABY STORY | 23. THE REAL WORLD |
| 7. THE BACHELOR | 24. THE RESTAURANT |
| 8. THE BACHELORETTE | 25. ROAD RULES |
| 9. BIG BROTHER | 26. THE SIMPLE LIFE |
| 10. COPS | 27. STAR SEARCH |
| 11. EXTREME MAKEOVER | 28. SURVIVOR |
| 12. FEAR FACTOR | 29. THE SWAN |
| 13. FOR LOVE OR MONEY | 30. TEMPTATION ISLAND |
| 14. I WANT A FAMOUS FACE | 31. TRADING SPACES |
| 15. JOE MILLIONAIRE | 32. A WEDDING STORY |
| 16. LAST COMIC STANDING | 33. WHILE YOU WERE OUT |
| 17. MEET MY FOLKS | |

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