Redefining reality TV: Exploring viewers' perceptions of nine subgenres

Abstract

Reality TV has been largely documented in literature as a genre which places non-actors in dramatic situations with unpredictable outcomes. However, over the past few years, the influx of reality TV in primetime programming has been highly reflective of its expansion in formats, evident from the variety of narrative structures and themes embedded in reality-based shows. This study redefines this entertainment genre and provides a richer conceptualization of reality TV by examining nine subgenres: dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, hidden camera, talent, game show, docusoap, sitcom, law enforcement, and court. Responses to an online questionnaire revealed significant differences in character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition across these subgenres. Findings not only suggest that programs commonly defined as reality TV offer different experiences for viewers, but also provide strong support for its growing diversity of formats, as well as a reconceptualization of this TV genre.

Introduction

Today, the unscripted and inexpensive nature of reality TV programs has made them a popular commodity in the television industry. The reality TV format rose in popularity at a time when networks were looking for a quick fix solution to economic problems with the cultural industries (Hill, 2005). While the nonfictional element of these shows is the recruitment of non-actors, placing characters in dramatic situations with unexpected outcomes constitutes for its fictional format. “Reality formats provide a never-ending fresh supply of non-professional actors in new series of existing formats” (Hill, 2005, p. 38). Prior research has documented reality TV’s appeal as a function of an individual’s motive for self-importance (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004), mechanisms for escape (Javors, 2004), perceived realism (Potter, 1986), surveillance (Andrejevic, 2002) voyeurism (Nabi et al., 2003), audience interactivity (Griffen-Foley, 2004) and other factors which contribute to or heighten overall enjoyment. To date, reality TV has been primarily explored as a broad genre with assumptions regarding its universal and homogeneous messages and themes. Nevertheless, with an influx of reality-based programming on primetime television, it is evident that reality TV’s narrative structures have become more complex due to its increasing expansion of formats and subgenres (Murray & Ouellette, 2004).

Although these formats are strong in their voyeuristic appeal, the messages and particular elements that capture and sustain the attention of viewers may vary across subgenres. Do viewers respond differently to varying reality TV formats, depending on their perceptions, involvement, motivation, and gratification? The purpose of the present research is to examine character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition of nine subgenres of reality TV: dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, hidden camera, talent, game show, docusoap, sitcom, law enforcement, and court. These categories have been readily documented
by media scholars in regards to the increasing variety of formats and appeal that the reality TV genre provides to its audiences (Murray and Ouellette, 2004; Hill, 2005; Deery, 2004). By exploring the basic assumptions surrounding reality-based programming, this study explores whether particular format elements are more salient in some subgenres than others. “It is the ‘see it happen’ style of reality programming that makes it appealing to audiences, and the ratings success of infotainment, docusoaps, lifestyle and reality game shows is testament to the mass appeal of entertainment stories about real people caught on camera” (Hill, 2005, p. 39). This research investigates how these nine subgenres differ not only in content, but also in their appeal, by determining whether these various formats elicit similar or different perceptual, cognitive, and affective involvement among viewers.

Reality TV Genre and its Growing Diversity

Currently, reality TV’s prevalence and popularity are well established by its dramatic increase in specialized formats. Murray and Ouellette (2004) suggest that the genre of reality-based shows is comprised of a variety of subgenres including gamedoc, dating, docusoap, talent, reality sitcoms, etc. While these subgenres provide viewers with “an unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what might be called the entertaining real” (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 4), these formats have their own personalities and provide different media experiences for the viewer. By scanning lists of current reality-based programs on broadcast and cable networks and examining subgenre categories highlighted in literature documenting the diversity of reality TV narrative formats and structures, evaluations of nine subgenres are investigated in this study. Dating/romance shows (e.g., Joe Millionaire, The Bachelor, Mr. Personality, Blind Date, and For Love or Money) center on themes of romance, often placing contestants in positions of winning the heart of a man or woman. Makeover/lifestyle programs (e.g., What Not to Wear, A
Wedding Story, Extreme Makeover, and The Swan) showcase extraordinary transformations of ordinary people as they undergo simple procedures, such as fashion makeovers, or life-altering plastic surgeries. Hidden camera shows (e.g., Punk’d and The Jammie Kennedy Experiment) feature staged situations in which hidden cameras capture random or chosen passersby in the act of not knowing they are being observed. Talent shows (e.g., American Idol, Star Search, America’s Top Model, and Rock Star: INXS) are based on the search for talent and unique skills and are often premised on finding the next superstar, singer, model, or performer. Game shows (e.g., Survivor, Big Brother, The Amazing Race, and Fear Factor) place characters in often enclosed environments and situations in which their primary objective is to win a prize, either in the form of prestige or most likely money. Docusoaps (e.g., The Real World, The Surreal Life, High School Reunion, and Sorority Life) document the lives of real people and actual events and are somewhat comparable to daytime serials. Reality sitcoms (e.g., The Osbournes, My Life as a Sitcom, The Anna Nicole Show, and Newlyweds) are reality-based situation comedies. Law enforcement programs (e.g., Cops and America’s Most Wanted) highlight the consequences of criminal injustice by following police officers as they stake out criminals, use their authority to demand order, or request for the public’s help in searching for wanted perpetrators. Lastly, court shows (e.g., Judge Judy and People’s Court) feature actual courtroom cases in which a judge resolves a situation between two opposing parties.

The subgenres mentioned above are indeed different from one another in their fundamental narrative structures and premises. Because these varying narrative formats are apparent, there is a need to address whether these subgenres are perceived and experienced differently among viewers. This study particularly examines whether and how these subgenres
are associated with viewers’ media experiences in facets of character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition.

Character Identification

Studies on character identification generally reveal two types of viewers: those who identify with those they view based on how they normally see themselves and those who identify with those they see in the media by “becoming” such characters. “Ordinary people can watch the shows, see people like themselves and fantasize that they could gain celebrity status by being on television” (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004, p. 374). Based on the Uses and Gratifications theory, notions of fame and status that are often associated with being exposed by the media may explain why character identification can be used as a justification for consumption. Smith and Wood (2003) describe ways in which reality TV-induced consumerism is a form of character identification and identity creation. “As we bought ‘voted off the island’ t-shirts or loudly proclaimed we only watched it once and didn’t understand the big deal, we crafted identities based on different degrees of primitive watching” (Smith & Wood, 2003, p. 195).

Much of the literature on character identification places those in the media hand in hand with consumers, as both tend to develop during the show or series. Researchers have concluded that the most popular genres allow audiences to connect with characters in situations that are familiar. “Docusoaps take a number of characters, social actors performing themselves, and following them through their days (or weeks, or months), intercutting several stories per episode in the manner of a soap opera” (Brenton & Cohen, 2004, p. 35).

Not only are viewers looking at such venues as ways of identifying themselves, but many consumers have looked to the media for ways to categorize or stereotype others. This is particularly troubling in terms of law enforcement shows, which “depict real-world crime in
strikingly simple terms, as a conflict between good, wisecracking cops and evil urban lowlifes” (Brenton & Cohen, 2004, p. 39). Moreover, perceptions of reality and identity may be enhanced by the level of interactivity audiences experience with mediated content.

Interactivity

Research on audience interactivity of reality-based shows tends to focus on how viewers engage with other media, such as the Internet, to find additional information about program content. How viewers indirectly or directly influence the content of these programs by voting for a particular contestant or auditioning for a role on the show has also been a focus of audience interactivity studies. Holmes (2004) argues that today, the influx of reality-based television bridges the roles of audience and producer, highly evident in programs such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*. These programs serve as outlets where viewers are able to cast votes and play a substantial part in influencing character outcomes (e.g., the player who is evicted from the house and the contestant who wins a million dollar recording contract).

Casting votes online and via phone and text messaging allows a new participatory relationship to develop between the “viewer and screen” (Holmes, 2004, p. 214), suggesting another dimension of enjoyment—the *behavioral* component. Currently, this evolving dynamism, which affords a sense of agency for audiences, is evident across the reality TV genre, encompassing programs such as *American Idol*, *Married by America*, *So You Think You Can Dance?* and *Rock Star: INXS*. Reality-based programs formerly grounded on their voyeuristic and competitive appeal have also adopted this interactive format. For example, during *Survivor: All Star*, viewers were able to take part in the voting process by submitting online votes for the contestant most deserving of the million dollar prize. Much of the literature concerning audience interactivity is also very closely related to perceived realism and character identification. When
people relate to what they apparently conceptualize as real, they may be more inclined to involve themselves in the outcome of the show. “Viewers watch these sorts of programs (America’s Funniest Home Videos) to formulate ideas for potential clips from their lives that may win cash prizes—exposure becomes an interactive affair” (Smith & Wood, 2003, p. 67).

In conceptualizing the experience of reality TV, interactivity not only applies to the television medium. Avid viewers and enthusiasts use other media to achieve more enhanced program engagement and participation. “According to American Demographics, more than a quarter of reality TV viewers read or post messages on sites devoted to reality shows, and 70 percent of self-described ‘avid fans’ go to show-related websites” (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 14). Today, it is common for fans to seek audition information via online sources, take part in voting, and enter contests or sweepstakes to win seats for live tapings. Lundy et al. (2005) suggest that the opportunity to influence a program’s outcome affords viewers a sense of self-importance. In light of the Uses and Gratifications theory, avid fans even seek out consumer products that physically display their enthusiasm and interest in their shows.

Enjoyment

One of the bizarre forms of human responses elicited by individuals is the enjoyment of watching those whom we dislike endure grief, pain, torture, or agony. Wolff, Smith, and Murray (1934) were first to recognize the factors that determine amusement-inducing experiences. They suggested that watching unaffiliated characters or those whom we do not care for suffer is naturally entertaining for human beings. The emotional glory of witnessing another individual falter, specifically one who has no affiliation with the self, is common, innate, and neither inhibited by social nor moral sanctions.
Prior research has shown that the enjoyment of shows can be explained, at least in part, by events that occur to characters who are perceived as favorable or unfavorable. Disposition theory uses this logic as a framework for predicting and understanding the reasons why audience members experience different levels of enjoyment while watching entertainment programs with varying plot formats (Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). The theory suggests that enjoyment is a function of viewers’ affective dispositions toward dramatic characters and the outcomes that these characters experience during the course of a dramatic presentation (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975, 1986). Namely, enjoyment is thought to be maximized when liked characters experience positive outcomes and/or when disliked characters suffer from negative outcomes. In contrast, enjoyment is predicted to decrease when liked characters experience negative outcomes and/or when disliked characters enjoy rewards.

Applying the Disposition theory to reality TV programs, due to the varying themes illustrated in the genre, the multiple personalities cast by the creators of these shows, and the placement of these characters in dramatic situations, it is not surprising that viewers may elicit varying levels of enjoyment. The degree to which an individual perceives programs of a particular subgenre as exciting or pleasurable to watch can be a function of their favorability toward people presented on these shows, as well as the expected fate of these characters.

Perceived Realism

The concept of perceived realism has been studied extensively, particularly as it relates to television viewing. Various theories have been generated to explain how individuals shape and develop perceptions of realism during TV exposure (Busselle, 2004). The Magic Window theory posits that what is seen on television is real in and of itself. Social Realism theories suggest that viewers believe that mediated content resembles the real world. While Plausibility and
Probability theories do not carry the same realism magnitudes, they suggest that viewers perceive television content as having the potential to be real. Utility and Typicality theories tend to look at television content as usable and worthwhile to viewers, due to its apparent practicality.

Current literature and research on the “realism” of reality-based programming highlights the importance of the Magic Window theory. According to this theory, when watching reality TV, viewers believe that they are seeing a glimpse into the real lives of others. “Raw footage of people going about their business with no knowledge they are being filmed will inevitably reappear on our television screens” (Hill, 2005, p. 38). A recent study by Lundy et al., (2005) which examined consumption of reality TV among college students makes a direct connection between the Magic Window theory and the Uses and Gratifications theory. They suggest that reality TV serves as a vehicle which allows viewers the chance to experience others’ realities. In a sense, the perceived “other reality” is an opportunity for audiences to take part in something that is not entirely real or familiar in their everyday lives. Interestingly, research on social reality construction suggests that perceived realism leads to a greater tendency to be influenced by program content (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000).

Perceived Competition

While literature on reality-based TV has heavily explored its appeals in relation to identification, interactivity, enjoyment, and perceived realism, the area of perceived competition has received minimal attention. It can be argued that most reality-based programs are banked on motivational goals of winning a reward at the end. These rewards can be classified as monetary (e.g., a million dollars on Survivor), love (e.g., winning the heart of the Bachelor), prestige (e.g., the title of the American Idol), etc. While the narrative themes appear to be largely goal-oriented, in that contestants have a strict purpose, do viewers perceive some subgenres to be more
competitive than others? Do goals of striving for romance, fame, power, or luxury encourage viewers to perceive reality-based programs as competitive and do these perceptions of competition vary across the nine subgenres?

Rationale

Although literature on media entertainment, particularly reality-based programming, has documented its appeal by characterizing reality TV as a single genre, the present study examines various subgenres of this television form. While reality TV has been found to influence perceptions of reality and serves to gratify a variety of psychological, cognitive, and behavioral needs, it is critical to examine this genre not only as one narrative format, but that consisting of many, each having individual and unique characteristics. Due to reality TV’s expansion in formats, it is expected that viewers will respond differently to each subgenre perceptually, cognitively, affectively, and possibly behaviorally. Thus, the question of interest is the following:

RQ: Do character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition differ across the following nine subgenres of reality TV: dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, hidden camera, talent, game show, docusoap, sitcom, law enforcement, and court?

Method

Participants

A total of 277 participants were recruited from a variety of Communication courses in a large Northeastern university. Due to missing data, three cases were eliminated from this sample. Among the 274 respondents, 136 were males (50.4%) and 134 were females (49.6%) with a mean age of 20.5 years ($SD = 1.73$). Participants received extra credit for their involvement in the study.
Procedure

In order to determine differences in the appeal of the nine subgenres of reality TV, an online questionnaire was administered. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six counterbalanced versions of the questionnaire. For each reality TV category, participants reported their evaluations of these programs based on character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition, as well as their frequency of viewing programs within each particular subgenre.

Measure of TV Viewing

Participants reported the average number of hours of general TV and reality TV viewing per week. In addition, for each of the nine reality TV subgenres, respondents indicated the number of shows they watched in that specific category in an average week. For each subgenre, two examples were provided: Dating/romance (e.g., *The Bachelor* and *For Love or Money*), makeover/lifestyle (e.g., *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*), hidden camera (e.g., *Punk’d* and *The Jammie Kennedy Experiment*), talent (e.g., *American Idol* and *Popstars*), game show (e.g., *Survivor* and *Fear Factor*), docusoap (e.g., *The Real World* and *The Surreal Life*), sitcom (e.g., *The Anna Nicole Show* and *Newlyweds*), law enforcement (e.g., *Cops* and *America’s Most Wanted*), and court (e.g., *Judge Judy* and *People’s Court*).

Measures Evaluating Nine Subgenres

On a Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, participants responded to 10 items for each of the subgenres which measured character identification (*I am similar to people on these shows and I could put myself in the place of the people in these shows*), audience interactivity (*I have control over the content of these shows and I have auditioned for a role on these shows*), enjoyment (*I find these shows exciting and I am curious to*
see what happens on these shows), perceived realism (People in these shows appear to be acting and These shows do not present life as it really is), and perceived competition (Strategy is involved in these shows and People on these shows have conflict).

Results

To check for univariate outliers, cases with z-scores ± 3.29 were deleted, thus one case was removed from the character identification analysis and one case was removed from the interactivity analysis. Next, Mahalanobis Distances were computed to check for multivariate outliers using critical $\chi^2$(df = 8, $p < .001$) = 26.13. The following numbers of cases were deleted as a result of not meeting this criterion: character identification ($n = 2$), interactivity ($n = 19$), enjoyment ($n = 2$), perceived realism ($n = 2$), and perceived competition ($n = 4$). In addition, one case was deleted from the perceived competition analysis due to missing data.

On average, participants reported watching an average of 13.36 hours ($SD = 10.15$) of general TV per week and 3.52 hours ($SD = 3.72$) of reality TV per week. The percentage of respondents in the sample who reported watching at least one show within each of the following subgenres from highest to lowest were: docusoap (35.2%), sitcom (22.7%), game show (18.0%), talent (17.9%), hidden camera (12.6%), makeover/lifestyle (11.2%), law enforcement (9.9%), dating/romance (5.2%), and court (2.7%).

To determine whether the following factors—character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition, were associated with each other, the means of each across all nine subgenres were computed. Pearson correlation coefficients showed that character identification ($M = 2.02, SD = .60$), interactivity ($M = 1.59, SD = .51$), enjoyment ($M = 2.84, SD = .75$), perceived realism ($M = 2.79, SD = .53$), and perceived competition ($M = 3.13, SD = .61$) were all associated with each other. Significant positive correlations between all
factors were found, except between perceived realism and interactivity ($r = .04, p = .53$) and perceived realism and competition ($r = .02, p = .76$) (See Table 1).

A series of repeated measures ANOVAs employing a multivariate approach were conducted to examine differences in character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition of the nine reality TV subgenres: dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, hidden camera, talent, game show, docusoap, sitcom, law enforcement, and court. The first analysis revealed significant differences in character identification as a function of reality TV subgenres, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .47, F (8, 263) = 36.84, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .53$. In order from highest to lowest mean character identification scores were docusoap ($M = 2.58, SE = .07$), game show ($M = 2.37, SE = .06$), talent ($M = 2.06, SE = .06$), sitcom ($M = 1.94, SE = .06$), dating/romance ($M = 1.93, SE = .06$), makeover/lifestyle ($M = 1.87, SE = .06$), court ($M = 1.55, SE = .05$), and law enforcement ($M = 1.52, SE = .05$). Docusoaps were significantly higher in reported character identification than all other subgenres ($p < .01$), followed by game and hidden camera shows. Participants identified least with characters on law enforcement and court shows (See Table 2).

The second analysis indicated significant differences in interactivity among the subgenres, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .64, F (8, 246) = 16.98, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$. In order from highest to lowest mean interactivity scores were talent ($M = 1.91, SE = .04$), docusoap ($M = 1.55, SE = .04$), dating ($M = 1.51, SE = .04$), game show ($M = 1.51, SE = .03$), hidden camera ($M = 1.50, SE = .04$), makeover/lifestyle ($M = 1.47, SE = .04$), sitcom ($M = 1.45, SE = .04$), law enforcement ($M = 1.44, SE = .04$), and court ($M = 1.41, SE = .03$). Talent shows were reported as being significantly more interactive than all subgenres ($p < .001$) (See Table 3).
The third analysis revealed significant differences in enjoyment of the subgenres, Wilks’ Λ = .40, F(8, 264) = 50.52, p < .001, partial η² = .61. In order from highest to lowest mean enjoyment scores were hidden camera (M = 3.37, SE = .07), docusoap (M = 3.35, SE = .08), game show (M = 3.23, SE = .07), talent (M = 3.03, SE = .08), sitcom (M = 2.91, SE = .08), law enforcement (M = 2.63, SE = .08), makeover/lifestyle (M = 2.62, SE = .08), dating/romance (M = 2.55, SE = .08), and court (M = 1.88, SE = .06). Hidden camera, docusoap, and game shows were rated as significantly most enjoyable (p < .001; p < .001; p < .05, respectively), whereas court shows were reported as least enjoyable (p < .001) (See Table 4).

The fourth analysis revealed significant differences in perceived realism of the subgenres, Wilks’ Λ = .44, F(8, 264) = 42.82, p < .001, partial η² = .57. In order from highest to lowest mean perceived realism scores were law enforcement (M = 3.56, SE = .06), makeover/lifestyle (M = 2.98, SE = .06), hidden camera (M = 2.88, SE = .06), court (M = 2.86, SE = .06), talent (M = 2.79, SE = .06), game show (M = 2.71, SE = .06), docusoap (M = 2.63, SE = .06), sitcom (M = 2.42, SE = .06), and dating/romance (M = 2.21, SE = .06). Law enforcement shows were perceived as significantly more realistic than all other subgenres (p < .001), whereas dating/romance shows were perceived as least realistic (p < .01) (See Table 5).

The final analysis indicated significant differences in perceived competition of the nine subgenres, Wilks’ Λ = .40, F(8, 261) = 50.01, p < .001, partial η² = .61. In order from highest to lowest mean perceived competition were game show (M = 3.78, SE = .05), docusoap (M = 3.33, SE = .05), talent (M = 3.29, SE = .05), law enforcement (M = 3.21, SE = .05), dating/romance (M = 3.20, SE = .06), court (M = 3.19, SE = .06), hidden camera (M = 3.01, SE = .05), makeover/lifestyle (M = 2.68, SE = .07), and sitcom (M = 2.59, SE = .05). Game shows were perceived as significantly more competitive than all other subgenres (p < .001), whereas
makeover/lifestyle shows and sitcoms were perceived as least competitive \((p < .001)\) (See Table 6).

In general, results showed that the nine subgenres differed significantly in character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition as predicted. Furthermore, the means of each of the above factors were positively related with each other, regardless of subgenre.

Discussion

General findings of this study reveal that character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition are positively associated with one another, except for relationships between perceived realism and interactivity and perceived realism and competition. The most striking correlation suggests that viewers who identified with characters and perceived reality TV shows as competitive experienced greater enjoyment than those who did not identify with characters. However, results also imply that perceptions of realism may not be associated with one’s sense of control or perceptions that a program involves strategy and conflict. While findings provide conclusions for general assessments of shows within the reality TV genre, the main results lend support for the prediction that differences exist among the nine subgenres in terms of character identification, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism, and perceived competition.

In the sample, viewers most identified with characters in docusoaps. This finding may be a result of the strong tendency of docusoaps, such as *The Real World* and *Sorority Life*, to feature characters in their late teens and early twenties, an age range which resembles that of the recruited sample. These programs not only are largely targeted toward young adult viewers, but also depict life situations regularly experienced by those in the target demographic group. The
situations faced by characters in reality-based programs are predominantly concerned with issues of dating, family, racial tension, and moral decisions, and are particularly salient and relevant for college students (Lundy, et al., 2005). Therefore, these representations on reality TV programs may lead viewers to develop feelings of connectedness with characters. Moreover, it can be argued that characters are somewhat idealized on docusoaps based on attractiveness and social prowess, and often become pseudo-celebrities in the process. As a result, viewers may have a desire to be part of these programs, imagining that they themselves can be chosen to have their lives tapped.

Following docusoaps, viewers identified most with characters in game and hidden camera shows. This finding suggests that viewers not only feel as if they are similar to characters on these shows, but also that they can likewise imagine themselves as participants on these shows. Results also reveal that viewers reported the lowest level of identification with those featured on law enforcement and court shows. Criminal situations and court proceedings depicted in these shows perhaps are less applicable to the sample population of college students. Furthermore, many of the people featured in law enforcement and court shows are vilified, or at least ridiculed or mocked, making them unlikely targets for identification. Future research can investigate whether differences in demographics (e.g., age and socioeconomic status) play a role in character identification among reality subgenres. Furthermore, studies can examine whether other variables, such as the ability to imagine oneself as being a participant on these shows and the desire to do so influence the degree to which viewers experience character identification.

In terms of behavioral engagement, findings indicate that interactivity was reported highest for talent shows and lowest for court shows. This suggests that viewers sense the greatest control over the content of talent shows (e.g., American Idol, Star Search, and Rock
Star: INXS). This finding seems logical since audience interactivity is one of the main features of current reality-based talent programs. Viewers are often encouraged to vote for their favorite contestants and the votes cast determine the final outcome. In addition, the premise of these programs and the reinforcement of rewards, such as a million-dollar recording contract and the title of “the most talented,” often promote interactivity because these shows encourage viewers to audition for a chance at fame.

On the other hand, several of the other reality TV subgenres examined in this study do not include a behavioral interactive component. Viewers are not often asked to determine the fate of characters on makeover/lifestyle, sitcom, law enforcement, and court shows. It is unlikely that viewers would audition on several of these shows, particularly those within the law enforcement and court subgenres. Thus, a methodological limitation lies in the items used to assess interactivity because behavioral involvement is not entirely applicable to some subgenres. Future studies can investigate whether other components of interactivity, such as online message board participation and engagement in reality TV fantasy leagues, contribute to a viewers’ sense control over program content, thus heightening the interactive appeal of particular subgenres.

While differences were found in the dimensions of character identification and interactivity across subgenres, viewers also indicated varying levels of enjoyment. In the sample, viewers reported experiencing the greatest level of enjoyment for programs within the hidden camera, game, and docusoap subgenres. Court shows were reported as being the least enjoyable among the nine subgenres. It can be speculated that being able to observe the private lives of real people and situations in which individuals are not aware of being watched excites viewers. Furthermore, the anonymous glimpse into the “reality” of others may be perceived as pleasurable because viewers are able to engage in a voyeuristic experience. Elements of the
average court show can many times be seen in other venues, such as within news broadcasts and even in one’s personal lives. These explanations provide fruitful justifications for why viewers reported greater levels of enjoyment for docusoaps and hidden camera and game shows over court programs.

The construct of enjoyment can further be explored by examining how positive emotions, such as gratification, pleasure, suspense, and satisfaction, play a role in one’s overall media experience. Excitement and curiosity are only a few of many affective responses that may define enjoyment. For example, do different reality TV subgenres invoke varying affective responses that enhance enjoyment of a program? Future research can also consider examining negative emotions, such as fear or disappointment, in order to determine if subgenres differ in their negative appeals as well.

When assessing perceptions of realism, findings suggest that law enforcement shows were perceived as most realistic among the subgenres, while surprisingly dating/romance shows were perceived as least realistic. A logical explanation is that the use of real footage provided by police and law enforcement surveillance cameras plays a substantial role in enhancing the believable nature of these programs. In contrast, although unscripted, dating/romance shows are heavily staged; contestants are placed in situations where they, along with twenty other suitors are vying for the heart of a single man or woman, a situation that is not sensible or common in real life. Thus, the plausibility of events and the nature of these contrived situations can explain why dating/romance shows are perceived as least “real,” whereas the unedited and surveillance-based footage of law enforcement shows are perceived as most believable among the nine subgenres.
While items measuring perceived realism were limited to the degree to which people appear to be acting and that to which the show presents life as it really is, another factor that can play a role in shaping one’s perception of realism is the extent to which situations presented on these programs are actually “common” in real life. Furthermore, the motive of watching reality-based programs can be entirely not for the desire to observe “the real,” but more to escape from the real. If this is the case, then does intention to avoid realistic content influence how people evaluate realism of these shows? These issues, if further investigated, can provide valuable refinements to the concept of perceived realism as it pertains to not only reality TV, but media entertainment in general.

In addition, results also indicated that game shows were perceived as most competitive among all other subgenres examined in the study. This finding is particularly interesting because game shows, such as *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Amazing Race*, which are principally oriented around the goal of achieving a monetary reward, were evaluated as more competitive than programs whose ultimate objective is to win romance or to be crowned the most talented performer. The items which assessed perceived competition asked participants to evaluate programs based on the level of strategic involvement and degree of existing conflicts. Findings suggest that game shows were perceived as being more strategic and consisting of situations where conflict is more prevalent than dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, hidden camera, talent, docusoap, sitcom, law enforcement, and court programs. While a specific goal is present and consistently reinforced in game shows, other shows such as docusoaps and sitcoms do not place characters in positions of achieving a specific goal. Rather, these programs simply document the lives of real people in which goals and motives arise from not the narrative structure itself, but more so among the characters.
Furthermore, contestants who are showcased in makeover/lifestyle programs are already preselected to undergo extreme fashion or surgical transformations, where the act of being selected to appear on the show occurs in the preproduction phase. Although the goal of being successful in the transformation process exists, strategy and conflicts are not as applicable to makeover/lifestyle shows because accomplishment is largely in the hands of professional makeup artists, stylists, and plastic surgeons. Thus, it is logical that the findings show that makeover/lifestyle programs and reality sitcoms were perceived as less competitive than the other subgenres.

While competitiveness was measured as a function of strategic involvement and the degree of conflict, it is not clear whether the goals of these subgenres were evaluated as “competitive” or rather that the contestants and their behaviors on these shows serve to enhance perceived competitiveness. Future research can explore whether perceived competitiveness is attributed more to the goal of the show in general (e.g., winning money at the end) or strategy and conflicts generated among the characters positioned in particular goal-oriented situations. These factors can provide an even richer theoretical and conceptual understanding of how competition plays a role in viewers’ perception of reality TV.

When synthesizing the findings across subgenres, the most striking results show that although law enforcement, court, and makeover/lifestyle programs were reported as highly realistic, viewers exhibited low levels of character identification and interactivity and experienced minimal enjoyment from these shows. Thus, it is questionable whether perceived realism is indeed driving viewers to enjoy reality-based programs. Rather, do viewers enjoy programs which are more unrealistic and provide a more fictional experience? In contrast, although hidden camera shows were rated as highly realistic, viewers also enjoyed these
programs. A plausible explanation is that many hidden camera shows (e.g., *Punk’d* and *The Jammie Kennedy Experiment*) are banked on placing characters in comedic situations and seeing how individuals react in contrived contexts. Although footage is captured and depicts people who are not aware that they are being watched, hence the realism explanation, these situations may be more pleasurable to watch than programs in which the outcomes are more predictable (e.g., *Cops* and *Extreme Makeover*).

Viewers also indicated that game shows were the most competitive among the subgenres and reported that these programs were one of the most enjoyable as well. Thus, conclusions can be drawn that shows with strategic involvement and which are conflict-driven are pleasurable to watch. The notion of rewards may attract viewers to watch reality TV programs; however, enjoyment may be a function of the type of reward. It appears that programs which bank on winning money are much more appealing and exciting than those with the goal of attaining love. This is evident in the findings which reveal that dating/romance shows, though rated more competitive than other subgenres, were also reported as being one of the least enjoyable.

Results from this study are valuable contributions to literature documenting the diversity of reality TV formats. Findings not only suggest the multidimensional nature of the genre of reality TV, but also indicate that there are apparent differences in viewers’ identification with characters, interactivity, enjoyment, perceived realism and competition across nine subgenres of this particular programming. Thus, the present research redefines reality TV as not just a genre of homogenous narrative features, but rather one consisting of an increasing number of formats and themes in which various affective, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms operate. While the unscripted nature and placement of non-actors serve as a general characterization of the reality TV genre, it is critical for media scholars to not be bound by this loose and vague
conceptualization. This study reveals substantial evidence that programs within the various reality TV genres are indeed perceived differently by their viewers. Furthermore, these findings help to enhance understanding of the elements embedded within these nine subgenres that hold greater appeal for audiences, ultimately supporting the present phenomenon of reality TV’s growing diversity.
References


Endnote

1 Type III Sum of Squares were used in the Repeated Measures Analyses of Variance, thus the standard errors were reported instead of standard deviations.
### Tables

**Table 1. Pearson Correlations Among Character Identification, Interactivity, Enjoyment, Perceived Realism, and Perceived Competition (N=274)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interactivity</th>
<th>Enjoyment</th>
<th>Perceived Realism</th>
<th>Perceived Competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character Identification</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity</td>
<td></td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.55***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Realism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at $p < .05$
** significant at $p < .01$
*** significant at $p < .001$

**Table 2. Character Identification of 9 Subgenres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Dating/Romance</th>
<th>Makeover/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Hidden Camera</th>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Game Show</th>
<th>Docusoap</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.93&lt;sub&gt;ab&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.87&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>2.34&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>2.06&lt;sub&gt;be&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>2.37&lt;sub&gt;c&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>2.58&lt;sub&gt;f&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.94&lt;sub&gt;ae&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.52&lt;sub&gt;d&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.55&lt;sub&gt;d&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ $\Lambda = .47$, $F(8, 263) = 36.84$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .53$.

*Note: Means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using least significant difference post hoc comparisons.*

**Table 3. Interactivity of 9 Subgenres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Dating/Romance</th>
<th>Makeover/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Hidden Camera</th>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Game Show</th>
<th>Docusoap</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.51&lt;sub&gt;ab&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.47&lt;sub&gt;abcd&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.50&lt;sub&gt;abe&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.91&lt;sub&gt;h&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.51&lt;sub&gt;afg&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.55&lt;sub&gt;bf&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.45&lt;sub&gt;cdeg&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.44&lt;sub&gt;de&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.41&lt;sub&gt;e&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ $\Lambda = .64$, $F(8, 246) = 16.98$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$.

*Note: Means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using least significant difference post hoc comparisons.*
Table 4. Enjoyment of 9 Subgenres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Dating/Romance</th>
<th>Makeover/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Hidden Camera</th>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Game Show</th>
<th>Docusoap</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.55c</td>
<td>2.62c</td>
<td>3.37a</td>
<td>3.03b</td>
<td>3.23a</td>
<td>3.35a</td>
<td>2.91b</td>
<td>2.63c</td>
<td>1.88d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ Λ = .40, $F(8, 264) = 50.52, p < .001, \text{partial } η^2 = .61.$

Note: Means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using least significant difference post hoc comparisons.

Table 5. Perceived Realism of 9 Subgenres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Dating/Romance</th>
<th>Makeover/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Hidden Camera</th>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Game Show</th>
<th>Docusoap</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.21h</td>
<td>2.98a</td>
<td>2.88ab</td>
<td>2.79bcd</td>
<td>2.71ce</td>
<td>2.63c</td>
<td>2.42f</td>
<td>3.56g</td>
<td>2.86ad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ Λ = .44, $F(8, 264) = 42.82, p < .001, \text{partial } η^2 = .57.$

Note: Means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using least significant difference post hoc comparisons.

Table 6. Perceived Competition of 9 Subgenres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Dating/Romance</th>
<th>Makeover/Lifestyle</th>
<th>Hidden Camera</th>
<th>Talent</th>
<th>Game Show</th>
<th>Docusoap</th>
<th>Sitcom</th>
<th>Law Enforcement</th>
<th>Court</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.20a</td>
<td>2.68b</td>
<td>3.01c</td>
<td>3.29aced</td>
<td>3.78f</td>
<td>3.33c</td>
<td>2.59b</td>
<td>3.21ac</td>
<td>3.19ad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilks’ Λ = .40, $F(8, 261) = 50.01, p < .001, \text{partial } η^2 = .61.$

Note: Means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using least significant difference post hoc comparisons.