To watch or not to watch? That is the question.

Identifying the common characteristics of the reality television viewing audience

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Laura M. Sipple

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Thesis Committee

_____

Todd A. Smith, Chairperson Date

_____

Carey Martin, PhD Date

_____

Darlene Graves, PhD Date

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Abstract

Reality television shows are increasingly appearing on network and cable outlets each season. Not only are they advancing in number, they are consistently dominating the weekly Nielsen's Top 10 ratings as well. This study seeks to identify the reality television show viewing audience, why captivated their interest to begin watching these shows and what kept them watching week-to-week. By identifying participants who consistently watched these programs, it was believed that various themes would arise out of this study for further analysis and comparison. In-depth qualitative interviews were utilized to further explore the following areas: (1) Who are the consistent viewers of reality television programs? (2) What specific reality television shows did these viewers watch on a regular basis?, (3) Why did these viewers choose to watch these particular reality shows? and (4) What specific appeal did these reality shows have over other television formats? (such as scripted comedies or dramas). Twenty-two viewers representing six states participated in this study and collectively watched forty-three reality television programs. A total of thirteen common themes for watching reality television shows were found present among these viewers. Participants were closely divided on the appeal that reality programs had over other television formats. For roughly half of the viewers, reality television shows held a specific appeal while the remaining participants preferred dramas or sitcoms.

Key Terms: reality television, reality TV, viewers, definition, audiences

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To Watch or Not To Watch? That is the Question.

Identifying the Common Viewing Habits of Reality Television Audiences.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Reality show programs are not a "new" phenomenon appearing in the past decade on television networks and cable outlets as some in the media have led the American public to believe. Simply stated, reality shows, or programs that utilize real people over paid actors, have made an impact on the television viewing public for more than 50 years (Powers 1). The term "reality television shows" will be discussed in greater detail further in the study.

Beginning with *Candid Camera* in 1947, audiences became familiar with the concept of the hidden camera, which *Candid Camera* designed to "use the tools of their unique trade -- a hidden camera and gentle humor -- to capture the reactions of ordinary people to extraordinary, and even bizarre, situations." (Candidcamera.com)

According to the article "The Real History of Reality TV or How Alan Funt Won the Cold War," written by Charles Slocum, the show *Truth or Consequences* followed *Candid Camera* in similar fashion beginning in 1950. (Slocum 1) A variety of other shows also appeared during the 1950s including, *What's My Line?* and *You Asked for It* in 1950, *I've Got a Secret* in 1952, and *To Tell the Truth* in 1956. In 1973, PBS broadcast a documentary titled, *An American Family*, that featured a middle-class family struggling with changing values including a son's gay's lifestyle and a couple's divorce. A handful of other shows appeared throughout the 1970s up until the 1990s when MTV first aired *The Real World* on cable television in 1992, currently broadcasting its 20th season on the network. (Slocum 2)

While some television formats -- such as scripted sitcoms or dramas -- define a television season to include fall, winter and spring seasons which total approximately twenty-two episodes

(Writers Guild of America West 1), reality television shows take a different approach. A television season is not necessarily pre-determined by the number of episodes, nor does the show have to be broadcast during the fall, winter and spring seasons. A season can simply be defined as the number of episodes aired during a specific timeframe. For example, *Dancing with the Stars* season 5 debuted on September 24, 2007 and ran until November 27, 2007. The sixth season of *Dancing with the Stars* premiered March 18, 2008 and continued until May 20, 2008.

Most recently, viewers have become captivated audiences to countless shows appearing on network and cable television regularly. Each week, millions of viewers tune in to find out who gets voted off *Survivor*, *Big Brother* or *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*; or who gets cut from shows such as *Dancing with the Stars*, *American Idol*, *The Amazing Race* or *The Apprentice*. According to ratings information, in January 2006, *The Bachelor* had higher ratings than the scripted sitcom *Will &Grace* and scripted dramas, *The West Wing* and *ER*. (City News Service 247). In addition, Nielsen Media Research released the Top ten television programs that were scheduled during the 2006 viewing season revealing that half of the programs belonged to reality television shows alone. *American Idol* dominated the yearly programs claiming spots one and two. *Dancing with the Stars* followed closely behind at numbers three and five. *Deal or No Deal* concluded the list as a tie with *Without a Trace*. (Nielsen)

Further, with the additions of *American Idol* and *Joe Millionaire* appearing on the Fox network in 2002, Fox was now in a position to compete with rival networks NBC, CBS and ABC for primetime ratings – the first time since 1948. Not only did *American Idol* hit number one in the Nielsen ratings that year, the season finale of *Joe Millionaire* also ranked as the "highest-rated non-sports show in Fox history." (CNNMoney.com 1)

Television ratings for reality television programs have continued to rise, with these

programs accounting for 85% of the most valuable TV-advertising space in 2003. (Jaffe 1) Further, television networks continue to develop, produce and seek additional concepts for new reality shows as these shows are cheaper to produce than scripted television shows and networks do not have to pay A-list actors a large salary in order to star in their episodes. According to the Screen Actors Guild's (SAG) filing with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in 2006, television networks planned to have significant percentages of their independent productions during the 2006-2007 primetime lineup dedicated to reality television shows. The breakdown is as follows: 42% on ABC; 33% on NBC; 20% on CBS; and 16% on Fox (Screen Actors Guild 16).

During the spring 2008 season, 39 new or returning reality programs aired on network and cable outlets. (Realityblurred.com) In addition, 2007 saw season sixteen for *Survivor*, season twelve for *The Amazing Race*, season seven for both *American Idol* and *The Apprentice*, season twelve for *The Bachelor*, season nine for *Big Brother*, season twenty for MTV's *The Real World* and season six for *Dancing with the Stars*. (realityblurred.com).

During the primary week in which this study was conducted, March 24-30, 2008, an analysis of the Nielsen ratings revealed eight out of the Top ten spots (with a tie for numbers ten and eleven) and half of the Top twenty spots were claimed by reality television show programs. (See Appendix A for complete listing). *American Idol* dominated the weekly ratings with Wednesday's results show taking spot one and Tuesday's live performance show taking second. *Dancing With the Stars* live performance show followed closely in spot number three while the *Dancing With the Stars* results show claimed spot four. In addition, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* claimed spot eight, followed by the season finale of *Celebrity Apprentice* came in at number nine. *Deal or No Deal* (Thursday's episode) and *Oprah's Big Give* finished out the Top

ten with a tie for spots ten and eleven. Three more reality shows rounded out the Top 20 for that week, with *Dancing With the Stars* recap episode at number fourteen and reality game-show *Deal or No Deal* (Monday's episode) and new reality show *Moment of Truth* tied for numbers sixteen and seventeen. (www.usatoday.com). This is contrary to various entertainment insiders who predicted that reality show programs are losing their popularity. (Kaplan 1) In addition, in 2003, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences created a new category for its annual awards titled "Outstanding Reality/Competition Program" and that category is still active today. (www.emmys.tv).

Research has only just begun to explore the topic of reality television programs. More studies of this genre can attempt to further explain and identify who watches these programs and why. But what exactly is a reality television program and what specific shows does it include? As the popularity of reality television shows continues to rise, these questions and more will need to be answered to further identify and understand the viewing audience.

Reality Television Defined

In an attempt to define reality television show programs, a plethora of information is readily accessible both online and in print, ranging from the Directors Guild of America to published communication scholars. Yet, which definition is the standard? Herein lies a fundamental problem in conducting research pertaining to "reality television" -- no single accepted, standard definition exists. Each book, study or article attempts to define reality television their own way and applies their research accordingly. Thus, comparing research and analyzing published studies and reports become problematic and difficult. While one study will include a particular show such as *American Idol* as a reality television show, another study would classify the show as a competition-show or game-show and exclude it from the category of

reality television. With this inconsistency, relating results from one study to another can become inconclusive.

The definition given by Merriam Webster online is found under the keyword "reality" and is listed third among three possible definitions. It is "television programming that features videos of actual occurrences (as a police chase, stunt, or natural disaster) —often used attributively as 'reality TV.'" (Merriam-Webster) The MSN Encarta dictionary takes the definition a step further to include a person's "behavior and emotion." A "TV show observing real-life situation: television programs that present real people in live, though often deliberately manufactured, situations and monitor their emotions and behavior." (MSN Encarta)

However, the entertainment industry has specific guidelines to be followed for agreements made in the realm of reality television. The definition provided by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) contains very detailed criteria in order for a program to be classified as a reality television show. Their definition is as follows:

> "An 'unscripted' entertainment program that depicts actual people and with one or more of the following components: the programs' premise, circumstances or situations are manipulated for the purpose of creating the program; the program uses contrived, manipulated or staged elements, including reenactments or highly stylized production or editorial devices; the program may or may not include a prize and/or a competition. This definition would not apply to variety programs like *Star Search* or *American Idol*; to traditional quiz and game shows; or to programs like *Entertainment Tonight,* which are covered by special agreements." (Directors Guild of America)

The academic community is no different when it comes to differences found among the definitions. While one study may adopt a broad definition to include subgenres such as game

shows (*Deal or No Deal*, or *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), competition programs (such as *Survivor* or *The Apprentice*), celebrity shows (such as *The Surreal Life*), crime shows (such as *To Catch a Predator*), home renovation programs (such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* or *Design on a Dime*) and dating shows (such as *The Bachelor*), another study may limit the definition to only a fraction of these.

For example, academic scholars Steven Reiss and James Wiltz from The Ohio State University, defined reality television in more simple terminology as "ordinary people (not professional actors) serving as the main characters of the television program." (370) Researchers Murray and Ouellette also took a broad, generalized approach in defining reality television and said it is "an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real." (2).

In contrast, a study conducted by Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt defined reality-based television programming completely different. This study utilized 112 Arizona residents who were awaiting jury duty and asked them to group an alphabetical list of 48 television programs however they deemed best. This study sought to determine if the public viewed reality television programs as a separate genre from others such as dramas or sitcoms and defined a reality program as: programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise in their lives, as these events occur. Such programming is characterized by several elements: (a) people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles), (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 narrative context, or (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment. (304)

According to this definition, *American Idol* would be considered a reality show, however the definition from the DGA completely excludes it from the genre. The study results revealed "a

genre of reality-based television is coalescing in the public consciousness but is not yet secured." (310) They continued their discussion and point out that the phrase "reality-based" may potentially confuse some viewers as to what category the program actually fits. Thus, an accepted definition is needed for television audiences to know and understand exactly what is meant, both in the entertainment industry and the academic community, by the phrase "reality television" show. By accepting and adopting a universally-understood and accepted definition, communication scholars would also benefit by accurately and consistently comparing and applying research findings.

Herein, lies another issue with defining reality programs. Not only is there no accepted definition, various programs such as evening newscasts or game shows may or may not be considered reality programs, depending on which definition one chooses to accept. The question still remains, where is the line drawn in regard to what does and does not constitute a reality show program?

In an attempt to solve this dilemma, as well as cover aspects of the genre, researcher Mark Andrejevic took a different approach in defining reality television and stressed the need to narrow that definition on various formats. "The focus will be on unscripted entertainment reliant on willing submission to comprehensive monitoring of the rhythm and events of daily life." (64). The author notes that by generalizing the definition to mainly "unscripted entertainment," other shows could also be included such as "professional sports, political debates and dog shows." By limiting the definition to include "real people" and not professional actors, many self-proclaimed reality shows violate that definition with the appearance of celebrities. For example, *The Surreal Life,* broadcast on the cable channel VH1. This show brings together approximately six celebrities and observes their behavior as they live together under one roof in the Hollywood

hills.

In addition, Andrejevic claims that published academic research has focused primarily on law enforcement shows such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted* and therefore definitions based on these aspects only apply to dramas or crime-related shows (64) and may not be suitable to address dating programs such as *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*.

The findings of Alice Hall in the study of reality television audiences suggested dividing reality television programs into subcategories. These would include areas such as "competition shows," "dating shows," "specialty-dating shows," "challenge shows" and "game shows." By categorizing reality television shows in this way, viewers can distinguish the different types of reality television shows from each other. (208-209).

Until an industry-standard definition is accepted among scholars, researchers must clearly define, for the purposes of their study, exactly what they mean by the term "reality television show" so that conclusions may be drawn adequately and appropriately applied to other research as well.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Reality Show Viewers

Why are so many people tuning in to view these programs and who are the people that continue to watch each season? While research relating to reality television is relatively new, several studies have been conducted in relation to viewer characteristics, media effects, realism and gratifications. However, due to the popularity of fictional crime, detective dramas and police work, most of the earliest research relied heavily on these types of series including shows such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted*. (Oliver & Armstrong, 1; Andrejevic).

The studies focusing on these types of shows (crime show series) adapted Gerbner's cultivation theory which focuses on "the consequences of exposure to its recurrent patterns of stories, images and messages" (191) and what viewers watch and their perceived reality.

Previous research has briefly explored why viewers watch certain programs but has been limited in their sampling sizes or program selections. In Oliver and Armstrong's study, the data focused primarily on crime shows (*COPS* and *America's Most Wanted*) and did not consider other types of reality programs for their study. Random telephone surveys were conducted in Wisconsin and Virginia in areas centered around large universities and only adults who were not full-time students participated. Researchers sought to identify why viewers enjoyed watching reality-based, fictional crime programs.(561)

Reiss & Wiltz's study utilized a questionnaire format and chose human service workers and college students as participants. Five specific reality shows were noted on the questionnaire and included *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *Temptation Island*, *The Mole*, and *The Real World*. Researchers chose these five shows based on the "low level of morals found on the shows and the exploitation of the participants as well as their appeal to a viewer's basic human quest for

truth and need for genuineness." (370) Again, only a limited number of reality shows were addressed in this study and two groups of participants were selected.

In the study conducted by Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt, only Arizona residents who were awaiting jury duty participated in the study. And most recently, a study conducted in 2006 by Alice Hall addressed the audience's understanding of the "nature, realism and gratifications" of reality show programs. (191) The study participants included college students at an urban Midwestern university, with an average age of twenty three. Here again, the participants chosen were limited. While the results of these studies are useful to further understand the nature of audiences, more diversity among participants could have produced results that may be applied more universally in the field.

Some research, including work conducted by Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, takes a psychological perspective and utilizes the uses and gratification theory. According to this theory, the audience is active and media is goal-directed. The audience has specific expectations and these expectations motivate their choice of media. Media is in competition with other sources for satisfaction and individuals are aware of these needs and audience media selections and subsequent gratifications are known and able to be effectively communicated. (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney 266-267)

This approach has been taken by Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt in the study of reality television -"what it is, how it differs from other types of programs and who watches it and why." (324) Specifically, the study focused on the following gratifications identified by Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch: "diversion," "personal relationships," "personal identity" and "surveillance." (312) Results indicated that the gratification for regular viewers exceeded those of casual viewers and regular viewers needed to be entertained versus casual viewers who watched in hopes of

"alleviating boredom." (325).

While this theory has been accepted, cited repeatedly and has propelled other theories, it has been criticized by other scholars. (O'Guinn & Faber). Criticisms included the lack of clarity, the nature of the audience, and reliance on the data, specifically, reliance on self-reports. (Anderson &Meyer; Swanson; Sparks) In response to these criticisms, R.B. Rubin identified the following six reasons why children watched television: learning, habit, companionship, escape, arousal and relaxation. This aided in addressing the problem of applying the research to other areas (lack of clarity), and helped to address data validity. When questions such as these arose, a shift in research was directed to what viewers do with media, rather than what media does to people. (Klapper 27).

According to a recent article in the Journal of Consumer Research, "Reality TV allows viewers to imagine themselves as actual participants." (Rose & Wood) The authors continue their discussion by assessing that viewers blend fact with fantasy, a term they have coined "hyperauthenticity." In these cases, viewers compare and contrast their lives to the participant's lives depicted onscreen.

Other research has shown viewers may have a voyeuristic nature (Johnson 56). However, this is a claim that Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt refutes. According to their study, voyeurism was not evident in the data. "Viewers wanted to watch other people, but did not see something the characters didn't want them to see." (324) In this study, regular television programs as well as seven specific reality-based programs -- *Survivor*, *Real World*, *A Wedding Story*, *Temptation Island*, *The Mole*, *Blind Date* and *COPS* -- represented a variety of sub-categories of the reality show genre. The results indicated that regular viewers note that reality television programs are "novel," "suspenseful" and viewers enjoy their "unscripted nature" and "watch because they are

entertained" whereas casual viewers watch out of "curiosity and entertainment." (320). In addition, very few differences were found among participants in regard to race, sex or age.

Reiss and Wiltz concurred with Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt and took the research a step further to locate unique motivations for each individual. Their study was based on Reiss' theory of human behavior, more specifically "16 basic desires." Based on Aristotle's means and ends, and a variation of the "uses and gratification" approach, Reiss expands the theory to include 16 fundamental meanings of human life and suggests all goals in life can be categorized into one of the following categories: "power, curiosity, independence, status, social contact, vengeance, honor, idealism, physical exercise, romance, family, order, eating, acceptance, tranquility and saving."

According to Reiss and Wiltz, "if we could identify the most basic or fundamental motives of human life, we may be able to connect these motives to desires to pay attention to various media experiences." (364) Their results showed that status was the main motivational factor in determining what program to watch. "The more status-oriented people are, the more likely they are to view reality television and report pleasure and enjoyment." (373) They also found that particular shows may appeal to different psychological needs. For example, *Survivor* may appeal to those who are more competitive in nature, thus filling the need for vengeance. (374).

Other studies focus on the personal connections that a viewer can potentially make with a specific person being portrayed on television shows, not on the reasons or motivations they may receive for watching a specific program. This approach to the study of television audiences addresses the process known as identification.

While no studies specifically mentioned the use of identification as an audience response

to reality programs in the United States, studies linking the process of identification between audiences and television programs exist. Rubin R.B. & McHugh (290) saw that the longer an audience member is exposed to a character, the more likely they are able to imagine themselves as that character.

Some scholars contend that identification can occur after the viewing has taken place. Resengren noted that "equally or even more important are those relationships which extend beyond the moment of viewing ... 'long term identification' with one or more of the personae of the media world." (349)

Early studies conducted on identification took on a psychological approach and focused on a child's need for identification and how it related to the formation of one's social identity (Freud; Erikson).

Kenneth Burke took the process a few steps further conducting extensive research on the subject of identification and believed that the process of identification occurs when "one individual shares the interests of another individual or believes that he or she shares the interest of another." (Burke 180). Herbert Kelman accepted Burke's research but added the process of persuasion and included that in identification as well. He claims that an individual goes through a three-stage process of identification: 1) compliance, 2) identification, and 3) internalization. During this three-stage process, identification can take on one of two forms. The first form can be "classical - attempts to be like or actually be the other person" (Kelman 63). Secondly, Kelman says the individual may take the "recipricol role of identification - the roles of two parties are defined with reference to one another." (64).

Cohen has defined identification as "an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character" (Cohen 261). He continues

by discussing an individual taking on a vicarious experience. "Vicarious experience may take various forms: experiencing things we cannot, or have not yet had the chance to, experience in person; trying on alternative identities; or otherwise adopting the goals, feelings, or thoughts imagined to be those of the target of our identification. Whether this vicarious experience results in overt behavior or takes on a more purely imaginative form, it is this vicarious experience that makes identification central." (249).

In an attempt to measure identification, Cohen has developed the following four dimensions of identification: "(1) empathy or sharing the feelings of the character, (2) a cognitive aspect that is manifest in sharing the perspective of the character, (3) motivational -- addresses the degree to which the audience member internalizes and shares the goals of the character and (4) the absorption or the degree to which self-awareness is lost during exposure to the text." (256)

Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron, discovered that children who identified with aggressive television characters increased their learning of aggressive behavior. Many studies have been conducted to evaluate an audience's identification with television characters (Chory-Assad Cicchirillo 154), fictional characters (Hoorn & Konijn 255), and national identity (Creeber 31) however, only one study specifically addressed the process of identification in relation to reality television programs (Aslama & Pantti 52); and this was a study conducted in Finland. Results indicated that the construction of national identity was intentional on the part of the producers and that some details, perhaps unintentional, also contributed to the formation of national identity.

This research study is anchored in qualitative methods, utilizing in-depth interviews to further identify common themes among viewers and their reasons for returning to these types of

programs on a regular basis.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

What exactly is a reality show program and who are the people who consistently watch these programs? What, if any, common characteristics are found among viewers? What do these viewers find more appealing in reality show programs? By identifying participants who consistently watched these programs, it was believed that various themes would arise out of this study for analysis and comparison. This study sought to identify and further explore these common themes.

In order to locate these possible underlying themes among reality show viewers, a qualitative approach was taken utilizing in-depth personal interviews. Participants were asked questions broken down into three basic categories: (1) personal background information (including such demographics as age, employment status, and education level), (2) reality show viewing habits, including a definition of reality programs and naming specific programs by title and (3) specific reasons for watching particular shows. (See Appendix C titled "Interview Guide) By asking questions of this nature, respondents were able to describe in detail why they watched the programs they did and more importantly, why they continued watching these programs. This showed that the participant indeed fit the necessary criteria for the interview and were able to identify a reality show program. Participants were given the opportunity at the end of the interview to note anything of relevance to the research topic that was not adequately covered in the interview.

The purpose of the above mentioned questions was to determine any potential themes found among participants. This method was chosen to gain further insight into what viewers think or feel when determining their program selections from the participant's perspective (Keyton 275).

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in this study of consistent viewers of reality television show programs. A consistent viewer is one who watches at a minimum, 75% of the episodes, aired during a show's season. To fit the consistency criteria, it did not matter if the participant watched the program during its scheduled airtime, or if it was viewed at a later date through some recorded means (Tivo, video cassette, posted online, etc.) All that mattered, was that the viewer consistently watched the program of choice. However, if any differences were present and found to exist in relation to the viewing medium, they were noted and addressed.

RQ1: Who are the consistent viewers of reality television shows and what do they have in common with one another, regardless of age, gender, education or employment background?

RQ2: What specific reality television shows did they watch on a regular basis and how would they define a reality television show?

RQ3: Why did viewers choose to watch these particular reality television shows?

RQ4: What, if anything, did viewers find more appealing in reality television shows than in scripted programs such as sitcoms or dramas?

An informal interview approach was taken. Three types of interviews took place in this study -- email, telephone and face-to-face. For participants who were not in close proximity for a face-to-face interview, an electronic interview was conducted. That is, an interview that takes place through email. This format has been criticized for a number of reasons, including lack of rapport with participants and the commitment level of the participant is difficult to measure (Keyton 275-276). However, by utilizing technology available today, specifically the use of the Internet through user forums and chat rooms, these disadvantages may be overcome. There are many websites available to fans of reality programs where visitors may post comments, read

episode recaps or vote online for their favorites, including official sites located on network homepages (realityblurred.com, realityshows.com, accessreality.com, beonrealitytv.com, fansofrealitytv.com, 2007) to name a few. While a specific number of participants recruited from these sites could not be known, these sites, among others, were a valuable starting point in which to obtain potential participants for this study. Thus, rapport may be established through contact on these sites and communication that took place there.

Another method utilized for participant recruitment was snowball sampling, taking the recommendation of others who knew potential participants who fit the necessary criteria. Utilizing the various social networks of current study participants, other potential qualifying participants could possibly be enlisted to take part in this study.

By focusing on personal interviews, several strengths should be noted concerning this choice of methodology. First, the research participant is physically present with the interviewee for a specific amount of time. This allows for further questioning, perhaps going deeper than anticipated or follow-up immediately to previous responses. Secondly, interviews allow for the gathering of information that is not obtainable by "direct observation." (Keyton 275-276)

Several weaknesses should also be addressed. They include the tendency to get off-topic easily during the interview and the potential that a participant may be reluctant to speak. (276)

Each interview took place at an agreed upon time and place suggested by the interviewee and included face-to-face, e-mail and telephone interviews. All applicable interviews were audio-taped by permission of the participant and were subsequently transcribed. Participants were chosen based on the criteria that they are active reality television show viewers. That is, they consistently watch one or more reality show programs at least 75% of the time during the season that it aired. Participants were also chosen to include a diverse background. Previous

studies have been limited to interviewing or surveying only college students or only adults in a specific region or limited areas. A broad, nationally-diverse sampling was not evident in any prior research study. To better understand if variations do exist among gender, marital status, or educational background, participants were selected based on the criteria that they were consistent viewers of reality program(s).

In addition, whether they viewed the program during its air date or through a delayed medium (such as TIVO or DVR) will also be addressed. To protect the identity of the participants, their names were changed in the final results.

The data collected through personal interviews and electronic media was coded using QSR International's qualitative software program titled, NVivo 8. This program stored the transcripts in one document where in-depth analysis of the information could take place. Through importing the transcribed data source (referred to as an internal) and specifying the various coding criteria (nodes) the data was then classified, sorted and arranged in a uniform format. Thus making various queries and reports available to assess and interpret the data. (http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)

Identifying why reality television audience members chose to watch -- and continued watching -- these programs could provide useful to a variety of sources including networks who seek out new programs, advertisers who want to reach their target audience(s), and researchers of audience behaviors. This study sought to identify specific themes among the various participants in regard to their television viewing habits and the specific appeal of reality television shows.

Preliminary Research - Focus Group

Prior to conducting the in-depth personal interviews, a focus group was utilized to test the validity of the research questions and to locate any potential problems. A group of eleven

individuals was recruited, all of who belonged to a central Virginia Baptist church.

The focus group was conducted February 22, 2008, located in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Prior to conducting the focus group, participants were informed there was no compensation for participation in the study and the benefit was furthering research in the academic field. They all understood the voluntary nature of the study and acknowledged they could discontinue the focus group at any time, for any reason. Each participant signed a consent form and participated in the complete session. (See Appendix B for complete form) The entire session was video-taped and subsequently transcribed. The following results were found after analyzing the data.

RQ1: Who are the consistent viewers of reality television programs and what do they have in common with one another, regardless of age, gender, education or employment background?

The focus group consisted of nine female and two male participants, all of whom lived in central Virginia. Eight of the individuals were classified as single/never married, two were divorced and one was widowed. The education level of the participants varied: one held a high school diploma; one had an associate degree, one had completed some college, five held undergraduate degrees, one held two undergraduate degrees and two had master's degrees. Ages ranged from twenty-sex years of age to fifty-two years old, representing a twenty-six year difference among the participants.

The most popular theme and highly agreed upon theme among group participants was the emphasis placed on the "real" – real people and real life situations using their real names. Four of the participants wanted to clearly distinguish that the participants in reality television shows are not actors.

Group members then shifted the discussion on the "so-called reality" of reality television

programs and the producer's role in editing what a viewer actually sees when the final episode is broadcast. Participants specifically focused on the show *Kid Nation* – where underage children were sent to a remote desert to see if they could revitalize a forgotten town. Amanda wasn't buying into the hype that no adults were present to influence the outcome of the show and doubted that kids were left alone to spend the evenings unsupervised. Veronica disagreed, basing her response on what she had read in the media. Knowing that a qualified adult would have to video-tape the action taking place on the set, she knew that there was always a cameraman around it. So if there was a cameraman around, it was likely to assume that there was an adult around as well – whether or not any supervision would take place. She added that some of the parents were really mad about what was happening on the set since they were not informed of the true nature of the show when they agreed to have their minor children participate and signed the releases and consent forms for them to do so.

Charles then recalled a specific accident on an early season of *Survivor* where a contestant fell into a fire. Producers did not intervene and allowed the events to play out so that the contestant received burns that needed extensive medical attention, even after the program concluded. Veronica couldn't believe that individuals, including other contestants and production staff and crew would not assist another person in need. She said, " Like is a person really going to die? In a situation where it becomes life or death are other human beings going to just stand around and do nothing?" Apparently in Australia, where *Survivor* was filmed that season, the producers did, further proving Veronica's point that they do have medics available on site and are prepared for situations like that to occur, but do not prevent them from taking place.

Amanda drew her own conclusion as to the nature of reality is based solely on the editing. "I think what makes it reality is not necessarily, that the editing is done but that the

editing takes away from the original intent of the situation. Participants go into it in good faith, knowing they are being filmed. They don't know what editing is going to be done or how they are going to be portrayed on TV. That's all done later. They think everything they say or do could make it on TV but after it has been edited and they view it later on they say that's not what happened."

Veronica completely agreed and recalled seeing something on TV where contestants would talk about their experience on a particular show. " Later on they say they were mislead or betrayed. It's not their fault. It was the way that the producers edited it." These viewers tend to draw a line where "reality television shows" are based on reality, but do not represent true reality once they are edited and broadcast to the public.

RQ2: What specific reality television programs did they watch on a regular basis and how do they define a reality television show?

The second question in this research study specifically looked for participants who watched reality show programs and asked the participants to name those exact shows. Participants readily identified eighteen reality television programs including, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *American Idol*, *Big Brother*, *Dance War*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Project Runway*, *My Dad is Better than Your Dad*, *Super Nanny*, *The Bachelorette*, *So You think You can Dance*?, *America's Next Top Model*, *Wife Swap*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Biggest Loser*, *The Swan*, *The Real World* and *Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency*.

While not initially recognized as a reality television show, the following seven shows came up in later discussion and were classified as reality shows by the group. They included *Design War*, *Temptation Island*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Simple Life*, *Jon & Kate plus 8*, *Little People, Big World* and *Survivor Man*.

The second part of this research question sought to identify how a viewer defined a reality television program. Answers to this question varied and participants debated various "sub groups" of the genre. All agreed that a reality television show included "real people" and not actors and that real-life situations were being filmed.

Much of the debate centered on shows which contained a "prize" or a "competition" and whether or not they were indeed classified as a true reality television show. Some group members were confident that most of the current reality television shows offered some type of prize either at the conclusion of an episode or during the season finale. Exceptions were given for shows such as *Super Nanny,* where participants received some type of assistance, not a prize. In addition, some members questioned the validity of including these types of "self-improvement" shows as reality since no prize was won.

American Idol specifically dominated the conversation with members debating its status as a reality show. Group members argued its place among reality shows since the winner receives a recording contract at the end of the season and those competing for this prize have the opportunity to manipulate the viewing audience for votes, thus not portraying true reality. However, others felt that manipulation also occurs in real life as some people only show a side they want others to see, thus it is true reality. Joanna said, "Contestants do that for the cameras, knowing it will make it to TV, but so do people that you and I know in real life too."

Does reality include overcoming problems as well as achieving life-long dreams? Wanting to find a distinction in relation to the true nature of reality, specifically between *American Idol* and *The Biggest Loser*, was quite a challenge for the focus group. In reaching a consensus, participants compared the shows that portrayed situations that could occur in real life to those that were strictly a fantasy or completely prize oriented. Carla said, "Trying to lose

weight is real – a real situation and a real problem facing many in the world today. Even though it has a prize at the end, it is true reality. However, trying to win a record contract or meet a mate or become the next designer or the next *American Idol* is a dream or fantasy, not a real problem. Only one person is going to win those types of 'reality' programs whereas multiple contestants, if not all, are helped on shows like *The Biggest Loser*." A consensus was finally reached by categorizing the reality television shows in sub-groups of the overall reality genre. Both shows did fall under the reality grouping, but *American Idol,* and similar type shows, would be classified as competition-based and *The Biggest Loser,* and other similar shows, as self-improvement based.

RQ3: Why did viewers choose to watch these particular reality television shows?

In an attempt to answer research question three, participants were asked what initially intrigued them to begin watching a reality show and what kept their interest throughout the season. In addition, they were asked, what, if anything, did they find more appealing in reality television shows over other programming formats.

Group members identified five main categories of interest. They were (1) identification with the contestants or people on the show, (2) entertainment, (3) personal interest in topic, (4) discussing the show(s) with others and (5) curiosity. Joanna was simply curious about the dynamics involved with the concept of *Survivor*. Citing her love of watching the childhood classic "Swiss Family Robinson," she found it interesting to watch the people survive without food or shelter, especially for the contestants who have never lived outdoors before and watching them be total "pansies." For Amanda, who has a personal interest in music, she faithfully watched *American Idol* because of that love for music and watching people sing. Once she hears contestants, she chooses her favorite(s) and watches them weekly to see if they make it through

to the season finale and possibly become the next *American Idol*.

Susan just enjoyed talking about reality shows with other friends or co-workers. She started watching *Survivor* because it seemed like everyone she knew was talking about it and she wanted to see what all the hype was about and if she was missing out on anything by not watching it herself. For Stephanie, she found the transformations that contestants make on *The Biggest Loser* show to be inspiring. When contestants first arrive, they have multiple health issues and large amounts of weight to lose. However, as the season progresses, viewers see that weight come off each week and by the end of the season, the contestants are no longer the same people they were when they started the program a few months earlier. Peggy likes to see the changes in people and the weight loss they achieve in a short amount of time as well.

Veronica also watched *The Biggest Loser* but felt the lifestyle change was the biggest aspect. It wasn't as interesting for her to watch all of the weight contestants lost or seeing someone go from plus-size to size six. She prefers to watch contestants learn how to change their life so that when they leave the show, they will take it with them and implement the changes into their current routine – not just a quick fix that a trainer could provide but a life-long change.

RQ4: What, if anything, did viewers find more appealing in reality television shows than in scripted programs such as sitcoms or dramas?

When responding to the question regarding the appeal of reality programs, participant answers were quite diverse, including those who disagreed completely and preferred to watch scripted dramas or sitcoms.

One participant liked the fact that they could see themselves as a participant on various reality television shows, since these shows project "real people in real situations." In particular,

Carla could envision herself as a contestant on *Dancing With Stars*. Since viewers watch people connect with famous athletes and celebrities each week and train to become a dance star, why couldn't she do that too? If people she had watched on TV do it, she felt she could do it too!

The appeal for another focus group participant was the positive morals reality shows project to the viewing audience. Other types of programming, such as evening dramas or sitcoms, lack good morals that are much needed today. Stephanie saw that television has taken a negative turn in regard to these needed morals and values. She said, "There is just a lot of sleeze -- a lot of sleeping around -- sex. Virtually every commercial for a new episode seems to be all about sex, sex, sex. Shows are just not good anymore. Most shows reveal that someone is hopping into bed with someone else each week of they appear to have children out of wedlock regularly. There is no sacredness to marriage or the family anymore. Shows are just no good."

When the topic of morals and values came up, other focus group members saw reality television shows as getting worse, not just the traditional formats of television shows as Stephanie mentioned. Amanda sees producers airing more and more physical scenes -- including more physical contact and more nudity -- then when she first started watching reality shows several years ago. She sees it as a trend and acceptance among television shows in general, not that one genre of programs are more to blame than others – they are equally as bad and are equally becoming worse.

Peggy mentioned the new reality show, *The Moment of Truth* as the perfect example of a reality show gone bad. Having only watched the show for just a few minutes, she labeled the content as "horrible and terrible" specifically referring to the type of questions contestants would be asked by the host. "They ask questions such as, 'If you knew your spouse wouldn't find out, would you cheat on them?' What type of morals and standards is that setting for the marriage?"

These results from the initial focus group, correlate with the 2005 study released by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press that found two-thirds of respondents agreed that entertainment TV shows are worse now than they were five years ago. Specifically, this study addressed the Internet and reality television shows. "People who watch top-rated reality television shows or those with sexual or violent content express somewhat greater satisfaction with available choices than those who do not watch such programs."

For others in the focus group, the appeal lay in its uniqueness. Charles said there was a lack of original shows today, as most of the shows appear to be a copy or an attempt to copy what is currently being broadcast. Randy agreed, stating, "There seem to be 30-40 different types of the basic lawyer show, or 30-40 medical shows, or 30-40 different types of the police or detective dramas, and after a while, they all just blend together. People want something different – some type of show to stand out. Not just another replica of the same basic formula of scripted television series."

The results of the focus group indicated that the questions were all understood by the participants and each participant gave answers to the initial questions asked. The discussion of the focus group could have easily lasted two, three or four times as long as the allotted time. Participants were passionate about the shows they watched and appeared defensive if another group member spoke poorly of their chosen show.

The shows that were discussed most frequently were *American Idol and Dancing with the Stars*. This is in agreement with current national TV viewership as the two shows are consistently ranked among the Nielsen rating's Top ten most watched shows this season.

CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS

In order to locate any underlying themes among reality show viewers, a qualitative approach was utilized, focusing on informal interviews. Participants were asked four main questions (with additional questions asked as needed to clarify individual responses.) The purpose of these questions was to determine what factors, if any, contribute to the various viewing habits that comprise members of the reality television show audience.

All interviews took place in either an office setting or through the computer mediated communication (CMC) means via e-mail. Those interviews that took place in an office setting were conducted at an agreed upon time and place suggested by the interviewee. These interviews were audio-taped by permission of the participants and subsequently transcribed.

Participants were chosen based on the criteria that they are active reality television show viewers. That is, they consistently watched one or more reality show programs at least 75% of the season. To protect the identity of the participants, their names have been changed as reported in this study.

The interview consisted of four basic questions. The first question sought to identify the consistent viewers of reality television shows and what they had in common with one another, regardless of age, gender, education or employment background? Secondly, participants were asked to name or describe any reality show program(s) they watch or have watched in the past and how they would define a reality television show. This assisted in showing that they indeed fit the necessary criteria for the interview and were able to identify a reality show program and recall various aspects from the specific show.

Next, they were asked what intrigued their interest to initially begin watching the show(s) and after viewing the first episode, what specifically about the program(s) led them to continue

watching throughout the season. By asking these questions, respondents were able to describe in detail, why they watch and possibly more importantly, why they continue to watch these programs.

Finally, participants were asked what they found about reality show programs to be more appealing than watching sitcoms or dramas. Participants were also given the opportunity at the end of the interview, to explain in more detail, anything they felt was not covered by the specific questions asked and if there was anything else they would like to add that they thought was of importance to the topic.

Twenty-two participants took part in this study. To better understand the nature of reality television audiences, specifically in regard to gender, marital status, age, employment, education or geographic location, a diverse group of participants were interviewed. Five male (23%) and seventeen female (77%) adults took part in this study. (See Fig. 1 on next page) They included single, married, divorced and widowed adults. The education levels of participants ranged from a high school education to post-doctorate degree holders. Adults with no children and those with up to six children were interviewed. A total of six states from across the U.S. were represented including: Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina. (See Fig. 2 on next page) The employment status ranged from housewives to full-time status. (See Appendix E for a complete description of participants.)

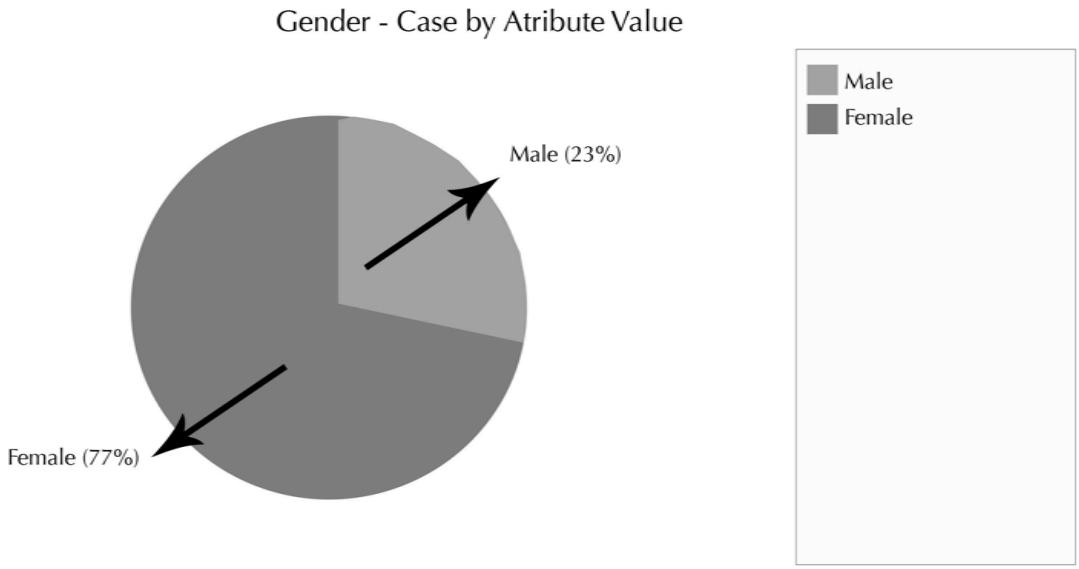

Fig. 1 Gender Chart of In-depth Interview Participants

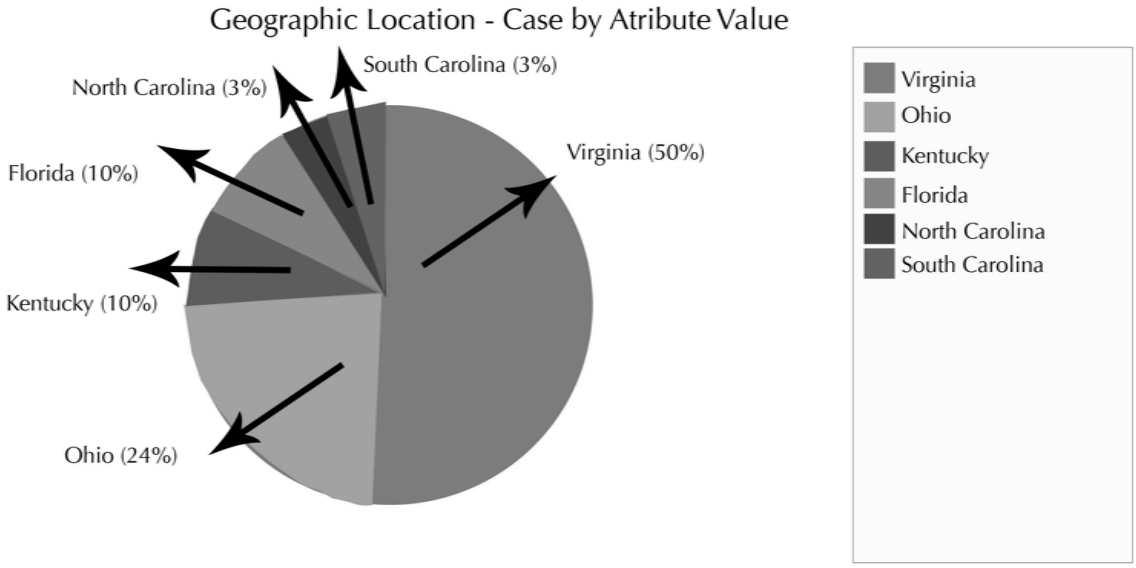

Fig 2 Geographic Location of In Depth Interview Participants

A message asking for potential participants was posted on the user forum web group located at www.realitytvblurred.com and www.realitytvworld.com on Friday, March 15, 2008. The message was only posted for three days, until it was locked and pulled from both sites as a violation of forum posting rules. However, thirteen potential participants initiated contact and were sent the consent form. Three of these potential participants replied and were interviewed for possible inclusion in this study; however their results are not represented in this paper due to violating the web forum's posting rules.

In addition to the websites mentioned above, potential participants were also recruited from the social-networking site www.facebook.com. Thirty seven people responded with an initial interest in the study and twenty two completed interviews. Interviews took place from March 17-31, 2008 with twelve taking place in-person, eight were conducted via telephone and two were email-based.

Research Question #1

The first research question inquired: What do consistent viewers of reality show programs have in common with one another regardless of age, gender, education, geographic location, or employment status? Both married men and married women, as well as single men and women, watched a variety of reality show programs. Of those, fourteen were college educated, with six holding post graduate degrees. (See Fig. 3 below) Parents of infants, elementary, middle school, high school, college students and grown adults as well as those with no children watched these programs as well. This is not to indicate that all married men, married women, single men and women who fall in these categories will be consistent viewers of reality programs, but it shows the diversity that does exist among the viewers. Viewers from across the U.S., watched reality show programs and included six states: Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Florida,

North Carolina and South Carolina. Further study would be needed to specifically address these demographics in greater detail to determine if these factors affect the type of reality program that is viewed, the quantity of programs being watched during the same season, etc.

Research Question #2

The second research question inquired: What specific reality television shows do you watch on a regular basis and how would you define a reality television show? Viewers in this study consistently watched forty three reality show programs weekly (See Appendix F for complete listing). The top ten rated shows included *American Idol*, *The Amazing Race*, *Dancing With the Stars*, *Survivor*, *The Real World*, *Deal or No Deal*, *The Apprentice*, *The Biggest Loser*, *The Bachelor and Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In addition, participants mentioned being familiar with forty eight specific reality shows, but did not meet the necessary criteria (viewing 75% of a season) to be considered a consistent viewer. (See Appendix G for complete listing).

Of the forty three mentioned reality television shows, all twenty two participants actively watched at least one of these reality television shows weekly and were familiar with at least one of the main characters/contestants on the corresponding show.

The second research question also attempted to seek a common definition shared among reality show viewers. Participants were specifically asked to define a reality show program in their own words. When asked what their definition of "reality TV" was, their answers initially varied yet when broken down were quite similar. The key words that participants used most often were "unscripted" and "real people – not actors."

Emily thought it was simply watching real people in real situations. Brody's definition was a bit more complex, due to the dramatic increase and popularity of reality television shows over a relatively short amount of time. He said, "It's hard to accurately define because reality

television has invaded our culture so much in so many different formats that it's really hard to come up with a true definition of it right now because it's not just competition shows like *American Idol* or *Survivor*. I guess cameras being present in the lives of everyday people."

Nancy considered the various types or subgroups of reality television shows when she chose a definition. Basing her definition on real-life people in their everyday lives or competition situation (but not classical game-show oriented), she expanded the definite to include shows that are not scripted and involve no writers.

In interpretating the true meaning of "unscripted," Katelyn clearly articulated a discrepancy in the use of the term." "A reality TV show does not use professional actors, nor is a reality show entirely scripted -- although parts of each reality show I've seen certainly are. The cameras capture the action and dialogue as it unfolds, so the action seems more natural and the dialogue more conversational." Here, the viewer recognizes that situations are filmed in true reality, yet they allow for certain aspects of the show to be written or scripted.

Similar to what was found in academic research, there doesn't seem to be a clear, standard, universally-understood definition that could be attributed to reality programs. If using one definition, *Deal or No Deal* would indeed be considered a reality show; however using Nancy's definition, it would be excluded. Further implications will be addressed in the discussion section.

And yet, given these definitions a contradiction exists. The respondents didn't seem to believe that it is truly reality. Helen said, "I think people want really, truly to believe that they can relate to them – to the people that are on reality shows because that word 'reality' signals that there is a commonality – they're just another person off the street. And I think that as the years go by and as reality TV becomes more of a phenomenon, people start to realize that it

really isn't real TV. There are times when you hear behind the scenes certain situations were set up – the producers prompted something to happen and you start to realize that in reality television, it's not really true to what's going on." Landon mentions the competition-based reality television show *Survivor* specifically and how he knew off camera, contestants were given certain foods, able to sleep in hotels, etc. so that what we were seeing, as viewers, was a manipulated version of reality – not true reality that is unscripted.

So viewers are not necessarily buying into the concept of true reality shows. They are questioning what they are seeing and determining that it is the producer's version of reality and what they want us to see, not what actually occurred. More accurately, reality television could therefore be defined as not only unscripted but also unedited in order for viewers to accept it is a true reality show and not a manipulated one.

Research Question #3

The third research question addressed: What specific shows do viewers choose to watch and why do they continue watching on a regular basis? This question presented a total of thirteen common themes, each of which will be individually addressed in greater detail. These themes were: entertainment; curiosity; different than traditional TV program offerings; drama among guests; discussing show(s) with family, friends and co-workers; humorous; interest in topic; involvement with characters; media promoting show(s), knew contestant, nothing better on TV, same producer of previously watched reality TV show and the writer's strike of 2007-2008. (See Appendix G for complete listing)

Entertainment

One of these themes in particular stood out above the rest. All participants cited some form of enjoyment or pleasure as a reason for viewing. This is in agreement with prior research

that has been conducted with television audiences. Specifically addressing one of the six reasons researcher Rubin recognized in children as a reason for watching television. This will be discussed in further detail in the discussion section.

Some viewed the enjoyment as a way to escape the various problems of the day and to not have to think about anything at all. Others thought it was a fun way to spend time watching the reactions of various judges on *Dancing with the Stars* or *American Idol*. For Amber, the drama that sparked each week was a motivating factor. "I became very addicted because it was fun to watch every week the drama between the people. It was fun to watch them interact." Jason added "watching people's natural reaction to problems" was the entertainment he found in viewing these programs."

Curiosity

Another reason given focused on a viewer's curiosity – about the characters, the nature of the show and potential outcomes. Rose was specifically intrigued by the concept of *The Bachelor*. Was it possible that somebody could really find true love dating on TV? Mary elaborated on her curiosity of *Survivor* and wondered if people could truly survive on an island under such harsh conditions and contemplated who would want to survive?

Caroline's curiosity focused on the concept and nature of *The Apprentice* and how people could perform such spontaneous tasks, covering a variety of business expertise, in such a short amount of time. In addition, the prospect of landing a $250,000-a-year job with Donald Trump was especially rewarding. Simply wondering who the contestants would be, what educational and professional backgrounds they would bring with them to the show and how they would interact with one another in team settings and living together under one roof for the duration of the show, intrigued her the most.

Different Than Traditional Programming

Several viewers noted the difference they saw in the reality television shows. Lily just wanted to watch ordinary people perform and react to normal, everyday situations. Donna agreed and said she first began watching reality television shows with MTV's 'The Real World,' as it was such a drastically different format for a television program. She found it interesting to watch their lives, interactions with others and overcoming obstacles with those they are forced to live with for months. Joy was simply tired of watching the same reruns week after week and thought dramas were becoming too emotional and staged most of the time. In contrast, reality shows were spontaneous and the drama and emotion is real. In her opinion, fiction shows are not real and viewers can notice the made-up situations that would never happen but reality TV shows how real people live and act.

Drama among guests

Not only do viewers enjoy the conflict that could occur in a reality television program, it keeps them coming back regularly. Pam cites a sociological interest in viewing these programs and the group dynamics -- how well individuals get along with each other under such difficult circumstances. Specifically which contestants form alliances, who do they choose to form the alliances with, who emerges as group leaders, who are the followers, who can keep their tempers in check, who loses their tempers and who is smart enough to outwit the others, etc.

Discussing shows with family, friends and co-workers

Not wanting to be left out of a group or not "in the know," many of the respondents watched reality programs to talk about later with others. For some, it was their family. Others it was friends, both in person and those met online. While the remaining participants fell prey to the water cooler effect – that is, discussion among co-workers.

Katelyn watches for a potential dinner she can win with an inter-office pool relating to *American Idol*. Since so many of her co-workers are watching it and talking about it at work the following day, she began watching to take part with the group. Monica did not want to feel left out of any conversations regarding these programs either but is not in it for a reward for herself at the end – simply the conversation and opportunity to get to know her co-workers on a deeper, more personal level. She also didn't want to miss out on a dramatic event that "everyone" would be discussing at work and if she didn't watch that week, she wouldn't have a clue to what event the co-workers were referring.

In addition, eleven respondents quoted some sort of "connection" as the reason they continued watching the shows. This connection could be made with the specific characters portrayed on the series or interpersonal connections they had with existing family members and friends.

Donna made connections with people at work and distant family members. Specifically, with siblings miles away through the discussion of the first season of *American Idol*. She said, "I was living in Minnesota, away from family, and I was living with my Aunt and Uncle. I would watch it I my room … and it was my connection back home because my sister was watching the season too so I was able to talk with her about it and stay connected with home even though I was that far away."

Humorous

Being able to laugh at the topic of the show, the contestants or the subject matter being discussed all intrigued some of the participants to watch. Madison finds the contestants on *American Idol* funny, especially the ones who think they can sing but are actually very bad singers. Helen finds the shows to be just fun and the people who choose to be on them

particularly funny. A few participants admitted to making fun of contestants on shows such as *American Idol* as a reason for her viewing. Especially watching the beginning of each season of *American Idol*, where producers project the various potential contestants from across America who tried out for a chance at achieving their musical dream, however knowing they had no chance at all at stardom, due to their lack of talent.

Interest in topic

Again, all of the participants cited a personal interest in the topic of a particular show or shows as a reason for viewing. Katelyn became interested after writing an article about *American Idol* for the newspaper she was working for at the time the show premiered. For others, an interest in fashion was a natural draw for watching shows such as *Project Runway*. Likewise, an interest in the music industry, attracted viewers to shows such as *Nashville Star* and *American Idol*, each show depicting how an aspiring singer could get a break in the music industry and have their dream of achieving a number one song come true.

Involvement with characters

Emily enjoyed watching the progression of an average person attaining Hollywood fame and status -- to see how ordinary people were able to use their talents and go further with them. Some watched to see how the person may change, after achieving new found fame or if they stay grounded and true to the person that got them to that success. Nancy became attached to the people on the shows *Jon & Kate plus 8* and *Little People Big World* and enjoyed keeping up with them and becoming involved with different things in their daily lives.

Ashley was very passionate about the shows *The Biggest Loser* and *Super Nanny* and the positive influence they could have on the lives of those who watch them. *The Biggest Loser* has helped many people see the importance in becoming and remaining healthy and with losing

weight and the potential it has to literally change the lives of the millions of viewers who watch each week. She was also interested in learning various parenting techniques from *Super Nanny* that she hoped to put in to practice in the future if she were to become a mother.

Similar to other respondents, Claire enjoys the whole process of watching contestants on *American Idol*, their musical journey and the opportunity she can show support by calling in to assist in furthering their musical endeavor. Personally becoming involved and allowing the viewer to have a say in the outcome of the show was a huge factor for participants who watched American Idol. Giving the viewer control aided in continual viewing as it allowed the viewer a way to connect with the contestants and watch their struggles and triumphs along their journey and then have the opportunity to be able to vote for them in the final episodes.

Helen simply found the opportunity to live out her fantasy through others in watching *Dancing with the Stars*. While she would love to be a dancer and is not, she lives vicariously though those who do and imagines herself as being one of those contestants. She said, "When you take something like that, where it's taking actors and actresses and putting them in the competition format, you've broken that barrier of the intangible of an actor or actress and you've put them into a setting where viewers think 'Oh, they're vulnerable to making mistakes too. Just like me. And they become real to you."

Media promoting show

There is no denying the impact of marketing and promotion that is used to influence a potential viewing audience. The participants in this particular study cited a combination of network promotions as well as a magazine feature as key elements in their viewing decisions. Pam picked up a free magazine and read an article about an upcoming show called *Survivor*. This article had a picture of each of the contestants, a list of their luxury items, and where they

were from. Her interest was intrigued and she became a dedicated fan. But the magazine feature wasn't all. Pam also became interested through the network's strategic timing of upcoming promos that aired during Christmas. While watching other shows, she viewed promos for a season of *The Biggest Loser* and realized she needed to lose some holiday pounds, and thought watching this show might be a motivation for her to lose weight as well.

Study participant knew contestant on a show

The personal connection of knowing a contestant prior to them appearing on national TV affected one of the participants in this study. Krystal specifically watched *The Bachelorette* because she had gone to high school with one of the contestants named Ryan and wanted to see how well he would progress on the show.

Amber's sister knew a contestant on *Fear Factor* so she began watching to follow the progress of this contestant.

Nothing better on TV

Emily had become tired of reruns and did not find any other program as "fun or stimulating" than reality television programs and therefore began watching for that reason. Eric also agreed that there was really no other options available on television and most of the programs were just the same type of sitcom or drama show.

Helen felt for the most part, reality television shows are not centered around crime and sex and offer the public an alternative to that type of style of show. For example, reality television shows do not focus on someone getting kidnapped, raped, beaten, shot or killed. Instead, they offer a different type of programming to watch that is free of this type of violence.

Same producer of previously enjoyed reality show

The only reason that Pam started to watch *The Apprentice* was simply because Mark

Burnett was producing the show and she had become familiar with his work after watching *Survivor* and enjoying that program. The credibility of the work he had previously produced spoke for itself and she didn't question whether or not she would watch it – it was a given. Similar to avid readers who eagerly anticipate the newest release from their favorite authors, dedicated fans of reality television seek out new shows produced and developed from respected producers.

Writer's Strike of 2007-2008

Due to the writer's strike that began in 2007 and carried over in to 2008, some scripted programs' seasons were cut short, due to lack of episodes that were written, filmed, edited and ready for broadcast. In its place, reruns were one option as well as reality programs. Network executives looked to reality television programs as an alternative to airing reruns since cast and crew of reality television shows were not restricted to the guildelines set forth in the strike. In addition, networks did not have to wait weeks for scripts to be written, actors to be filmed, film to be edited, etc. They could simply broadcast a new reality show for a short run and wait for the strike to end. Eric was the only participant that specifically mentioned the writer's strike as a reason he finally tuned in to reality programming.

Unidentified Themes

There were several themes noticed among that may not even be realized by the participants. These themes included watching out of habit or addiction and viewing for the sake of companionship, which is in agreement with the study conducted by Rubin (1979).

Habit or addiction

Seventeen of the respondents also preferred to watch the entire series or not at all. Rose says, "I really don't like to watch a reality show unless I can see every week because to me, there

is no point because you miss stuff." True to this statement and not wanting to miss an episode, she went as far as to bring along her own TV on a family vacation where their cabin did not come equipped with one just so she could continue to watch *Survivor* and not miss an episode. Monica agrees and said, "I would say I watch at least 80% of any season that I invest in just because I want to go from beginning to end."

Companionship

Another common thread was that they enjoyed watching the shows with other people or alone. Fourteen respondents mentioned at least one other viewing partner. For Jason, it was his wife. For Ashley, it was her husband and for Caroline, it was a group of friends.

Weekly Viewing

All of the participants watched their programs of choice on a weekly basis. Respondents cited they wanted to view the program in its entirety the week it was broadcast and not read about it the next day or hear radio djs discussing the content that took place – it was important they watch it for themselves. Most participants watched the program during the time it was broadcast or watched it through TIVO or DVR the week it was broadcast. No participants watched the episodes through an iPod. Minimal participants viewed through video-taped medium; however they all watched the video during the week the show was broadcast as well.

Research Question #4

After focusing on what was the initial interest and what captivated the viewer to continue watching these programs, they were asked what, if anything, did they find more appealing in reality television shows than in other formats such as scripted sitcoms or dramas. The majority of respondents, nine, cited waiting for the unexpected to occur. Landon said, "I am drawn to the unpredictability of reality shows. I like the way that it is not a scripted plot that is unfolding the

way a writer designs. The participants/contestants determine the ending of the show. The twists and turns along the way keep the viewer interested and make them want to come back week after week to see what will happen next."

Joy elaborated a little more to include the unforeseen choice a person in a reality has to live out true reality. The assumption of the "unscripted" show showcasing "real life" is what is more appealing. Anything can turn out the way you want in a scripted show but you have that unforseen opportunity in a true "reality" show.

However, following closely behind, with eight respondents, participants said they did not find that reality television shows were any more appealing than scripted sitcoms or dramas.

Caroline prefers scripted shows due to the time that is spent developing the plot and characters. However the appeal of reality television is not the storyline, but rather the interaction that occurs among the people. Mary also prefers to watch dramas; however there was a lack of content available for her to view due to the writer's strike so she picked up a few reality shows to fill in the gap until her preferred programs returned.

The participants in this study were relatively evenly split on whether or not reality television shows were more appealing. Citing a variety of reasons ranging from nothing better on television to the writer's strike, viewers were more likely to tune in to reality programs that they might have otherwise passed on by.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

In this study, four main questions were asked of twenty two participants to further understand and examine the viewing habits of reality television audiences from across the United States. The first question sought to identify common themes or characteristics of viewers regardless of age, gender, education background, marital status or geographic location. In doing so, thirteen common themes emerged with the most common viewers seek programs for some form of entertainment. In addition, the following twelve themes were present and previously discussed: curiosity; different than traditional TV program offerings; drama among guests; discussing show(s) with family, friends and co-workers; humorous; interest in topic; involvement with characters; media promoting show(s), knew contestant, nothing better on TV, same producer of previously watched reality TV show and the writer's strike of 2007-2008. (See Appendix G for complete listing)

Research question two addressed the specific shows viewers watched and a consistent definition for reality television shows. Among the twenty two respondents, a total of forty eight shows were recognized as reality shows and forty three shows were watched. Respondents had no problem naming specific reality shows they had heard of or recalling the specific shows they watch on a regular basis.

One problem soon became apparent when participants gave their definition of a reality television show. Similar to findings among academic researchers, respondents had trouble identifying which programs were indeed true reality and which programs were competition-based. Another issue arose over the interpretation of "unscripted" programs. Some viewers felt that reality shows were truly "unscripted' while others addressed the specific use of writers on the programs. In spite of these differences, a common theme emerged and included the use of

real people in real life events. Therefore, to answer question this question, to include a working definition of reality television, would have several parts and includes the following:

A television format that includes the use of real people (not actors), participating in daily functions of their lives in as normal fashion as possible (with the intrusion of cameras) in a familiar setting. It could also take place in the form of a competition-based format where the real person is participating as a contestant for the sake of winning a prize. Thus, this definition includes what other researchers have labeled as sub-genres: competition-based, dating shows, game shows, etc.

From the various responses given from these interviews, several conclusions may be reached. Viewing habits seem to be similar when one identifies with a specific character represented in a reality show program. Thirteen of the twenty two respondents could relate to at least one character and would consistently watch that character throughout the course of the season, not wanting to miss anything from week-to-week. Another common theme was the process of identification. Viewers connected with certain people on specific shows and continued to watch the season to follow the person's progress.

Viewership was varied and quite diverse ranging from single to married adults, couples with children to adults with no children and widows. All had at least a high school education.

Watching reality television programs for enjoyment was a common theme among participants. This finding agrees with a study conducted by Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1974) that found regular viewers seek to watch reality programs for entertainment.

Seven of the participants cited television was gradually becoming worse and reality programs were helping to fill a void of much-needed "good" television as an alternative.

Limitations of Research

While only twenty-two participants took part in this study, it would be more beneficial to better represent the population of the United States as a whole, to include more participants from additional states and regions of the country. Further analysis of a study of this nature could seek out specific trends in various regions, or particular parts of the nation.

This study was conducted over the course of an eight day period of time. By conducting the study during a longer timeframe, potentially more participants could take part. Some respondents did not return phone calls or emails for further contact and this could have been due to scheduling conflicts during the limited time of the study.

Implications for Further Study

While not answering one of the specific research questions initially proposed and not sure where these findings fit, several answers were found to be quite fascinating on various ways that reality shows have impacted the lives of the viewers. Further study would be necessary to determine the effects that these specific instances have created.

For example, Lily's husband proposed to her modeled after her favorite reality show, *The Amazing Race*. He set up her very own version of *The Amazing Race* around their hometown. He knew that she was a huge fan of the show and wanted to make his marriage proposal "memorable." Similar to the show format, he staged his own "scavenger hunt" strategically placing clues where they first met, where they had their first date, etc. At each location, clues were given to take Lily to the next spot and so on until she reached the final destination, where she received a marriage proposal.

Krystal confessed the need for personal distance from reality television shows as true reality was being mixed with television reality. As mentioned earlier, this is what Rose and

Wood defines as "hyperauthenticity" (Rose and Wood, 2005). While watching a high school friend Ryan, compete on *The Bachelorette*, this participant was interested to know "could somebody really find true love dating on TV? I had a huge crush on Ryan's best friend in high school so when the wedding was on TV and the guy I had the crush on was in the wedding, at that point I went, 'You know what? I probably need to take a reality show break because for me, all of a sudden reality was mixing with true reality and I'm like this is way too bizarre! I did take a year off from watching all of it because I had to separate myself from it.

Is there a point were reality television crosses over in a person's true reality? For example, Further study would be needed on this topic as well to answer questions such as: How does this process occur? What can be done to counter act it? Can anything be done to avoid this?

Another common theme was the companionship that viewers made with others as a result of watching the show and not wanting to be left out of discussions pertaining to these shows. This brings up further questions for future studies. Are friendships enhanced through this process? Are work relationships strengthened? Are there "outsiders" who exist in these environments if they do not participate in watching these shows? In addition, watching these programs with someone else appeared to be an added benefit.

In attempting to define a reality television program, participants brought up the debate of "so-called reality" programs and the "unscripted" format. Some felt that the reality shows were indeed scripted and producers played a part in coordinating certain events to happen. This study did not specifically address or seek out to identify the use of writers on reality television programs. However, writers do exist for reality shows, but what exactly is their role and how much of the show is "scripted" by them? Further study would be needed to address this specific issue. The Writer's Guild of America West is currently in the process of what they term

"Organizing Reality" to address this concern. Not only do they want to organize the writers, they want to include producers and editors as well. (Scott 2005) Their focus is not to expose the "scripted" format of reality television, but rather to gain health and pension benefits, among other things, for these industry workers.

The impact of the writer's strike from late 2007 to early 2008 was mentioned by a couple of participants but not addressed as a whole with this study. While reality television programs increased during the winter season, due in part to the writer's strike, how much of an impact did that truly make on new viewers of reality television show programs? Further study would be needed to look further into this variable of the viewing audience.

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APPENDIX A – Nielsen Ratings for March 24 – 30, 2008

Broadcast: Top 20				
Rank	Season average	Show name	Network	Viewers in millions
1.	2	American Idol (Wed)	Fox	25.7
2.	1	American Idol (Tues)	Fox	24.8
3.	4	Dancing With the Stars	ABC	20.5
4.	8	Dancing With the Stars results	ABC	17.5
5.	17	CSI: Miami	CBS	16.1
6.	20	Two and a Half Men	CBS	14.2
7.	17	60 Minutes	CBS	13.4
8.	17	Extreme Makeover: Home Edition	ABC	13.0
9.	48	Celebrity Apprentice	NBC	12.1
10.	X	Deal or No Deal (Thurs)	NBC	11.4
*	26	Oprah's Big Give	ABC	11.4
12.	73	How I Met Your Mother	CBS	10.7
13.	85	Dateline	NBC	10.6
14.	X	Dancing With the Stars recap	ABC	10.5
15.	X	NCAA: Louisville vs. USC	CBS	10.4
16.	20	Deal or No Deal (Mon)	NBC	10.1
*	11	Moment of Truth	Fox	10.1
18.	X	'Til Death	Fox	10.0
19.	73	Primetime	ABC	9.9
20.	N/A	Cold Case	CBS	9.8
*	N/A	New Adventures of Old Christine	CBS	9.8

source: http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/nielsens-charts.htm

APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM
Reality Television Show Viewer Characteristics
Reality Television
Laura M. Sipple
Liberty University
Communication Studies Graduate Department

You are invited to be in a research study of reality television show viewer characteristics. You were selected as a possible participant because you have identified yourself as a consistent viewer of at least one reality television show program. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by researchers from Liberty University: Laura M. Sipple, graduate student in the department of Communication Studies in Lynchburg, Va.

Background Information
The purpose of this study is: to identify the various but common characteristics that are associated with viewers of reality television show programs.

Procedures:
The interview will be conducted at an agreed upon time, conducive to participant's schedule. The interview will be audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. Names will be changed to preserve participant's identity in this particular study. After interview is transcribed, the tape will be destroyed. In addition, where geographic location does not permit, email interviews will be conducted. After transcription, emails will be deleted and printed copies will be shredded.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study
The study has minimal risks and they are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. There are no specific benefits to the participant in this study, other than assisting in this research.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The audio tape and printed emails will be kept in the office of the interviewer in a locked cabinet, in a locked office. No one else will have access to the tape or printed email documents. Once the tape and printed documents have been reviewed, and data transcribed, the tape will be erased and printed emails shredded. Names will be changed so that no direct identification could be associated with your participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Liberty University If you decide to participate, you are

free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is: Laura M. Sipple. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at Liberty University, 434-582-7306, lmsipple@liberty.edu or my advisor, Todd Smith, Liberty University Communication Studies/Visual Communication Arts Department, 434-582-2285, tasmith2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Human Subject Office, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian:_____ Date: _____
(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____Date: _____

Appendix C – Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thanks for your voluntary participation in this research study. As a reminder, you were chosen based on the criteria that you are an active reality show television viewer. That is, you watch at a minimum, 75% of the episodes, aired during the season. To fit the active viewer criteria, it does not mat-ter if the you watched the program during its scheduled airtime, or if it was through some recorded means (Tivo, video cassette, posted online, etc.)

Please be as specific as you can in answering these questions. The more information you can provide, the better.

WHAT IS REALITY TELEVISION?

1. a. Please state your definition of a reality television show program. List as many show titles as you can as examples. (including those you do not watch regularly)
   b. Based on this definition, please name and describe any current or previously aired reality show(s) you watch (or have watched). Be sure to include the show title and any other relevant information pertaining to your particular show(s) of interest.

VIEWING HABITS

2. a. How often do you watch this show(s)? For example: Every week? Every other week? Once a month? etc.
   b. When do you watch the show(s)? The time it is broadcast? Through a taped medium (such as video, DVR, TIVO, etc.) Online? Downloaded on ipod? Other?
   c. Who do you watch the show(s) with? Do you watch alone? With others? Group of friends? Family? Why? Where does your viewing take place?

REASONS FOR WATCHING

3. a. What intrigued your interest to initially begin watching this show(s)?
   b. After initially viewing, what specifically about this show(s) has led you to continue watching?
4. Do you find reality show programs more appealing to watch than dramas? fiction? movies? sitcoms? Why or why not?

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age
Sex/Gender
Race/Ethnicity
Education
Geographic Location
Employment Status
Religion
Marital Status
Children & Ages

APPENDIX D
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

Ref. # _____

APPLICATION TO USE HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS
Liberty University
Committee On The Use of Human Research Subjects

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1. Project Title:
   Identifying the common characteristics of the reality television viewing audience

2. Expedited Review ☐

3. Funding Source (State N/A if not applicable): N/A
4. Principal Investigator:
   Laura M. Sipple
   Graduate Student 582-7306, lmsipple@liberty.edu Liberty Journal

5. Faculty Sponsor (if student is PI), also list co-investigators below Faculty Sponsor, and key personnel:

   Todd Smith; Thesis Chair; VCAR Director VCAR, 582-2285, tasmith2@liberty.edu

   Dr. Darlene Graves
   Thesis Committee Member COMS, 592-7601, dgraves@liberty.edu

   Dr. Carey Martin
   Thesis Committee Member COMS, 582-7773, clmartin7@liberty.edu

7. Consultants:
8. The principal investigator agrees to carry out the proposed project as stated in the application and to promptly report to the Human Subjects Committee any proposed changes and/or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others participating in approved project in accordance with the Liberty Way and the Confidentiality Statement. The principal investigator has access to copies of 45 CFR 46 and the Belmont Report. The principal investigator agrees to inform the Human Subjects Committee and complete all necessary reports should the principal investigator terminate University association. Additionally s/he agrees to maintain records and keep informed consent documents for three years after completion of the project even if the principal investigator terminates association with the University.

Laura M. Sipple	March 4, 2008
Principal Investigator Signature	Date
Faculty Sponsor (If applicable)	Date

Submit the original request to: Human Subjects Office, Liberty University, 1971 University Blvd., IRB Chair, Suite 2400 CN, Lynchburg, VA 24502

APPLICATION TO USE HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS

10. This project will be conducted at the following location(s): (please indicate city & state) Liberty University Campus, various spots around Lynchburg, Va., as determined and agreed upon by PI and participant.

Other (Specify): When a face-to-face interview in not conducive due to geographic constraints, email correspondence will be utilized.

11.This project will involve the following subject types: (check-mark types to be studied)

- ☐ Normal Volunteers (Age 18-65)
- ☐ Subjects Incapable Of Giving Consent
- ☐ In Patients
- ☐ Prisoners Or Institutionalized Individuals
- ☐ Out Patients
- ☐ Minors (Under Age 18)
- ☐ Patient Controls
- ☐ Over Age 65
- ☐ Fetuses
- ☐ University Students (PSYC Dept. subject pool ___)
- ☐ Cognitively Disabled
- ☐ Other Potentially Elevated Risk Populations
- ☐ Physically Disabled
- ☐ Pregnant Women

12. Estimated number of subjects to be enrolled in this protocol: 30-40

13. Does this project call for: (check-mark all that apply to this study)

- ☐ Use of Voice, Video, Digital, or Image Recordings?
- ☐ Subject Compensation? Patients $ Volunteers $
  Participant Payment Disclosure Form
- ☐ Advertising For Subjects?
- ☐ More Than Minimal Risk?
- ☐ More Than Minimal Psychological Stress?
- ☐ Alcohol Consumption?
- ☐ Confidential Material (questionnaires, photos, etc.)?
- ☐ Waiver of Informed Consent?
- ☐ Extra Costs To The Subjects (tests, hospitalization, etc.)?
- ☐ VO2 Max Exercise?
- ☐ The Exclusion of Pregnant Women?
- ☐ The Use of Blood? Total Amount of Blood Over Time Period (days)
- ☐ The Use of rDNA or Biohazardous materials?

☐ The Use of Human Tissue or Cell Lines?
☐ The Use of Other Fluids that Could Mask the Presence of Blood (Including Urine and Feces)?
☐ The Use of Protected Health Information (Obtained from Healthcare Practitioners or Institutions)?

14. This project involves the use of an Investigational New Drug (IND) or an Approved Drug For An Unapproved Use.
☐ YES ☐ NO
Drug name, IND number and company: _____

15. This project involves the use of an Investigational Medical Device or an Approved Medical Device For An Unapproved Use.
☐ YES ☐ NO
Device name, IDE number and company: _____

16. The project involves the use of Radiation or Radioisotopes:
☐ YES ☐ NO

17. Does investigator or key personnel have a potential conflict of interest in this study?
☐ YES ☐ NO

EXPEDITED/FULL REVIEW APPLICATION NARRATIVE

A. PROPOSED RESEARCH RATIONALE (Why are you doing this study? [Excluding degree requirement])

Prior research focusing on television viewing habits has briefly explored why viewers watch certain programs but have been limited in their sampling sizes or program selections. In addition, no accepted formal definition of "reality television" has been applied to an industry standard, thus allowing comparison of studies. This particular study seeks to conceptualize a foundational, working definition of reality television that can be applied to current academic research and to further the study of this genre. Participants will include a wide variety of diverse individuals that may consist of college students, working professionals and retirees who are single, married, widowed or divorced. Consideration will also be given to various geographical locations and include participants from across the U.S. This research seeks to identify why viewers specifically seek out reality television programs over scripted formats and what keeps them watching week to week. Thus, this study will address both the viewing habits of reality television programs and scripted programs to locate what differences, if any, exist among viewers.

B. SPECIFIC PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

- In a step-by-step manner, using simple, nonscientific language describe what your subjects will be required to do. (Note: Sections C and D deal with type of subjects and their recruitment. That information does not need to be included here.)

C. SUBJECTS

Who do you want to include in your study? Please describe in nonscientific language:

- The inclusion criteria for the subject populations including gender, age ranges, ethnic background, health status and any other applicable information. Provide a rationale for targeting those populations.
- The exclusion criteria for subjects.
- Explain the rationale for the involvement of any special populations (Examples: children, specific focus on ethnic populations, mentally retarded, lower socio-economic status, prisoners)
- Provide the maximum number of subjects you seek approval to enroll from all of the subject populations you intend to use and justify the sample size. You will not be approved to enroll a number greater than this. If at a later time it becomes apparent you need to increase your sample size, you will need to submit a Revision Request.
- For NIH, federal, or state funded protocols only: If you do not include women, minorities and children in your subject pool, you must include a justification for their exclusion. The justification must meet the exclusionary criteria established by the NIH.

The following research questions will be examined in this study of consistent viewers of reality television show programs.

- RQ1: How do viewers define reality television programs?
- RQ2: What do viewers find more appealing in reality television shows than in scripted programs such as dramas or sitcoms?
- RQ3: Who are the consistent viewers of reality show programs and what do they have in common with one
- another, regardless of age, gender, education or employment background?
- RQ4: What specific shows do they choose to watch and why do they continue watching on a regular basis?

In order to locate any underlying themes among reality show viewers, a qualitative approach will be taken utilizing personal interviews. Participants will be asked questions broken down into three basic categories: (1) personal background information (including such demographics as age, employment status, education level, etc.), (2) television viewing habits - By asking questions of this nature, respondents will be able to describe in detail why they watch the programs they do and more importantly, why they continue watching these programs. (3) reality show viewing habits, including a definition of reality programs and naming specific programs by title. This shows that the participant indeed fits the necessary criteria for the interview and were able to identify a reality show program and recall various aspects from the specific show(s). Participants will also be given the opportunity, at the end of the interview, to explain in more detail, anything they felt was not covered by the specific questions asked and if there was anything else they would like to add that they thought was of importance to the topic.

Each interview will take place at an agreed upon time and place suggested by the interviewee. Again, this could be face-to-face, through e-mail or telephone. All interviews will be audio-taped by permission of the participant and will be subsequently transcribed. To protect the identity of the participants, their names will be changed in the final written report. The total number of participants will range from 30-40 individuals.

Participants will be chosen based on the criteria that they are active reality show television viewers. An active viewer is one who watches at a minimum, 75% of the episodes, aired during a season. To fit the active viewer criteria, it does not matter if the participant watched the program during its scheduled airtime, or if it was through some recorded means (Tivo, video cassette, posted online, etc.) All that matters, is that the viewing took place during a season. However, if any differences are present and found to exist in relation to the viewing medium, they will be noted and addressed.

An informal interview approach will be taken. The interview may take place face-to-face, through email, message boards. user forums or by telephone. For participants who are not in close proximity for a face-to-face interview, an electronic interview will be conducted. That is, an interview that takes place through email, message boards or user forums.

Participants will be chosen to include a diverse background. Previous studies have been limited to interviewing only college students or only adults in a specific region or limited areas. A broad, nationally diverse sampling was not evident in any prior research study. To better understand if variations do exist among gender, race, marital status, region or educational background, participants will be selected first on the criteria that they are consistent viewers of reality program(s). Secondly, they will be chosen by geographic location and other factors mentioned.

For example: college students from a large Virginia university may be selected as well as a retired auto mechanic from Las Vegas, Nevada.

D. RECRUITMENT OF SUBJECTS AND OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT

- Describe your recruitment process in a straightforward, step-by-step manner. The IRB needs to know all the steps you will take to recruit subjects in order to ensure subjects are properly informed and are participating in a voluntary manner. An incomplete description will cause a delay in the approval of your protocol application.

There are many websites available to fans of reality programs where they may post comments, read episode recaps or vote online for their favorites, including official sites located on network homepages (realityblurred. com, realityshows.com, accessreality.com, beonrealitytv.com, fansofrealitytv.com, 2007) to name a few. While I cannot guarantee a specific number of participants obtained through this method alone, these sites, among others, will be a valuable starting point in which to obtain potential participants for this study. Thus, rapport may be established through contact on these sites and communication that takes place there.

Another method I may utilize for participant recruitment is that of snowball sampling, taking the recommendation of others who know potential participants who fit the necessary criteria. This university alone has students from all 50 states and provides a huge network of opportunities for participants from all over the nation.

Participants will be asked to participate in this study for research purposes only. A copy of the consent form will be reviewed with each participant prior to conducting the interview. After the participant acknowledges understanding of the study and all questions (if any) have been answered and the consent form has been signed, the interview will begin. It should be noted that participants will clearly understand that their participation is voluntary, that the research has been approved by Liberty University, and that they may choose not to answer any question or they may end the interview at any time.

E. PROCEDURES FOR PAYMENT OF SUBJECTS

- Describe any compensation that subjects will receive. Please note that Liberty University Business Office policies might affect how you can compensate subjects. Please contact your department's business office to ensure your compensation procedures are allowable by these policies.

Participants will not receive compensation of any kind for their participation in this study. There is no benefit to the participant other than assisting in the research and furthering the understanding of television audience viewing habits.

F. CONFIDENTIALITY

- Describe what steps you will take to maintain the confidentiality of subjects.
- Describe how research records, data, specimens, etc. will be stored and for how long.
- Describe if the research records, data, specimens, etc. will be destroyed at a certain time. Additionally, address if they may be used for future research purposes.

The records of this study will be kept private. All interviews will be audio-taped by permission of the participant and will be subsequently transcribed. In addition, where geographic location does not permit, email interviews will be conducted. After transcription, emails will be deleted and printed copies will be shredded. No one else will have access to the tape or printed email documents. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office and destroyed after the study has been completed. To protect the identity of the participants, their names will be changed in the final written report. In this report, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. The total number of participants will range from 30-40 individuals. The data collected will not be used for any future research purposes.

G. POTENTIAL RISKS TO SUBJECTS

- There are always risks associated with research. If the research is minimal risk, which is no greater than every day activities, then please describe this fact.
- Describe the risks to participants and steps that will be taken to minimize those risks. Risks can be physical, psychological, economic, social, legal, etc.
- Where appropriate, describe alternative procedures or treatments that might be advantageous to the participants.
- Describe provisions for ensuring necessary medical or professional intervention in the event of adverse effects to participants or additional resources for participants.

The study has minimal risks and they are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

H. BENEFITS TO BE GAINED BY THE INDIVIDUAL AND/OR SOCIETY

- Describe the possible direct benefits to the subjects. If there are no direct benefits, please state this fact.
- Describe the possible benefits to society. In other words, how will doing this project be a positive contribution and for whom?

There are no specific benefit to the participant in this study, other than assisting in this research.

I. INVESTIGATOR'S EVALUATION OF THE RISK-BENEFIT RATIO
Here you explain why you believe the study is still worth doing even with any identified risks.

This study will help to identify the unique viewing habits of reality television viewers. While this genre of television shows is relatively new in the field of academic research (a little over a decade), much is still to be learned and gained from this study and research. Risks are minimal and participation is voluntary so the benefits outweigh the risks.

J. WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT FORM (Please attach to the Application Narrative. See Informed Consent IRB materials for assistance in developing an appropriate form. See K below if considering waiving signed consent or informed consent)

K. WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT OR SIGNED CONSENT
Waiver of consent is sometimes used in research involving a deception element. Waiver of signed consent is sometimes used in anonymous surveys or research involving secondary data. See Waiver of Informed Consent information on the IRB website. If requesting either a waiver of consent or a waiver of signed consent, please address the following:

1. For a Waiver of Signed Consent, address the following:
   a. Does the research pose greater than minimal risk to subjects (greater than everyday activities)?
   b. Does a breech of confidentiality constitute the principal risk to subjects?
   c. Would the signed consent form be the only record linking the subject and the research?
   d. Does the research include any activities that would require signed consent in a non-research context?
   e. Will you provide the subjects with a written statement about the research (an information sheet that contains all the elements of the consent form but without the signature lines)?

2. For a Waiver of Consent Request, address the following:
   a. Does the research pose greater than minimal risk to subjects (greater than everyday activities)?
   b. Will the waiver adversely affect subjects' rights and welfare? Please justify?
   c. Why would the research be impracticable without the waiver?
   d. How will subject debriefing occur (i.e., how will pertinent information about the real purposes of the study be reported to subjects, if appropriate, at a later date?)

L. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS (to be attached to the Application Narrative)

M. COPIES:
For investigators requesting Expedited Review or Full Review, email the application along with all supporting materials to the IRB Chair (Dr. Fernando Garzon, fgarzon@liberty.edu). Submit one hard copy with all supporting documents as well to Dr. Fernando Garzon, Liberty University, IRB Review, 1971 University Blvd., Lynchburg, VA 24502.

APPENDIX E - FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS
FEBRUARY 22, 2008

Susan
Age: 44
Children: 1
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Katy
Age: 38
Children: 3
Education: 2 College Degrees
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Randy
Age: 46
Children: 2
Education: High School graduate
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Widowed

Amanda
Age: 34
Children: 2
Education: 2 College Degrees
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Divorced

Peggy
Age: 36
Children: 2
Education: Masters Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia

Marital Status: Single

Carla
Age: 39
Children: 1
Education: Masters Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Divorced

Joanna
Age: 52
Children: none
Education: B.A. degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Stephanie
Age: 34
Children: none
Education: Associate degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Charles
Age: 26
Children: none
Education: some college
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Veronica
Age: 32
Children: none
Education: B.A. degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Kasey
Age: 50
Children: none
Education: 2 years college
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

APPENDIX F - INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Richard
Age: 30-39
Children: no children
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: South Carolina
Marital Status: Single

Krystal
Age: 30-39
Children: 2
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Ohio
Marital Status: Married

Donna
Age: 30-39
Children: 6
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Housewife
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Amber
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Adam
Age: 30-39
Children: 1
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Emily
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Claire
Age: 20-29
Children: none
Education: Student
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Rose
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Jason
Age: 20-29
Children: 3
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Part-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Florida
Marital Status: Married

Angela
Age: 30-39
Children: 4
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Brody
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: High School
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Ohio
Marital Status: Married

Katelyn
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: College
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Florida
Marital Status: Single

Lily
Age: 20-29
Children: 1
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

Joy
Age: 40-49
Children: 3
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Ohio
Marital Status: Married

Landon
Age: 40-49
Children: 6
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Ohio
Marital Status: Married

Eric
Age: 30-39
Children: 2
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Male
Geographic Location: Kentucky
Marital Status: Married

Madison
Age: 60 and over
Children: 5
Education: High School
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Ohio
Marital Status: Widowed

Mary
Age: 20-29
Children: none
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: North Carolina
Marital Status: Single

Emily
Age: 20-29
Children: none
Education: Master's Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Ashley
Age: 40-49
Children: none
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Single

Caroline
Age: 30-39
Children: 3
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Kentucky
Marital Status: Married

Helen
Age: 30-39
Children: none
Education: College Degree
Employment Status: Full-time
Gender: Female
Geographic Location: Virginia
Marital Status: Married

APPENDIX G
CODING BY NODES IN NVIVO 8

NODE 1:
Definition of Reality Television Program

1. Live action
2. No actors
3. No writers/Unscripted/Non fiction
4. Involves a prize
5. Real life
6. Real people
    - Genres
        - Competition reality programs
        - Excludes news and or commentary

NODE 2:
Reality Television Show Examples

1. American Idol
2. America's Got Talent
3. America's Next Top Model
4. Are you Smarter than a 5th Grader
5. Beauty and the Geek
6. Big Brother
7. Cash Cab
8. Clean House
9. COPS
10. Dancing With the Stars
11. Deal or No Deal
12. Extreme Makeover Home Edition
13. Fear Factor
14. Flava of Love
15. Here Come the Newlyweds
16. I want to be a Super Hero
17. I want to be a Super Model
18. Iron Chef
19. Joe Millionaire
20. Jon and Kate plus 8
21. Kathy Griffin My Life on the D List
22. Laguana Beach
23. Little People Big World
24. My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance
25. My Dad's Better than Your Dad
26. Nashville Star
27. Oprah's Big Give
28. Project Runway
29. Real Housewives of O.C.

30. Real World
31. Real World Road Rules
32. Scare Tactics Practical Jokes
33. So You think you Can Dance
34. Super Nanny
35. Survivor
36. Ten Years Younger
37. The Amazing Race
38. The Apprentice
39. The Bachelor
40. The Bachelorette
41. The Biggest Loser
42. The Hills
43. The Millionaire Matchmaker
44. Top Chef
45. Trading Spaces
46. What Not To Wear
47. Wife Swap
48. Your Mamma Can't Dance

NODE 3:
Reality Television Shows Watched

1. American Idol
2. America's Got Talent
3. America's Next Top Model
4. Are you smarter than a 5th grader
5. Beauty and the Geek
6. Big Brother
7. Clean House
8. Dancing With the Stars
9. Deal or No Deal
10. Extreme Makeover Home Edition
11. Family Feud
12. Fear Factor
13. Flava of Love
14. I want to be a Super Hero
15. Iron Chef
16. Jeopardy
17. Jon and Kate plus 8
18. Kathy Griffin My Life on the D List
19. Laguana Beach
20. Little People Big World
21. My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance
22. Oprah's Big Give
23. Project Runway

24. Real World
25. Real World Road Rules
26. Scare Tactics Practical Jokes
27. So You think you Can Dance
28. Super Nanny
29. Survivor
30. Ten Years Younger
31. The Amazing Race
32. The Apprentice
33. The Bachelor
34. The Bachelorette
35. The Biggest Loser
36. The Hills
37. The Millionaire Matchmaker
38. Top Chef
39. Trading Spaces
40. What Not To Wear
41. Wheel of Fortune
42. Wife Swap
43. Win Lose or Draw

NODE 4:
Initial Interest in Reality Show program

1. Discussion with family, friends and coworkers
2. Curiosity
3. Entertainment
4. Interested in topic
5. Different than traditional TV programs
6. Drama among guests
7. Follow success of character
8. Magazine article
9. Knew a contestant
10. Nothing Better on
11. Same Producer of previously watched show
12. TV Promo
13. Writers Strike

NODE 5:
Continued Interest in Reality Shows

1. Discussion with family, friends and coworkers
2. Drama among guests
3. Enjoyment
4. Topic is Interesting
5. Inspiring/Motivational
6. Interaction of guests and natives
7. Follow success of character

8. Learn more about opposite sex
9. Nothing Better on
10. See the world
11. Values presented

NODE 6:
Viewing Medium

1. Downloaded to ipod or other device
2. Online
3. Reruns
4. Tivo or DVR
5. Video-Taped Medium
6. When it is Broadcast

NODE 7:
Frequency of Viewing

1. Every other week
2. Every week
3. Once a month

NODE 8:
Viewing Companions

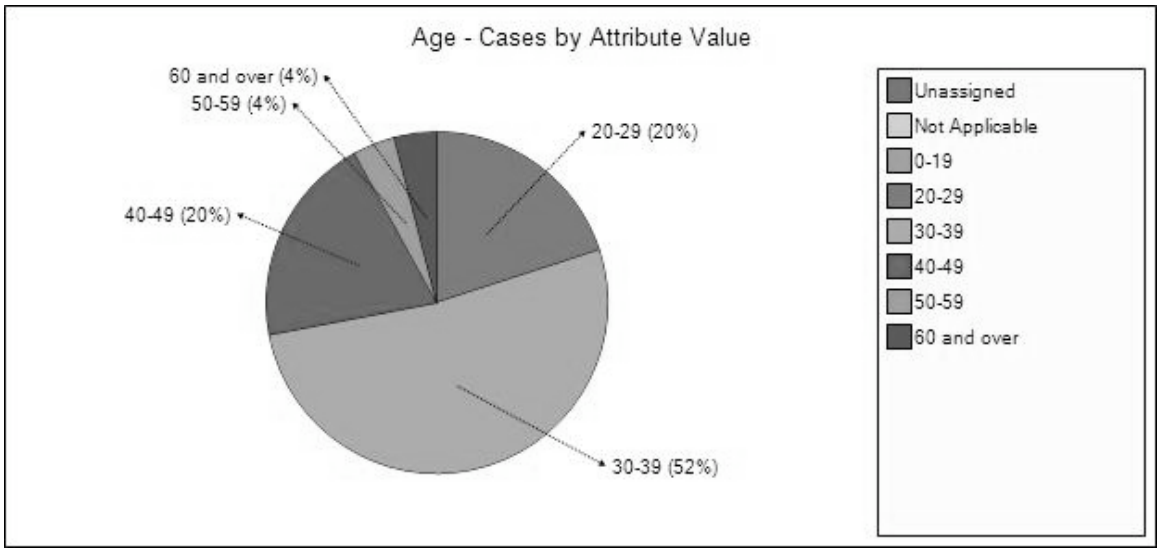
1. 6 or more friends
2. Alone
3. Children
4. Spouse
5. With 2-5 Friends
6. With a friend

NODE 9:
Reality Television Appeal

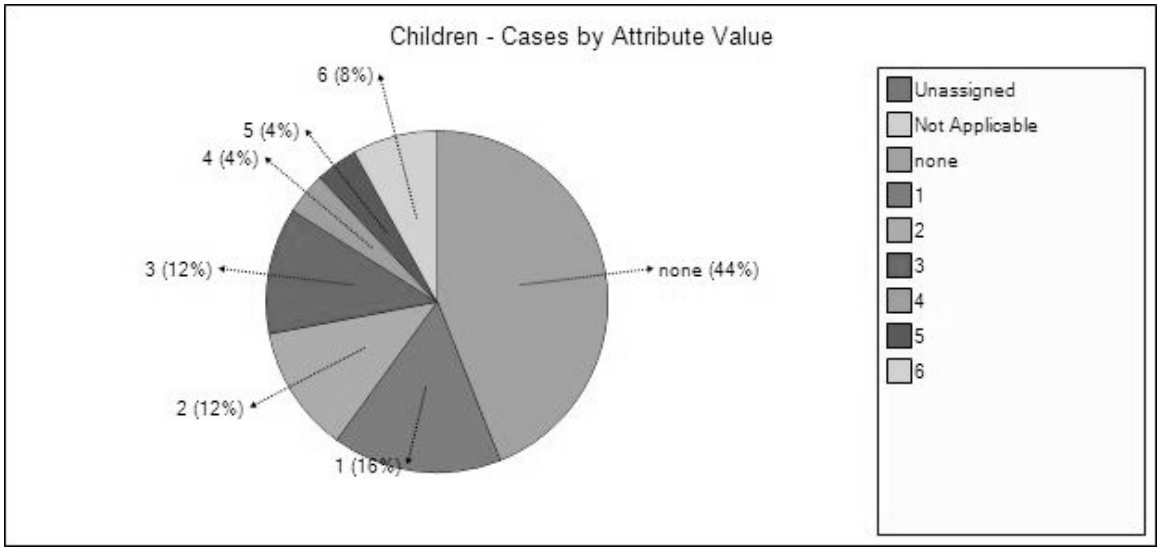
1. Different than other formats
2. Less sex
3. Less violence
4. Nothing else on
5. Watching participants not become tainted by fame/success
6. Personal connection(s) with people on show(s)
7. Not Appealing
8. Real emotion
9. The unexpected
10. Writers strike

APPENDIX H
CHARTS & GRAPHS

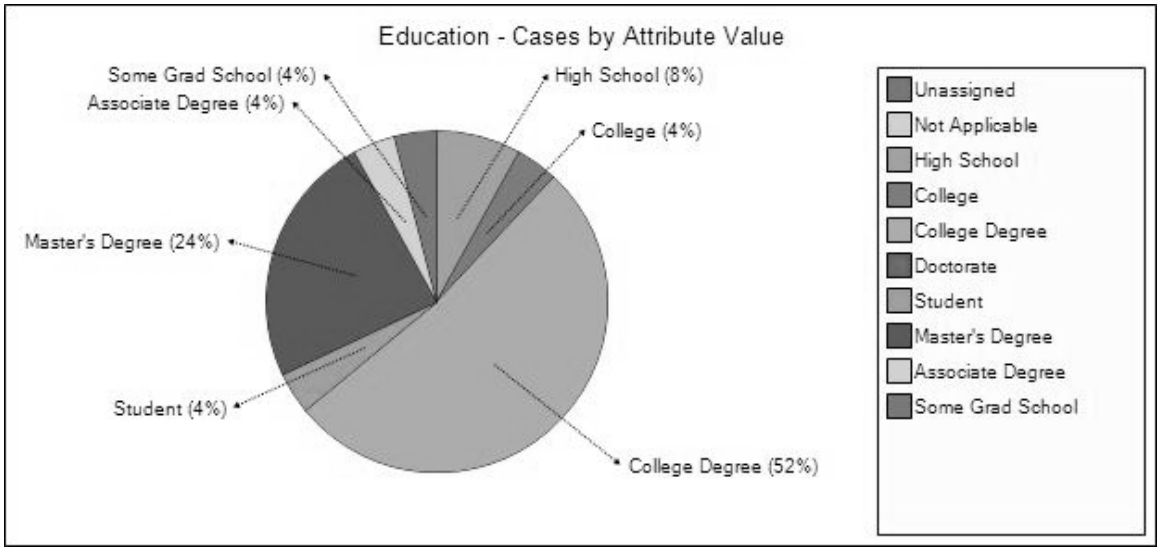
Age



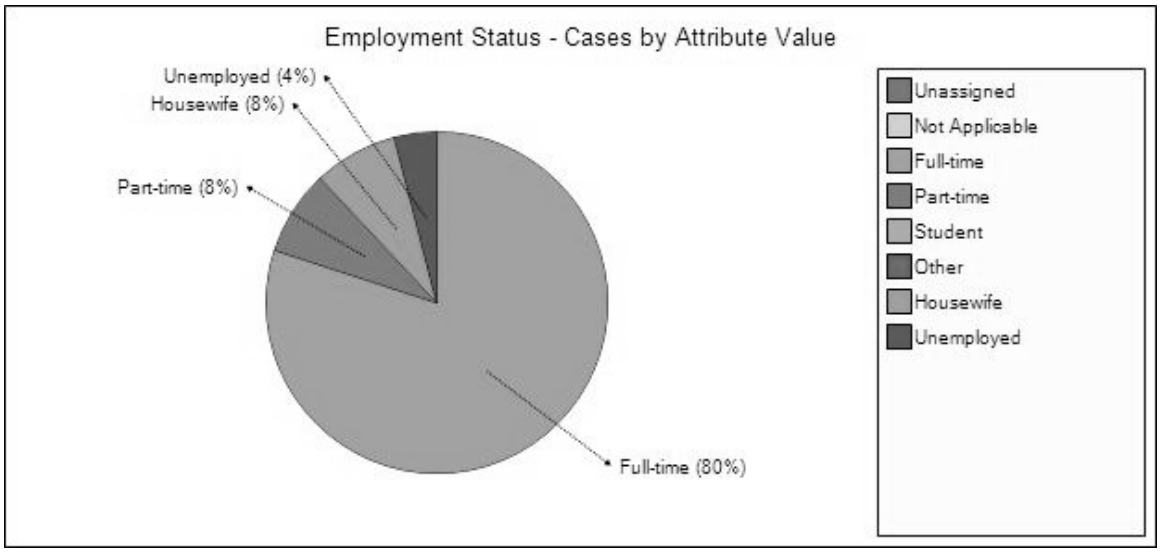
Children



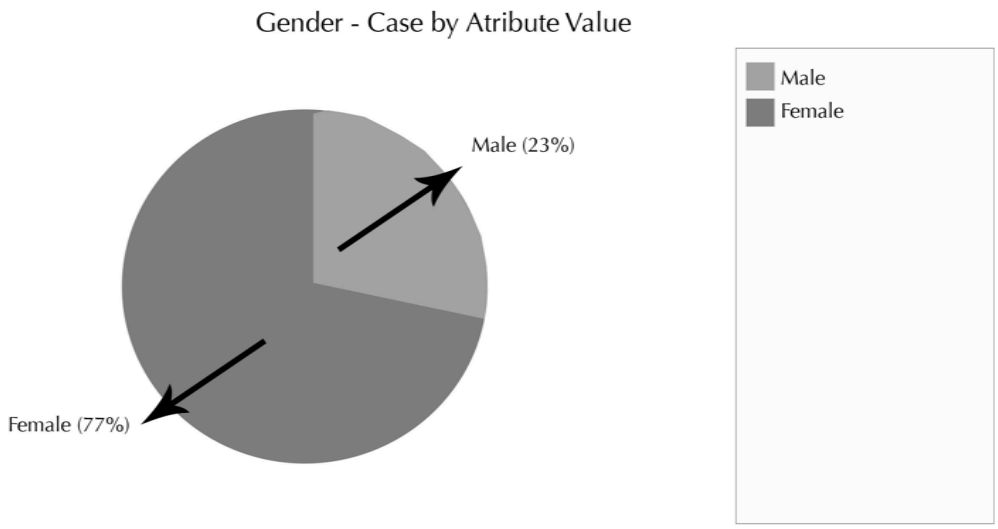
Education



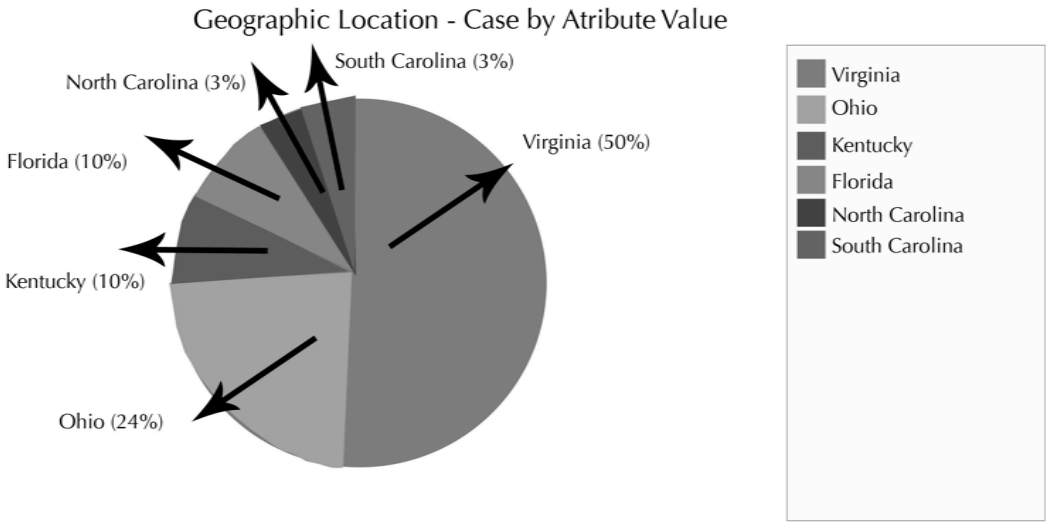
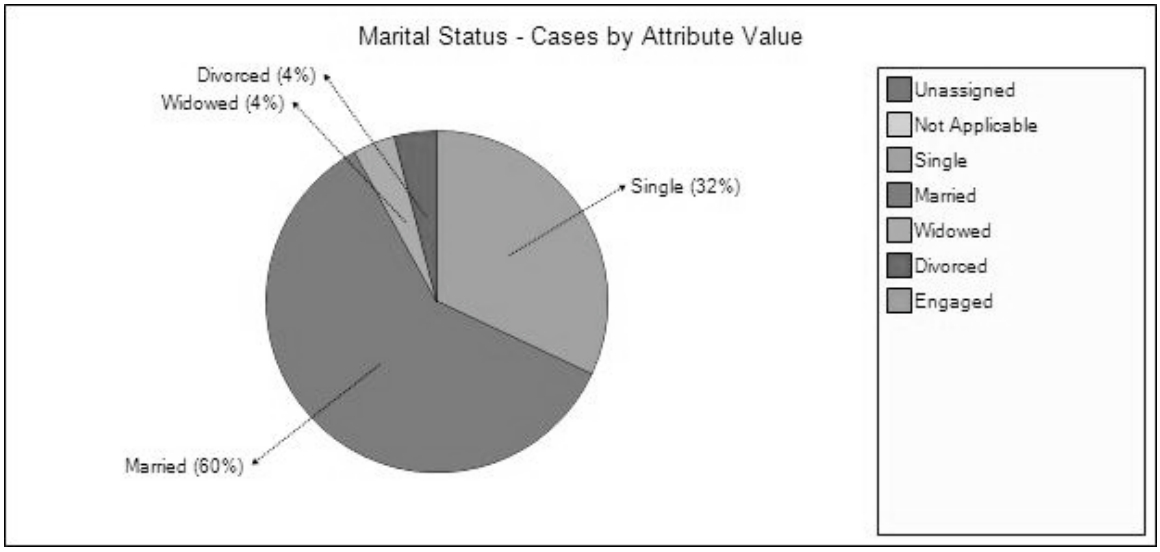
Employment Status



Gender



Geographic Location



Marital Status