Why People Watch Reality TV

Steven Reiss
James Wiltz
The Ohio State University

We assessed the appeal of reality TV by asking 239 adults to rate themselves on each of 16 basic motives using the Reiss Profile standardized instrument and to rate how much they watched and enjoyed various reality television shows. The results suggested that the people who watched reality television had above-average trait motivation to feel self-important and, to a lesser extent, vindicated, friendly, free of morality, secure, and romantic, as compared with large normative samples. The results, which were dose-dependent, showed a new method for studying media. This method is based on evidence that people have the potential to experience 16 different joys. People prefer television shows that stimulate the feelings they intrinsically value the most, which depends on individuality.

Reiss (2000a) put forth a comprehensive theory of human motivation, variously called *sensitivity theory* or the theory of *16 basic desires*. The theory borrows heavily from the philosophical ideas of Aristotle (trans. 1953), but it differs from Aristotle in its analysis of individuality. Previous reports on sensitivity theory addressed diverse applications such as spirituality (Reiss, 2000b, in press), personality (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003, in press), interpersonal relationships (Engel, Olson, & Patrick, 2002), psychopathology (Reiss & Havercamp, 1996), developmental disabilities (Dykens & Rosner, 1999; Lecavlier & Tasse, 2002), and sports (Reiss, Wiltz, & Sherman, 2001). In this article, the theory is applied to understanding reality television. The conceptual approach of this article may be expanded someday into a general theory of culture.

Sensitivity theory holds that people pay attention to stimuli that are relevant to the satisfaction of their most basic motives, and they tend to ignore stimuli that are irrelevant to their basic motives. A person motivated by a strong desire for social contact, for example, often looks for opportunities to socialize, whereas a person

Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven Reiss, Nisonger Center, The Ohio State University, 1581 Dodd Drive, Columbus, OH 43210–1257. E-mail: reiss.7@osu.edu

with a weak desire for social contact may not even know who is holding a party over the weekend. A person with a strong desire for cleanliness (which falls under the basic desires of order) may notice when cigarette ashes are left in a tray, whereas a person with a weak desire for order may not even notice when dirty dishes are left in the sink. 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. This may lead to insight into why certain categories of television programs, such as reality TV, appeal to many people.

In his search for basic motives, Aristotle (trans. 1953) distinguished between means and ends. Means are motivational only because they produce something else, whereas ends are self-motivating goals desired for no reason other than that is what a person wants. When a professional athlete plays ball for a salary, the salary is only a means of obtaining whatever is eventually purchased. When a child plays ball for the fun of it, however, having fun and physical exercise (vitality) are ends. Aristotle urged fellow philosophers to identify the end motives of human life, because these indicate the most fundamental purposes of behavior. Under sensitivity theory, end motives are called *basic desires*.

In an effort to identify basic desires, Reiss and Havercamp (1998) asked thousands of people to rate the importance of hundreds of possible life goals.[1] Mathematical factor analyses of these ratings showed that the participants' responses expressed 16 factors or root meanings. Both exploratory factor analysis (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998) and three confirmatory factor analyses (Havercamp & Reiss, in press; Reiss & Havercamp, 1998) showed the 16-factor solution to basic motivation.

In conclusion, all motivation reduces to basic motivation,[2] and basic motivation influences what people pay attention to and what they do. The sensitivity theory of motivation offers a unique analysis of basic motivation based on what thousands of people rated to be their most important goals and motives. The results of the initial studies on sensitivity theory showed 16 basic desires.

BASIC DESIRES

The 16 basic desires are shown in Table 1. At first blush, the list seems to leave out a number of basic desires, such as those for wealth, survival, and spirituality. It is important to keep in mind that the 16 basic desires are considered to be elemental end motives. Whereas chemists have shown that all chemical compounds can be analyzed as combinations from the Periodic Chart of Elements, sensitivity theory holds that many complex (herein called *compound*) human motives

TABLE 1
Reiss's 16 Basic Motives

Motive Name	Motive	Animal Behavior	Joy
Power	Desire to influence (including leadership)	Dominant animal eats more food	Efficacy
Curiosity	Desire for knowledge	Animal learns to find food more efficiently and learns to avoid prey	Wonderment
Independence	Desire for autonomy	Motivates animal to leave nest, searching for food over larger area	Freedom
Status	Desire for prestige (including desire for attention)	Attention in nest leads to better feedings	Self-importance
Social Contact	Desire for peer companionship (including desire to play)	Safety in numbers for animals playing in wild	Fun
Vengeance	Desire to get even (including desire to win)	Animal fights when threatened	Vindication
Honor	Desire to obey a traditional moral code	Animal runs back to herd when stared at by prey	Loyalty
Idealism	Desire to improve society (including altruism, justice)	Altruism in animals	Compassion

(continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Motive Name	Motive	Animal Behavior	Joy
Physical Exercise	Desire to exercise muscles	Strong animals eat more and are less vulnerable to prey	Vitality
Romance	Desire for sex (including courting)	Reproduction essential for species survival	Lust
Family	Desire to raise own children	Protection of young facilitates survival	Love
Order	Desire to organize (including desire for ritual)	Cleanliness promotes health	Stability
Eating	Desire for food	Nutrition essential for survival	Satiation
Acceptance	Desire for approval	Corresponding animal behavior unclear	Self-confidence
Tranquility	Desire for inner peace (prudence, safety)	Animal runs away from danger (anxiety, fear)	Safe, relaxed
Saving	Desire to collect	Animal hoards food and other materials	Ownership

can be reduced to combinations among 16 basic desires. For most people, for example, the desire for wealth may be reduced to some compound of basic desires for status, power, and saving. Readers interested in a more detailed discussion of why certain desires are not included in the list of 16 should consult Reiss (2000a).

Each of the 16 basic desires is thought to be universally motivating, but individuals differ in how they prioritize the 16 basic desires. Some people, for example, are more strongly motivated by power than by curiosity, whereas others are more strongly motivated by curiosity than by power. By definition, a *Desire Profile* shows how strongly each of the 16 basic desires motivates a particular individual (Reiss, 2000a).

When a basic (end) goal is obtained, people experience a *joy* (an intrinsically valued feeling). As shown in Table 1, a different joy is experienced depending on which basic goal is experienced. Freedom, for example, is experienced when we obtain independence, whereas self-importance is experienced when we obtain status. Under sensitivity theory, pleasures (or joys) differ in kind. According to sensitivity theory, people seek to maximize their experiences of the 16 joys, especially those that are most important to them according to their Desire Profile.

Basic desires imply core values (see Schwartz, 1994); we value whatever we desire for its own sake. The logical connection between end motives and core values has been recognized since antiquity. Aristotle's (trans. 1953) analysis of human motivation, for example, was published under the book title, *The Nichomachean Ethics*.

In conclusion, basic motivation influences what people pay attention to and what they do. A new method for studying basic motivation—factor analysis of what large numbers of people say motivates them—has shown 16 distinct basic desires. The characteristics of each basic desire include the following: end motivation, elemental motivation, universal motivation, individual differences in prioritization, associated joys when goal is obtained, and core value. According to sensitivity theory, people behave as if they are trying to maximize the experience of 16 joys, concentrating on those most important to them according to their individual Desire Profile.

VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE

We have the potential to experience the 16 joys as a consequence of direct or vicarious experiences. When we watch a love movie, for example, we may experience the joy of lust, or for a war movie, the joy of vindication. Love and vindi-

cation are essentially the same emotions when we experience them as a consequence of viewing movies or direct experience. Compared with joys that result from experience, however, vicariously aroused joys may be more short-lived, of lower quality or intensity, and less satisfying when experienced during recall. Sensitivity theory holds that whether we pursue direct or vicarious experience depends on many factors, such as upbringing, culture, opportunities, personal skills, and personal history. According to sensitivity theory, we embrace television viewing as a convenient, minimal effort means of vicariously experiencing the 16 joys repeatedly.

As far back as Aristotle (see Taylor, 1919/1955), media theories concerned with vicarious experiences also were concerned with cathartic purging of one's soul. Catharsis theories express energy models of motivation; these models predict that vicarious experiences release psychic energy, producing reductions in relevant behaviors. Catharsis theory predicts that release of aggressive energy produces a reduction in aggression, whereas release of tension produces a reduction in anxious behavior. In contrast, sensitivity theory is a trait model of motivation, not an energy model. Sensitivity theory holds that aggression (which falls under the basic desire of vengeance), and anxiety (which falls under the basic desire of tranquility), are enduring personality traits. Under sensitivity theory, aggressive people watch violent television programs partially because doing so arouses feelings of vindication, which are joyful, not because viewing leads to a cathartic release of tension or energy. Thus, sensitivity theory predicts vicarious arousal of joys, but not a reduction in criterion behavior following vicarious arousal.

The results of a number of studies support the hypothesis that motivational personality traits are linked to viewer preferences (Bryant, 2002). Researchers have shown, for example, that aggressive children are attracted to aggressive television programs (Freedman, 1984), sex-oriented people are attracted to programs with sexual themes (Greenberg & Woods, 1999; Ward & Rivadeneya, 1999), religious people watch religious programs (Hoover, 1988), and curious people like to watch the news (Perse, 1992). Inconsistent results have been reported, however, on the question of whether or not viewing gratifies or satiates motives. Aggressive children who view films with aggressive content, for example, sometimes imitate the aggression, rather than show satiation (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1965; Kenny, 1952).

In conclusion, sensitivity theory holds that we have the potential to experience the 16 joys as a consequence of both vicarious and direct experiences. Sensitivity theory does not predict cathartic reductions in criterion behaviors following vicarious experiences of joys.

THEORY COMPARISONS

Sensitivity theory represents a variant of the "uses and gratification" approach to media psychology. Sensitivity theory expresses the following assumptions of this approach (see Perry, 2002): (a) media use is motivated; (b) people select media based on their needs; and (c) media compete with other activities for selection, attention, and use. Compared with previous uses and gratification theories, however, sensitivity theory (a) connects media experiences to the 16 basic (end) desires shown in Table 1 and (b) does not predict that gratification leads to increased global satisfaction. Instead, sensitivity theory predicts that gratification leads to the experience of joys specific to the basic motive that is gratified (see Reiss, in press).

Sensitivity theory has both similarities and dissimilarities with mood management theoretical approaches in media psychology. On the one hand, both mood management theory and sensitivity theory hold that people are motivated to balance motivational experiences. On the other hand, mood management theory holds that people balance positive and negative moods, whereas sensitivity theory holds that people balance separately each of 16 specific desires.[3]

Sensitivity theory is not an example of a "selective exposure" theory. Although sensitivity theory holds that people pay attention to stimuli relevant to the satisfaction of their basic desires, in social psychology selective exposure implies motivation to confirm one's beliefs and motivation to avoid disconfirmation of one's beliefs (e.g., Oliver, 2002; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985.) Under sensitivity theory, such motivation falls under the desire for acceptance, which is only one of the 16 basic desires that are connected to media experiences.

REALITY TELEVISION

According to sensitivity theory, people go through life seeking to experience 16 basic (end) goals and associated joys, and they concentrate on those that are strongest and most highly valued (which depends on individuality). Soon after a basic goal is obtained, the desire reasserts itself and must be satisfied anew. A few hours after eating, for example, hunger re-emerges. A vengeful person who has experienced a few days of minimal conflict may become motivated to pick a fight or argument. Because basic desires quickly reassert themselves and, thus, can be satiated only temporarily, people seek ways to repeatedly satisfy their most important

basic desires. According to Reiss (2000a), one of the purposes of culture is provide opportunities for people to experience repeatedly the 16 end goals and joys.

We applied Reiss's sensitivity theory to viewing television shows. The theory suggests that individuals prefer to watch those shows that arouse the joys most important to them. People who are strongly motivated to socialize, for example, should be especially interested in shows that portray groups, fun, or friendship. Those strongly motivated by vengeance should be especially interested in television programs with aggressive content.

If Reiss's theory is valid, it should be possible to develop reliable motivational profiles of viewers of particular types of television programs. In this investigation, we tested the hypothesis that viewers of reality-based television programs rank order the 16 basic desires in a characteristic manner that departs significantly from normative rankings. This is a fairly rigorous test of Reiss's theory because nearly every random group of 100 or so people produce approximate, normative rankings of the 16 basic desires. Further, we made the test even more rigorous by assessing "dose-dependent" associations—that is, the more reality television shows people watch, the greater should be the departure from normality of the viewers rank orderings of the 16 basic desires. As far as we know, this investigation represented the first significant effort to evaluate scientifically the appeal of reality television using standardized measures. The current popularity of so-called reality television has drawn interest from many social commentators and from some scholars (Johnson-Woods, 2002), but few scientific studies have been reported (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, in press). As the term is used here, the defining characteristic of *reality television* is that ordinary people (not professional actors) serve as the main characters of the television program. Included are shows such as *Survivor, Big Brother,* and *Temptation Island*. Whereas some have lamented the low level of morals on these shows and the exploitation of the participants (Peyser, 2001), others have seen these programs as appealing to the basic human quest for truth and need for genuineness (Calvert, 2000).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 239 adults (167 women and 72 men) who were recruited from one of two sources—seminars for 121 persons working in human service fields such as 4H youth groups and developmental disabilities programs—and 117 college students enrolled in courses at a large Midwestern university. We asked

these two groups to participate in this study because we had access to them rather than because of any specific characteristic they might show. They volunteered with the understanding that they would be asked to complete anonymously a questionnaire about what they like and dislike but could not be told the purposes of the investigation until the study was completed.

Questionnaire

The questionnaires used in this study were presented in booklets entitled "Free Time Activity." The booklets asked 159 questions organized into three sections. The first section asked for demographic information, including age, sex, and state of residence. A second section, Part B, asked participants to rate how much they participated in and enjoyed travel, different types of travel, sports in general, specific sports, music, various types of music, and reality television. The participants endorsed statements about how much they watched and enjoyed five different reality television shows—*Survivor, Big Brother, Temptation Island, The Mole,* and *The Real World*. The purpose of imbedding the questions about reality television into a more general survey of leisure activities was to disguise the investigators' interest in reality television, minimizing any bias or demand effects such as the participants' desire to please the experimenter by producing the results the experimenter is hoping to obtain.[4]

A third part of the questionnaire, Part C, consisted of the 128 items on the Reiss Profile of Fundamental Motives and Motivational Sensitivities (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). This is a standardized test of 16 "intrinsic" or "end" trait motives. A list of the motives is presented in Table 1; they are defined in detail in Reiss (2000a, in press). As noted already, previous research had shown a reliable factor solution to the test in a series of studies with more than 10,000 total participants (Havercamp, 1998; Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). The results on the Reiss Profile have been shown to predict real-life club participation (Havercamp & Reiss, in press), choice of college major (Havercamp & Reiss, in press), spirituality (Reiss, 2000b), and sports participation (Reiss et al., 2001). The reliability and validity coefficients for the instrument significantly exceed those reported for many personality tests (Havercamp & Reiss, in press).

In our research booklets, the order of presentation of Parts B and C were counterbalanced to minimize possible order effects. About half the participants completed booklets in which they reported their enjoyment of leisure activities before completing the Reiss Profile, and about half had completed the Reiss Profile before reporting how much they enjoyed various leisure activities.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The questionnaires were completed anonymously and individually. After prelimi-nary analysis showed no significant differences between the two samples, human service workers and college students, and no significant differences resulting from the order of presentation of the various questions, the data were collapsed across these dimensions.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows mean scores on each of the 16 Reiss motives for groups indicating they watched and enjoyed 0, 1, or 2 or more of the reality television programs in-cluded in our survey booklets. After the data were submitted to a multivariate F, which was highly significant at the .001 level, univariate Fs were calculated and ef-fect sizes were estimated for statistically significant differences.

TABLE 2
Mean Motive Score for Three Viewing Groups

Motive	Number of Shows Liked						
	Zero[a]	One[b]	Two+[c]	*SD*	*F*(2, 226)	*p* <	2
Social Contact	31.6	34.6	35.1	7.3	5.8	.01	.05
Curiosity	36.9	37.6	35.5	6.0	2.4	*ns*	—
Honor	36.6	35.1	34.0	6.1	4.4	.02	.04
Family	37.4	35.9	37.3	8.9	.05	*ns*	—
Independence	22.9	21.8	22.3	7.7	.40	*ns*	—
Power	26.4	28.2	28.3	7.5	1.8	*ns*	—
Order	27.4	29.0	30.9	8.9	3.4	.03	.03
Idealism	33.0	31.1	30.7	7.4	2.6	*ns*	—
Social Status	18.6	25.0	26.6	9.9	18.1	.001	.14
Vengeance	14.4	21.0	19.9	10.7	9.1	.001	.08
Eating	29.5	30.0	29.3	8.8	.06	*ns*	—
Romance	18.1	24.2	21.5	11.1	5.5	.01	.02
Physical Exercise	28.5	31.2	31.3	9.9	2.1	*ns*	—
Acceptance	27.8	30.8	29.1	8.2	.20	*ns*	—
Tranquility	20.4	19.5	20.4	8.4	.20	*ns*	—
Saving	27.6	29.5	29.5	8.0	1.5	*ns*	—

[a]$n = 94$. [b]$n = 48$. [c]$n = 84$.

By far, the largest significant effect was for the motive of status. The more reality TV shows a person liked, the more status-oriented was the person. The difference between the Zero and Two+ groups approached a full standard deviation, which is a very large group difference.

The second largest significant difference concerned the basic motive of vengeance. People who watched and enjoyed reality television placed a higher value on vengeance than did people who did not watch such shows.

Significant but small differences were reported on the motives of social contact, honor, order, and romance. People who liked two or more reality television shows on our list tended to be more motivated by social life, less motivated by honor, more concerned with order, and more motivated by romance, as compared to those who did not watch any of the reality television shows in our list.

DISCUSSION

Because this was the first study to evaluate Reiss motivational profiles of a television audience, its significance may be the suggestion of a new method of potentially productive research in the fields of mass culture and communications. Prior to this study, efforts to describe audiences in terms of personality traits were mostly unsuccessful. Personality tests have a powerful tendency to yield the norms every time groups of 100-plus people are tested; consequently, they often do not show profiles for audiences of television shows. The Reiss Profile is a new kind of personality instrument, however, based on motivational constructs rather than on traditional personality constructs. The results of this study showed a statistically significant, motivational profile for people who view reality television. This encourages future research aimed at developing motivational profiles of other groups identified by their interest in particular shows or aspects of culture.

The results of our study on reality television supported the theoretical perspective that Reiss's 16 basic desires and values are associated with viewing and enjoying reality television shows. The results showed that status is the main motivational force that drives interest in reality television. The more status-oriented people are, the more likely they are to view reality television and report pleasure and enjoyment. As shown in Table 1, people who are motivated by status have an above-average need to feel self-important. Reality television may gratify this psychological need in two ways. One possibility is that viewers feel they are more important (have higher status) than the ordinary people portrayed on reality television shows. The idea that these are "real" people gives psychological significance to the viewers' perceptions of superiority—it may not matter much if the storyline is realistic,

so long as the characters are ordinary people. Further, the message of reality television—that millions of people are interested in watching real life experiences of ordinary people—implies that ordinary people are important. Ordinary people can watch the shows, see people like themselves, and fantasize that they could gain celebrity status by being on television.

Reality television viewers are more motivated by vengeance than are nonviewers. The desire for vengeance is closely associated with enjoyment of competition (Reiss, 2000a)—in prior psychometric research, the people who said they value and enjoy getting even with others also tended to say they value and enjoy competition. Further, people who avoid conflict, anger, and competition may avoid viewing reality television shows because these shows often portray competition and interpersonal conflict.

Because reality television is widely watched, it is often a topic of discussion at the office. It is not surprising, therefore, that sociable people are significantly more likely than nonsociable people to watch reality televisions, although the differences are small.

The finding that viewing reality TV shows is negatively associated with the extent to which a person embraces morality (honor) is not surprising because many reality television shows champion expedience over ethics. These differences, although statistically significant, were small.

Small, significant effects also were obtained for the value of order. This finding suggests that people who dislike rules may react negatively to the many rules that must be followed by the participants of reality television shows. The finding concerning romance suggests that the sexual aspects of some shows attract viewers but not very many because the effect is small in magnitude.

Some have questioned the intellectualism of reality television viewers, and others have questioned the physical laziness of people who like to watch television. No support was found for either of these hypotheses. Both viewers and nonviewers were equally motivated by curiosity, and the same was shown for the motive of physical exercise.

Although reality television viewing is generally about status, specific shows may appeal to different psychological needs. *Temptation Island*, for example, portrays infidelity, which may appeal to people who value expedience (low honor) more than morality. *Survivor*, in contrast, has more of a competitive theme, perhaps appealing to people who value vengeance.

The results of this study should be interpreted cautiously. Many different shows are classified as "reality television," so that current or future shows may have an appeal different from the shows evaluated here. Although the results of this study were not affected by gender, future studies may show gender preferences in how

viewing habits are connected with basic desires. Gender effects probably occur but perhaps at magnitudes too small to be identified by the methods used in this study.

The results of this study are consistent with those reported by Nabi et al. (2003) regarding the psychological appeal of reality-based television. Nabi et al. showed that curiosity (including need for cognition) was not a significant motive for watching reality television; the results of this study also showed no correlation between curiosity and viewing of reality television. Nabi et al. also showed that voyeurism ("getting a peek") does not motivate viewing reality television. Because Reiss and Havercamp (1998) and Reiss (2000) implied that voyeurism is motivating only as a means to 1 of more the 16 basic goals, we did not study voyeurism. (It is not a fundamental or intrinsically desired motive.) Nabi et al. reported a small correlation between the "unscripted nature" of reality shows and impulsivity. In our work, impulsivity is not a universal or fundamental motive (it is a personality trait), but flexibility falls under low or weak desire for order. We found a small correlation between order and viewing. Although the shows may be "unscripted," rules are salient features of these shows, so that arguably any expected association with order should be positive, not negative as Nabi et al. assumed.

In conclusion, these results supported the general hypothesis that cultural events such as reality television shows arouse specific combinations of 16 intrinsic feelings or joys. The appeal of reality events is influenced by the degree of match between (a) the pattern of intensities of 16 intrinsic joys the show arouses and (b) the individual's valuations of the 16 basic joys (called a Reiss Desire Profile). Future researchers can study the relevance of this model for a much wider range of television shows and cultural events. It is unlikely to work every time, of course, but it may produce reliable empirical results much more frequently than was the case with alternative methods.

NOTES

[1]Surprisingly, the most influential analyses of basic motivation in history were put forth without having first asked large numbers of people what their motives are. Plato's (trans. 1966) suggestion that justice and knowledge are basic motives was based on philosophical analysis, not on what fellow Athenians said motivated them. When Kant (1783/1953) discussed the overriding importance of moral imperatives, he did not ask large numbers of fellow Germans if "moral imperatives" motivated them. Darwin (1859/1990) held that reproduction and survival were the two most fundamental motives guiding behavior. He based his conclusion on detailed observations of animals, not on what fellow Brits said were their overriding goals. Freud (1916/1963) reduced all motivation to sex and aggression even

though his patients denied that that was their motivation. Even motivational personality theorists such as Murray (1938) and Maslow (1943) developed lists of basic motives without having asked large numbers of people about their motives.

[2]This is true a priori (as a matter of logic given what the terms mean), according to Aristotle.

[3]Reiss (in press) suggested that global concepts such as "positive mood" express logical errors and exaggerate the motivational significance of pleasure in human behavior. Historically, the idea that pleasure motivates human behavior above all else is *hedonism*. According to sensitivity theory, pleasure usually is a nonmotivational byproduct of end goal obtainment, not a motivating cause. In other words, we desire knowledge for its own sake and seek it even when doing so is frustrating. The fun experienced at attainment is a consequence, not cause, of our having desired knowledge.

[4]Copies of Parts A and B are available on request.

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