

“Why America Loves Reality TV” *from* Psychology Today

Examines the fascination of the people in the United States with reality television programs. Criticisms against the voyeurism of reality television programs; Findings of a survey which examined the reasons for the public's fascination with reality programs; Misconceptions about reality television programs and why people watch them.

By Steven Reiss, James Wiltz, published on September 1, 2001 - last reviewed on December 14, 2010



EVEN IF YOU DON'T WATCH reality television, it's becoming increasingly hard to avoid. The salacious *Temptation Island* was featured on the cover of *People* magazine. *Big Brother* aired five days a week and could be viewed on the Web 24 hours a day. And the *Survivor* finale dominated the front page of the *New York Post* after gaining ratings that rivaled those of the Super Bowl.

Is the popularity of shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island* a sign that the country has degenerated into a nation of voyeurs? Americans seem hooked on so-called reality television--programs in which ordinary people compete in weeks-long contests while being filmed 24 hours a day. Some commentators contend the shows peddle blatant voyeurism, with shameless exhibitionists as contestants. Others believe that the show's secret to ratings success may be as simple and harmless as the desire to seem part of the in crowd.

Rather than just debate the point, we wanted to get some answers. So we conducted a detailed survey of 239 people, asking them about not only their television viewing habits but also their values and desires through the Reiss Profile, a standardized test of 16 basic desires and values. We found that the self-appointed experts were often wrong about why people watch reality TV.

Two of the most commonly repeated "truths" about reality TV viewers are that they watch in order to talk with friends and coworkers about the show, and that they are not as smart as other viewers. But our survey results show that both of these ideas are incorrect. Although some people may watch because it helps them participate in the next day's office chat, fans and nonfans score almost equally when tested on their sociability. And people who say they enjoy intellectual activities are no less likely to watch reality TV than are those who say they dislike intellectual activities.

Another common misconception about Temptation Island, a reality program in which couples were enticed to cheat on their partners, is that the audience was watching to see scenes of illicit sex. Some critics were surprised that the show remained popular when it turned out to be much tamer than advertised. In fact, our survey suggests that one of the main differences between fans of the show and everyone else is not an interest in sex but a lack of interest in personal honor--they value expedience, not morality. What made Temptation Island popular was not the possibility of watching adultery, but the ethical slips that lead to adultery.

One aspect that all of the reality TV shows had in common was their competitive nature: contestants were vying with one another for a cash prize and were engaged in building alliances and betraying allies. The first Survivor series climaxed with one contestant, Susan Hawk, launching into a vengeful tirade against a one-time friend and ally before casting the vote that deprived her of the million-dollar prize. It makes sense, then, that fans of both Survivor and Temptation Island tend to be competitive--and that they are more likely to place a very high value on revenge than are other people. The Survivor formula of challenges and voting would seem to embody both of these desired qualities: the spirit of competition paired with the opportunity for payback.

But the attitude that best separated the regular viewers of reality television from everyone else is the desire for status. Fans of the shows are much more likely to agree with statements such as, "Prestige is important to me" and "I am impressed with designer clothes" than are other people. We have studied similar phenomena before and found that the desire for status is just a means to get attention. And more attention increases one's sense of importance: We think we are important if others pay attention to us and unimportant if ignored.

Reality TV allows Americans to fantasize about gaining status through automatic fame. Ordinary people can watch the shows, see people like themselves and imagine that they too could become celebrities by being on television. It does not matter as much that the contestants often are shown in an unfavorable light; the fact that millions of Americans are paying attention means that the contestants are important.

And, in fact, some of the contestants have capitalized on their short-term celebrity: Colleen Haskell, from the first Survivor series, has a major role in the movie *The Animal*, and Richard Hatch, the scheming contestant who won the game, has been hired to host his own game show. If these former nobodies can become stars, then who couldn't?

The message of reality television is that ordinary people can become so important that millions will watch them. And the secret thrill of many of those viewers is the thought that perhaps next time, the new celebrities might be them.

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