A Snooki Effect? An Exploration of the Surveillance Subgenre of Reality TV and Viewers’ Beliefs About the “Real” Real World

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Taking a cultivation approach, this study uses content analyses, entertainment journalists, and critical theorists to make the case that patterns of content appear in “surveillance” reality TV programs. Survey data collected from 145 young adults reveal that beliefs about the real world often match these content patterns. Heavy viewers of surveillance programs were more likely to think females in the real world engage in inappropriate behaviors (e.g., arguing, gossip) more than males. Exposure to surveillance programs also positively predicted beliefs about the prevalence of relationship discord in the real world. Implications for cultivation research, reality TV, and accessibility are discussed.

Keywords: cultivation, reality television, accessibility

They need no introduction: Snooki. The Situation. Kim Kardashian. Lauren Conrad. They are the stars of reality TV programs, and they have afforded viewers unprecedented access into their lives. Whereas some reality TV programs provide gripping competitions (e.g., Survivor), or provide viewers with potentially useful information on home renovations (e.g., Extreme Makeover Home Edition), a growing subgenre of reality TV simply allows audiences to watch people do nothing more than go about their daily routines. We are allowed to watch them run errands, eat meals, take vacations, plan parties, argue, and fall in and out of love. The purpose of this research project was to explore some possible effects of this unique form of surveillance. Taking a cultivation approach, this study will attempt to determine whether watching surveillance reality TV programs might affect viewers’ beliefs about what is going on in the actual “real world.”

Reality TV and the Surveillance Subgenre

Scholars define reality TV programs as unscripted shows portraying ordinary people rather than actors (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004). Despite the popularity of reality TV, audiences appear to have a complicated relationship with the genre. Many people will deny watching the genre, for example, or describe it as a “train wreck” (p. 214, Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008). Yet at the same time, audiences indicate strong enjoyment of the genre (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), and most people regularly watch at least one reality TV program (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). It appears audiences like these types of programs for voyeuristic reasons (Nabi et al., 2003), because they seek vicarious participation (Barton, 2009), and for escape (Lundy et al., 2008).

The limited research exploring the effects of exposure to reality TV falls into one of two categories: studies that focus on reality TV overall, and studies focusing on various subgenres of reality TV. As an example of the former, one line of research uses social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) to argue that viewers of reality TV might be modeling behaviors related to the disclosure of personal information. For example, studies have found that viewers of reality TV are more likely to blog, spend time on social networking Web sites, and engage in the sharing of videos and photographs online (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010). The authors of these studies suggest that audiences might be modeling behaviors seen on reality
TV, which often depicts people sharing private thoughts and emotions with the public. Another line of research focusing on reality TV as an overall genre explores issues related to sex roles. Cato and Carpentier (2010), for example, found that people who prefer reality TV tend to endorse traditional female roles.

However, because of the wide variety of content that falls within the overall category of "reality TV," many researchers have focused on the effects of exposure to subgenres. Research on subgenres can be challenging, however, because it is difficult to group the growing list of reality TV programs into categories that are meaningful, mutually exclusive, and exhaustive (Nabi, 2007). Nonetheless, researchers agree that a couple of subgenres represent unique categories that occupy their own space within the world of reality TV. For example, some scholars have studied the makeover subgenre (e.g., Extreme Makeover, The Swan), and have found that watching this subgenre is related to beliefs about the benefits of cosmetic surgeries (Nabi, 2009). Several scholars have explored the dating subgenre (e.g., The Bachelor, Millionaire Matchmaker), and their research reveals that people who view reality dating programs are more likely to think men are sex driven, view dating as a game, drink alcohol on dates, and think their peers are more sexually active (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011).

The present study will continue this tradition of focusing on a specific subgenre of reality TV, as it provides the opportunity to explore what happens when audiences are exposed to consistent patterns of content. In particular, this study will focus on a subgenre that has received little attention in the reality TV literature thus far: one that has been referred to as the docu-soap (Leone, Peek, & Bissell, 2006) or the surveillance (Aubrey et al., 2012) subcategory of reality TV. Aubrey and colleagues (2012), for example, asked a sample of undergraduates to report their exposure to 32 reality TV programs. Results of an exploratory factor analysis revealed several subgenres of reality TV, including one the authors referred to as the "surveillance" subgenre. The authors describe this subgenre as one that provides "a documentary-style perspective on people’s lives" (p. 87), and it includes programs such as The Real World and Laguna Beach.

Leone and colleagues (2006) referred to this subcategory as being "docu-soap" programs. Similarly, Murray (2004) suggests that this subgenre of reality TV shares textual and aesthetic characteristics with documentaries, because they focus on "the everyday lives of their subjects in somewhat 'natural' settings" (p. 42). For example, a show such as The Real World follows young adults as they navigate group dynamics living together in a house. Other examples include shows such as Keeping up with the Kardashians and Kendra, which follow personalities around as they (ostensibly) go about their daily activities. Thus, these programs tend to follow people in their actual homes and neighborhoods, although a few (e.g., The Real World, Bad Girls Club) put everyday people into a house setting and observe what happens. These programs do not include competitions or games; thus, there is no "winner" at the end of an episode or season.

At the same time, these programs must do something to keep audiences interested. Reality TV tends to provide audiences with gripping characters and dramatic tension of some sort (Rose & Wood, 2005). The surveillance subgenre accomplishes this not by asking characters to compete (e.g., Survivor) or to complete some sort of project (e.g., home makeover programs). As the following section will demonstrate, there are several key ingredients that help generate drama and tension within the surveillance subgenre. First, these programs often depict the lifestyles of the very wealthy, allowing audiences a peek into a world they do not personally experience. Second, these programs tend to include significant amounts of relational aggression. Third, these programs tend to portray drama and tension within the context of romantic relationships.

Cultivation and Possible Effects of Watching Surveillance Programs

Similar to previous research exploring the effects of reality TV exposure (Nabi, 2009), this study will approach the genre from a cultivation framework (Gerbner, 1969). Cultivation theory states that the more time people spend "living" in the TV world, the more likely they are to believe social reality is congruent with TV reality. Thus, people who watch a lot of televised violence tend to see the real world as being
more violent than people who consume less TV violence (Shrum, 2001). People who are heavy viewers of media with romantic themes (e.g., romantic comedies) tend to have unrealistic expectations for real-world romantic relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In the present study, therefore, we will explore some of the real-world beliefs of people who are heavy viewers of the surveillance subgenre of reality TV.

To conduct a cultivation study, however, it is important to demonstrate recurring content themes that are common in the genre of interest. Although there have been some content analyses of reality TV overall, there are very few that focus specifically on the surveillance subgenre. Still, the limited content analyses on reality TV overall, as well as observations from entertainment journalists and critical theorists, can be used to argue that three themes appear regularly in the surveillance subgenre: themes related to wealth, antisocial behaviors (especially by women), and romantic relationships.

There are no known content analyses verifying the prevalence of wealth on surveillance reality TV programs. It seems easy to argue, however, that the individuals who appear on most of these programs are quite wealthy. Kim Kardashian, for example, has a net worth of $35 million (“Kim Kardashian Net Worth,” 2012). On her shows, she travels via private plane, lives in a mansion, and is shown vacationing in locations such as Bora Bora. MTV describes the program Laguna Beach as a show set against the “staggering wealth” of Laguna Beach, California (“About Laguna Beach,” mtv.com, n.d.). The program My Super Sweet Sixteen follows the lives of wealthy teenagers whose parents throw them over-the-top birthday parties (Ogunuwa, 2006). On one episode of Holly’s World, former Playboy mansion resident Holly Madison reveals that she has both a Porsche and a vintage convertible Thunderbird, and proceeds to throw an elaborate party that includes a petting zoo in her backyard (Pappagiorio, 2010). The women on the Real Housewives franchise are described as spending their days “shopping, grooming, lunching, gossiping, and feuding” (Chocano, 2011). Even The Real World, which gathers participants from a variety of backgrounds, houses the participants in extravagant mansions. Given these content patterns, therefore, cultivation theory would predict the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There will be a positive relationship between viewing the surveillance subgenre of reality TV and estimates of the prevalence of wealth in the real world.

Another common theme on reality TV is bad behavior. In particular, reality TV participants—especially women—are shown as being aggressive and unable to control their emotions. A content analysis by Baruh (2009), for example, reveals that 25% of scenes on reality TV—including surveillance programs—portray negative emotions such as sadness and crying. Indeed, some reality programs seem to be specifically designed to humiliate individuals (Culpeper, 2005), and thus it is perhaps not surprising that viewers of reality TV believe the genre depicts a lot of humiliation, ridicule, and physical and emotional harm (Lundy et al., 2008). Dubrofsky (2009) argues that emotional women, in particular, are ubiquitous on reality TV.

Empirical research suggests that women, in particular, are frequently shown engaging in relational aggression on reality TV shows. Coyne and colleagues (Coyne, Robinson, & Nelson, 2010), for example, conducted a content analysis of some of the top reality TV programs in the United Kingdom (including American Idol, Big Brother, and The Apprentice). They counted all acts of aggression, coding them as physical, verbal, or relational. Their findings revealed that women were more likely than were men to engage in relational aggression, such as manipulative relationship tactics (e.g., threatening to withdraw friendship), spreading rumors, and engaging in gossip. A study by Lauzen and Dozier (2008) revealed similar findings. They conducted a content analysis of 129 TV programs during the 2004 to 2005 prime-time season, with reality TV programs as one of three genres studied in the project (along with comedies and dramas). Their findings suggest that when women resolve conflict on these programs, they tend to use verbally competitive conflict resolution strategies, such as making derogatory comments, arguing, and challenging one another. Female participants on Flavor of Love have even engaged in physical fighting (Holbrook & Singer, 2009), and YouTube contains a number of videos touted as the “Best Fights” ever
shown on Bad Girls Club. Based on these content patterns, therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** There will be a positive relationship between viewing the surveillance subgenre of reality TV and estimates of the prevalence of antisocial behavior among men and women in the real world. More specifically, viewers of the surveillance subgenre will judge women as engaging in antisocial behaviors more than men.

A final theme on reality TV programs is depictions of promiscuity and discord within the context of romantic relationships. Cultivation research, for example, has already documented the prevalence of marital discord on TV (Shrum, 2001, 2007). Thus, divorces, extramarital affairs, and the practice of having multiple sex partners are overrepresented on TV. Reality TV is also likely to overemphasize sex, sexuality, and promiscuous behaviors in the context of romantic relationships. Reality dating programs, for example, tend to emphasize the importance of physical appearance in romantic relationships, they portray men as being sexually driven, and they portray women as sex objects (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Hetsroni, 2000). According to Baruh (2009), reality TV as a genre makes sexual behaviors regularly available to viewers.

Although no content analyses on this topic have been conducted on the surveillance subgenre in particular, there is evidence to suggest that these findings apply. Kim Kardashian, for example, had a highly publicized 72-day marriage and subsequent divorce. Divorce was also a prominent theme on the Real Housewives series. For example, Camille Grammer appeared on the show while going through a highly publicized divorce with Kelsey Grammer (Evatt, 2010). The marital troubles of Taylor and Russell Armstrong were a central storyline during the show’s first season (“Bravo to Reedit,” 2011), culminating with his suicide after she filed for divorce. Multiple seasons of The Real World have featured storylines that include characters cheating on significant others (e.g., “Cheaters, Beaters, and Pavement Eaters,” mtv.com, n.d.). Finally, MTV describes Laguna Beach as a show that chronicles “the hook-ups, break-ups, screw-ups, and make-ups” of a group of wealthy teenagers (Bly, 2006).

Given reality TV’s emphasis on relationship strife, sex, and infidelity, the following hypothesis is posed:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** There will be a positive relationship between viewing the surveillance subgenre of reality TV and estimates of the prevalence of promiscuity and discord in romantic relationships.

Finally, recent research has unveiled some possible mechanisms that underlie the cultivation effect. Shrum’s accessibility model (Shrum & Lee, 2012), for example, suggests that construct accessibility mediates the relationship between TV exposure and real-world beliefs. Accessibility is defined as the “readiness with which a stored construct is utilized in information processing” (Higgins & King, 1981 p. 71). According to Shrum, heavy TV viewers are likely to have TV constructs chronically accessible in memory. As such, heavy TV viewers use these examples when asked to make estimations about the real-world frequency of events. Indeed, several studies support the notion that accessibility mediates the relationship between media exposure and real-world beliefs (Shrum & Lee, 2012). To test whether this may be true in the case of reality TV, the following hypothesis is posed:

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Accessibility will mediate the relationship between exposure to surveillance reality TV programs and related beliefs about the real world.

### Method

**Participants**

An online survey was distributed to a convenience sample of undergraduate students at a Midwestern University. Individuals were recruited from communication courses and received course credit for their participation. Data were collected from 145 participants in the spring of 2012. A majority of participants were women (73.8%) and Caucasian (80%). Descriptive data for the sample are provided in Table 1.
Exposure to Surveillance Reality TV Programs. Consistent with Nabi (2009), we provided participants with a list of popular reality TV programs and asked how often they view each on scales ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). In total, we presented participants with a list of 45 reality TV programs in alphabetical order. The 45 programs were selected because they represent top-rated reality programming, and many have been the focus of previous research on reality TV (Nabi, 2009).

A principal components factor analysis was first performed on the list of 45 shows, but similar to previous research on reality TV (Nabi, 2007), no consistent patterns emerged. For instance, 13 factors were generated with eigenvalues >1.0, yet a large number of programs did not load cleanly onto any one factor. Because this is a common occurrence in research on reality TV, Aubrey and colleagues (2012) acknowledge that many reality TV researchers group programs together based on personal impressions of similarity in content. This strategy will be undertaken in the present study, therefore, to generate a scale that represents participant exposure to the surveillance subgenre of reality TV.

From the list of 45 shows, 16 can be considered as falling within the surveillance subgenre of reality TV. That is, these 16 programs do not include any competition or prize, and instead follow individuals around as they experience their “real” lives. They provide viewers with a sneak peek into people’s everyday habits and activities using documentary-style filming techniques. To determine whether our participants actually watch these 16 programs, we examined frequency distributions for each of the shows. Consistent with previous research on reality TV (Aubrey et al., 2012), we decided to only include programs that were watched by at least one participant.

Table 1
Sample Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
<th>Total TV viewing</th>
<th>Reality TV viewing</th>
<th>Beliefs about</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family’s household income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0–$50,000/yr</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$50,000–$100,000/yr</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>$100,000–$150,000/yr</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150,000–$200,000/yr</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>$200,000/yr +</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bad behaviors</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
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</table>

Note. Total TV viewing measured in hours per week. Reality TV viewing measured on a 1 (never) to 5 (very often) scale. Beliefs range from 0% to 100%. Beliefs about wealth do not reflect the square root transformation, but rather actual values. Accessibility measured on a 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy) scale. Participants were allowed to select from among more than one ethnic category. SD = standard deviation.

Measures

The decision to measure reality TV exposure via closed-ended questions, rather than using an open-ended measure (as was the case in the measures assessing overall TV viewing levels), was made for several reasons. The reality TV literature tends to use closed-ended scales to measure exposure to the reality TV genre (e.g., Nabi, 2009; Nabi et al., 2006). This might be because the tendency to understate reality TV viewing might be even further pronounced if participants were asked to report hours per week of viewing. For example, the one known study that did measure exposure via an open-ended measure asked participants to report their weekly reality TV viewing in total, and the total number of hours per week watching reality TV was just 3 hours (Leone et al., 2006). As the present study asked participants to report viewership on a show-by-show basis, there was a concern that the number of hours per week for any one show would be low, leading to skewed results.
10% of the sample. In the present study, one surveillance program was watched by <10% of the population (Basketball Wives). Thus, this program was not included in any subsequent analyses.

A list of the remaining 15 surveillance programs is provided in Appendix A. There is strong internal consistency among these 15 shows (α = .91), which supports their selection as a distinct subgenre. Participants’ exposure to these 15 shows was therefore averaged together (M = 1.74, SD = .76).

**Real-World Beliefs.** Real-world beliefs were assessed through the use of prevalence estimate questions (Shrum, 2007), which ask people to estimate how frequently certain events occur in the real world. All questions asked participants to state their responses in the form of a percentage ranging from 0 to 100 (Appendix B). The real-world belief questions were organized into three different sections, one for each content area (wealth, bad behavior, and romantic relationships).

In the case of real-world beliefs about wealth, we presented participants with six items taken from previous research (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Shrum, 2007). Participants’ responses to the six items ranged from 0% to 70% (M = 9.2, SD = 6.7), and responses were extremely skewed. A square root transformation solved the skewness problem for all items except for the last question—the question asking about the prevalence of millionaires. Thus, the square roots of the first five questions on the topic of wealth were averaged together to create a beliefs about wealth scale (M = 2.78, SD = 1.07, α = .89).

On the topic of gender, participants were asked about the prevalence of four different types of behaviors: verbal aggression, spreading rumors and gossip, being argumentative and difficult to get along with, and being overly emotional. For each of these behaviors, participants were asked how often men engage in the behavior and how often women engage in the behavior (with higher numbers indicating greater prevalence of bad behavior). The gender order was switched from question to question (i.e., sometimes participants were asked about men first, and other times they were asked about women first). To assess whether gender differences exist, participants’ responses to the four questions assessing men’s behaviors were averaged together (M = 31.0, SD = 14.8, α = .77), as were responses to the four questions assessing women’s bad behavior (M = 39.4, SD = 17.1, α = .80). Next, the average score for men’s behaviors was subtracted from the average score for women’s behaviors, creating a variable that reflects beliefs about gender differences (M = 8.5, SD = 9.2). For this variable, higher numbers and positive scores reflect participants who rate women as engaging in bad behavior more often than men.

Finally, beliefs on the topic of romantic relationships were assessed with seven questions taken from previous reality TV and cultivation research (Ferris et al., 2007; Hetsroni, 2000; Shrum, 2007). Responses to all items were normally distributed, except for the final question assessing the prevalence of hot tubs on dates. Thus, this item was not included in the subsequent scale. The remaining six items were averaged together to create a beliefs about relationships variable (M = 43.3, SD = 14.1, α = .78).

**Accessibility.** Accessibility refers to how easily or readily thoughts come to mind (Higgins & King, 1981). Although many studies employ reaction times (RTs) to measure accessibility (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997), the present study will use a self-report measure used by Busselle and Shrum (2003). Busselle and Shrum asked participants to provide their own subjective judgments regarding the ease at which they could answer questions. This measure is therefore designed to measure perceived ease of retrieval, or perceived accessibility. Recall that the real-world belief questions described previously were given to participants in three separate sections. For example, all of the questions about real-world wealth were asked together in a section titled “Questions about Socio-Economic Status in America.” After participants had answered the questions on the topic of wealth (Appendix B), they were given the following question: “How difficult was it to answer these questions about socioeconomic status in America?” Participants chose answer options ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 7 (very easy, M = 2.8, SD = 1.2). The same procedure was followed after the questions about bad behavior on the part of men and women (M = 2.9, SD = 1.4), and behaviors in romantic relationships (M = 2.9, SD = 1.2).
Control Variables. Consistent with previous cultivation research (Shrum, 2007), participants were asked to estimate the number of hours of TV they view on weekdays within four day parts (6 a.m.–12 noon, noon–6 p.m., 6 p.m.–midnight, midnight–6 a.m.). Participants were also asked to indicate the number of hours of TV watched on Saturdays and Sundays. A weighted total was created by multiplying the weekday viewing by 5 and adding that to weekend viewing. Overall TV viewing ranges from 0 to 69 hours per week (M = 19.8, SD = 12.2).

Participant gender was measured and included as a control in tests of all hypotheses. Family income was also used as a control because of its obvious relationship with beliefs about wealth, but also because of possible relationships with beliefs about bad behaviors committed by men and women and beliefs about relationship strife (Stets, 1990). Income was measured by asking participants to select from one of five income brackets that included their family’s household income (Table 1). However, because categorical variables must be entered into regression equations with only two levels, the data were recoded into two groups of equal size. Based on the distribution of responses, a dichotomous variable was created that recoded participants into either a lower-income group ($0–$1,00,000/year, 48.8%) or a higher-income group ($1,00,000/year or more, 51.2%). Finally, participants’ parents’ marital status might be related to their beliefs about discord in romantic relationships. Thus, we had participants indicate their parents’ current marital status by selecting one of five categories (currently married, currently divorced/divorcing, currently separated, never married, and other). A majority of participants’ parents were currently married (80%), and thus a dichotomous variable was created that categorized participants as either having parents who were currently married or not currently married (20%).

Results

$H_1$–$H_3$ were tested using multiple regression models controlling for gender, family income, and total TV viewing. In testing $H_3$, parents’ marital status was also included as a control. Exposure to the surveillance subgenre was the primary independent variable, and beliefs about the real world serve as the dependent variables. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 2.

Tests of Hypotheses

$H_1$ predicts a positive relationship between exposure to the surveillance subgenre and estimates of the prevalence of wealth in the real world. The regression model testing $H_1$ was not significant, $F(4, 124) = 1.83$, $ns$. As Table 2 depicts, only total TV viewing ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$) positively predicts estimates of real-world wealth, explaining 3% of the variance in beliefs about wealth ($sr^2 = .03$, $p < .05$). Thus, $H_1$ is not supported.

$H_2$ predicts that watching surveillance shows will be related to estimates of the prevalence of antisocial behaviors among men and women in the real world. The overall model testing this hypothesis was significant, $F(4, 124) = 2.99$, $p < .05$, with the predictor variables explaining

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variables</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Gender differences</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$sr^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ marital status</td>
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<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TV viewing</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance show viewing</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.09*</td>
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Note. Coefficients reflect standardized values. Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female. Income coded as 1 = lower income, 2 = higher income. Parents’ marital status coded as 1 = currently married, 2 = not currently married. $sr^2 =$ squared semipartial correlation coefficient.

$^*p < .1$. $^*p < .05$. $^**p < .01$. 
9% of the variance in beliefs about gender differences. As Table 2 depicts, none of the control variables are related to beliefs about gender differences. However, exposure to surveillance reality TV shows positively predicts the dependent variable (β = .26, p < .01). Furthermore, an examination of the squared semipartial correlation coefficient reveals that exposure to surveillance programs explains an incremental 5% of variance in the dependent variable (sr² = .05, p < .01). Thus, H₂ is supported.

Finally, H₃ focuses on the relationship between watching the surveillance subgenre and beliefs about romantic relationships. The overall model is significant, F(5, 122) = 2.81, p < .05, and explains 10% of the variance in beliefs about relationship. In terms of H₃, exposure to surveillance reality TV programs adds an incremental 3% in explained variance in beliefs about relationships (p < .05). Furthermore, exposure to surveillance shows positively predicts beliefs about strife and sex in romantic relationships (β = .20, p < .05), supporting H₃.

**H₄: The Role of Accessibility**

H₄ predicts that accessibility will mediate the relationship between exposure to surveillance programs and real-world beliefs. Although tests of H₁ failed to find a direct effect of exposure to surveillance programs on beliefs about wealth, it is still possible that indirect effects through accessibility do exist (Hayes, 2009). To test H₄, therefore, we tested accessibility as a mediating variable in all three content areas (wealth, gender differences, and relationships). To do so, we used simple mediation analyses, constructing three different models using an OLS-based modeling program called PROCESS (Hayes, 2012). Each model tested the direct effect of surveillance exposure on real-world beliefs as well as the indirect effect through perceived accessibility.

Table 3 depicts the regression results for the path predicting the effects of exposure to surveillance programs on accessibility. It is interesting to note that in all models, gender is related to perceived accessibility, with men consistently saying they could answer the questions more easily than could women. In terms of H₄, however, only in the case of gender differences is exposure to surveillance programs related to perceived accessibility (β = .20, p < .05). Thus, heavy viewers of surveillance programs reported they could more easily answer questions about men and women in the context of bad behaviors.

To provide a true test of H₄, however, we must consider the total indirect effect, which is the product of the coefficients depicted in Table 3 and the coefficients from the path predicting beliefs from accessibility (Hayes, 2009). To test for total indirect effects, therefore, bootstrapping analyses were performed (n = 10,000 bootstrap samples) to determine whether the coefficients for the indirect effects are significantly different from zero. In the case of beliefs about wealth, for example, perceived ease of answering questions about wealth was used as the mediating variable between exposure to surveillance programs and beliefs about wealth. The bootstrapping analysis generated a confidence interval for the indirect effect that in-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Gender differences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>R²</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>−.25*</td>
<td>−.24*</td>
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<td>.15^</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ marital status</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TV viewing</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance show viewing</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total model</td>
<td>.06^</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Coefficients reflect standardized values. Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female. Income coded as 1 = lower income, 2 = higher income. Parents’ marital status coded as 1 = currently married, 2 = not currently married. sr² = squared semipartial correlation coefficient.

^p < .1. *p < .05.
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Ferris et al., 2007; Nabi, 2009; Vandenbosch & liefs and attitudes (Cato & Carpentier, 2010; between watching reality TV and viewers’ beliefs about wealth. The same pattern was revealed in the case of the two remaining content areas. That is, the confidence intervals for the indirect effect in the case of gender differences (-0.1130 to 1.3166) and relationships (-0.0179 to 1.8483) also contained zero. Thus, we cannot conclude that there are significant indirect effects in any of the four models. As a result, perceived accessibility does not mediate the relationship between exposure and beliefs.

Discussion

The present study advances research on reality TV forward by focusing on a popular subgenre that has received little attention in the effects literature thus far: the surveillance subgenre. Using a cultivation framework, the present study demonstrates a relationship between watching shows like Keeping up with the Kardashians and Jersey Shore and beliefs about the real world. More specifically, our data suggest that viewers of these programs believe women in the real world engage in bad behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors and verbal aggression) more often than do men. Furthermore, heavy viewers of these shows overestimate the prevalence of discord (e.g., affairs and divorces) and an emphasis on sex (e.g., sex on first date, having multiple sex partners) in romantic relationships. As such, this study provides support for cultivation’s proposal that exposure to content patterns on TV is related to viewers’ beliefs about the real world.

Furthermore, this study joins a growing list of research projects demonstrating a correlation between watching reality TV and viewers’ beliefs and attitudes (Cato & Carpentier, 2010; Ferris et al., 2007; Nabi, 2009; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). To our knowledge, however, there is limited experimental research testing the effects of reality TV on audiences. One exception is a recent study by Domoff and colleagues (Domoff et al., 2012) that tested the effects of watching the program The Biggest Loser. Results of that study suggested that watching one episode led viewers to dislike overweight individuals more than participants who did not watch the episode. Watching the program also increased the likelihood that individuals would think that weight is controllable. Given these types of findings, more scholars should conduct experimental research to explore the possibility that reality TV programs have a causal effect on viewers’ beliefs and attitudes. The present study provides growing evidence that this may indeed be the case.

Although this study focuses on a cognitive outcome such as beliefs about the real world, these beliefs may have broader implications for viewers’ attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. Bandura’s social–cognitive theory, for example, suggests that people are more likely to adopt new behaviors if they believe they are consistent with social norms (1997). According to the theory of reasoned action, behavioral intentions are affected by subjective norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Thus, if young adult viewers of reality TV believe that promiscuity is normative in the real world, it might affect their behavioral intentions (and thus behaviors) in the context of a romantic relationship. If a young woman thinks that gossiping and spreading rumors are normative, she may be more likely to model those types of behaviors compared with women who do not think spreading rumors and gossiping are normative. Thus, the cognitive outcomes explored in the present study are important, as they may lead to more serious outcomes down the road. As such, future research should explore the links between watching the surveillance subgenre of reality and some of these behavioral outcomes.

Interestingly, exposure to the surveillance subgenre was not related to participants’ perceptions of real-world wealth. Several issues could have contributed to this lack of significance, however. First, images associated with wealth are shown frequently on TV (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997), and thus exposure to the surveillance subgenre of reality TV may not have an incremental effect on beliefs. Indeed, heavy viewers of TV overall did indeed overestimate the prevalence of real-world wealth in the present study. A second possible explanation has to do with current events that took place shortly before our survey was administered (early spring 2012). During this period, news outlets had been covering the issue of an income gap in the United States, and thus our participants were likely familiar with campaigns such as “We are...
the 99%” (Stelter, 2011). As a result, many of our participants may have already believed that the ultrarich in this country represent 1% of the population. Indeed, when our participants were asked to estimate the prevalence of millionaires in the United States, the answer “1%” was the most popular response \((n = 38)\). Thus, news reports about the “1%” may have diminished the data’s variance with regard to wealth.

The present study also attempted to explore the role of construct accessibility in the cultivation process. As expected, heavy viewers of the surveillance subgenre did find it easier to answer questions about the ways men and women behave than lighter viewers of the subgenre. Thus, for people who watch a lot of the surveillance subgenre, perhaps imagery associated with drama, arguing, and gossiping are top of mind—easy to access. On the other hand, this heightened accessibility did not in turn predict their beliefs about the real world, and thus accessibility was not a mediating variable. Furthermore, the accessibility of thoughts related to wealth and relationships was not related to exposure to the surveillance subgenre. It is important to remember, however, that a self-report measure of accessibility was used in the present study, whereas alternative measures, such as RTs, have been used in the past. Thus, although the present study did not find support for Shrum’s accessibility model (Shrum & Lee, 2012), measurement issues may have contributed to the lack of findings.

Some additional limitations of the present study must be addressed. As previously mentioned, the sample was largely composed of white women who are college undergraduates. However, this is consistent with previous research on reality TV, which tends to use convenience samples of undergraduate students with a gender skew (Aubrey et al., 2012; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Although it is important to conduct research on young adult samples—especially given that they tend to be fans of reality TV—the generalizability of the present study’s data is limited. For example, if accessibility is indeed a mechanism that leads to cultivation-like outcomes, older populations might be more likely than younger adults to have highly accessible thoughts on the topic of wealth, affairs, and divorce that come from sources other than TV. That is, due to more extensive life experiences, their mental models for the topics studied in the present article might be richer and more contextualized (Krcmar & Curtis, 2003), and perhaps as a result, older populations might be less likely to rely on images from TV that are “top of mind.” Future research should explore these possibilities.

In cultivation research, researchers typically rely on content analyses of the show or genre under study to discern the actual frequency of content. In the case of the present study, however, there were few existing content analyses of the surveillance subgenre. Nonetheless, we relied on content or textual analyses that have been conducted on reality TV overall (Baruh, 2009) as well as arguments made by entertainment journalists (Pappagiorgio, 2010) to make the case that patterns of content do in fact exist in the surveillance subgenre of reality TV. Future scholars, however, should consider conducting content analyses on the subgenre of surveillance reality TV programs to provide more concrete evidence of content patterns. In the meantime, the present study can be viewed as an exploratory study demonstrating the possibility that consistent content patterns are responsible for audience members’ beliefs about the real world.

An additional limitation is that our participants indicated somewhat low viewership of the surveillance programs explored in the present study. On a 5-point scale, the average score for participants was 1.74 \((SD = 0.76)\). These low reports of viewing habits are consistent with previous research on reality TV, however. Aubrey and colleagues (2012), for example, measured reality TV exposure using 6-point scales, and found a mean score of 1.93 among their college student participants \((SD = 0.52)\). Lundy and colleagues (2008) found that college students underestimate how much they view reality TV, or will sometimes deny watching altogether. Thus, although the underestimation of reality TV viewing is somewhat of a concern, the present study still reveals a relationship between viewing these programs and beliefs about the real world. Future researchers, however, should be aware of people’s tendency to underreport exposure to reality TV, and may want to develop measures that will circumvent this potential problem. For example, future researchers could measure exposure to a longer list of reality TV programs than was explored in the present study. Participants in the present study rated
their viewing of only 45 reality TV programs— although the actual number of reality programs airing at any time (and streaming online or available via DVD) is longer than this. Thus, perhaps, participants in the present study actually do watch more reality TV than was revealed in the data, but they were not asked about the right shows.

One final limitation of the present study deals with the issue of missing data. There were 16 participants who did not answer the family income question, which might be a random problem (i.e., students not knowing their family income) or a more systematic problem (i.e., students from low-income families not wanting to reveal their incomes). These individuals were not included in the regression analyses testing the hypotheses, and thus the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Despite these limitations, our data provide preliminary evidence that heavy viewers of surveillance reality TV programs may overestimate the prevalence of women’s bad behavior— especially in terms of relational aggression (vs. lighter viewers of the genre). Heavy viewers of the subgenre also overestimate problems in romantic relationships compared with lighter viewers of the subgenre. In addition, the more people viewed these types of shows, the easier they found it was to answer questions about bad behaviors on the part of men and women. Thus, the present study’s data indicate that even with all the entertainment media choices available to consumers today, the cultivating effect of TV programming may still be strong. Given that cultivation research has close links with behavior change theories, such as social–cognitive theory and the theory of reasoned action (Nabi, 2009; Nabi & Sullivan, 2001), it is important for researchers to investigate the surveillance subgenre further. After all, the surveillance subgenre appears to have entrenched itself in popular society. With more surveillance shows appearing on TV channels that appeal to a variety of demographics (e.g., Teen Mom, I Love Jenni), we must continue to explore and understand the possible effects of watching these types of programs.

References


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(Appendices follow)
Appendix A

Surveillance Reality TV Programs

16 and Pregnant
Bad Girls Club
Bethenny Ever After
The Hills
Holly’s World
Jersey Shore
Laguna Beach
Keeping up with the Kardashians
Kendra
Kim & Kourtney Take New York
Khloe and Lamar
My Super Sweet Sixteen
The Real Housewives (any city)
The Real World (any city)
Teen Mom

Appendix B

Real World Belief Items

Prevalence estimate questions on the topic of wealth (α = .89)

1. What % of Americans have a private tennis court at their homes?
2. What % of Americans have maids or servants?
3. What % of Americans have an in-ground swimming pool?
4. What % of Americans have a hot tub or Jacuzzi?
5. What % of Americans belong to a country club?
6. What % of adult Americans are millionaires? (responses skewed, not included in final scale)

Prevalence estimate questions on the topic of gender differences

1. What % of men could be considered as being “verbally aggressive” (e.g., cursing, yelling, etc.) in the United States?
2. What % of women could be considered as being “verbally aggressive” (e.g., cursing, yelling, etc.) in the United States?
3. What % of women in this country enjoy spreading rumors and gossip?
4. What % of men in this country enjoy spreading rumors and gossip?
5. What % of women in this country are argumentative and difficult to get along with?
6. What % of men in this country are argumentative and difficult to get along with?
7. What % of men in this country could be described as being “over emotional?”
8. What % of women in this country could be described as being “over emotional?”

Prevalence estimate questions on the topic of relationships (α = .78)

1. What % of American married couples end up divorcing?
2. What % of Americans have had multiple sexual partners at any time?
3. What % of people in this country use physical appearance as the primary criteria when choosing a romantic partner?
4. What % of adult males in this country could be described as “sex driven?”
5. What % of married Americans have had an extramarital affair?
6. What % of women in this country have had sex on a first date?
7. What % of couples end up in a hot tub on a first date? (responses skewed, not included in final scale)