We're All Stars Now: Reality Television, Web 2.0, and Mediated Identities

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ABSTRACT

Social cognitive theory suggests a likely relationship between the rising popularity of both reality television and social networking sites. This research utilized a survey (N=456) of young adults to determine the extent to which reality television consumption explains user behavior in the context of social network sites. Results show a consistent relationship between reality television consumption on the length of time spent logged on to these sites, the size of user's networks, the proportion of friends not actually met face to face, and photo sharing frequency while controlling for age, gender and education. Other categories of television viewing like news, fiction, and educational programming were not related to user's online behavior.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [**Social and Behavioral Sciences**]: *psychology, sociology*

General Terms

Measurement, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

social cognitive theory, social network sites, Facebook, photo sharing, reality television

1. INTRODUCTION

I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself [11].

The opening lines of Shelley Jackson's hypertext literary work *Patchwork Girl* might seem an apt characterization of personal identity on the internet. Early conceptions of the internet, and later the Web, predicted that identity would become increasingly fragmented: absent physical cues in the text-based medium, individuals were free to construct and deconstruct identity as they saw fit. Gender, race, and ability only became a component of social exchange to the degree that individuals chose to introduce it. "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth," optimistically declared another early commentator [4]. Further, the burden of "piecing" together another's identity grew increasingly challenging as potential contexts of social interaction increased exponentially. The individual could easily and perhaps comfortably fracture into myriad social "faces" or identities. Significant amounts of subsequent research energy have been devoted to exploring how computer mediation affects personal identity construction and social interaction [see 16 for review]. Where Turkle [15] explored a low-bandwidth textual social landscape, today's internet provides banalized access to nonverbal social cues – e.g. physical appearance on Flickr or YouTube, attitudes and preferences on MySpace or Facebook. Rather than allowing users to experiment and play with their identity, many of today's computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies tie user identities ever closer to offline, physical selves.

Celebrity, of the type enjoyed or endured by actors, models, and athletes, was both a consequence and generator of the mass audience, and resulted in an informational flow that was primarily unidirectional. While the glamour of celebrity was something that mass audiences were encouraged to aspire to (generally by participating in fashionable consumption of advertisers' products) [12], the world of celebrities was fundamentally removed from the comparatively mundane world of the audience. We argue that the normative and behavioral distinction between the celebrity world and the everyday world is being eroded, and that the dissolution of this boundary is observable in two distinct trends: the development and explosive popularity so-called "reality television" (RTV) and the concomitant adoption of "Web 2.0" technologies like social networking sites (SNSs) that allow individuals to potentially be identified by and communicate with mass-scale audiences.

Taken together, RTV and Web 2.0 set the stage for a major shift in the way individuals perceive their role in the media environment. Rather than simply being the target of mediated messages, they can see themselves as protagonists of mediated narratives and can integrate themselves into a complex media ecosystem. The media tools and strategies employed by celebrities and their handlers – airbrushed photos, carefully coordinated social interactions, strategic selection and maintenance of the entourage – are now in a sense available to everyone, and are increasingly employed in everyday interpersonal interaction. Today, much CMC is thus marked by an increasing emphasis on existing offline relationships, physical and nonverbal communication cues, and their manipulation.

In this paper, Bandura's social cognitive theory [1, 2, 3] frames an analysis of the relationship between RTV consumption and online

behavior with Web 2.0 tools like SNSs. Consistent with social cognitive theory, viewers are operationalized as active processors of television content who learn and model behavior portrayed on television programming. Five broad categories of television viewing are analyzed, and used to predict a range of SNS user behavior. Results suggest that social behaviors commonly associated with mediated celebrity are now being enacted by non-celebrities in an increasingly mediated social environment. Andy Warhol predicted in 1968 that everyone would receive fifteen minutes of fame, and contemporary observers such as David Weinberger [18] suggest that internet technologies such as weblogs will make everyone famous to fifteen people. Reality television, however, demonstrates to viewers that anyone can become famous to an audience of millions, and Web 2.0 tools and applications put that potential within reach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reality television and affect TV
The relationship between the content of mass media and cultural attitudes are among the most-examined issues in mass communication research. Previous studies have explored the impacts of mass media upon attitudes towards violence [8], sex [13], and smoking [14, 17] among many additional topics. One trend observed in the last two decades is the relative increase of reality-framed television programming. RTV makes the personal thoughts, behaviors, and interactions of its characters the main focus of audience attention. Bente and Feist [5] refer to this genre as *affect TV,* which presents "the most private stories of non-prominent people to a mass audience, crossing traditional borders of privacy and intimacy" (p. 114). As the term is used here, the defining characteristic of RTV is that ordinary people (not professional actors) serve as the main characters [40], and includes programs such as *Survivor*, *The Bachelor,* and *Blind Date* among many others.

Recently, Ferris, Smith, Greenberg and Smith [9] conducted a content analysis of reality dating television and found that watching these shows was related to perceptions of dating relationships consistent with those modeled on television. The authors used social cognitive theory [1] to explain the connection between television viewing and subsequent attitudes. The current study, however, differs in that RTV is conceptualized more broadly.

Calvert [7] refers to RTV's realignment of the private and the public as "mediated voyeurism," and suggests that this is becoming endemic to the culture at large. This culture of mediated voyeurism may have real impacts on those who are most involved in it. Bandura's [1] social cognitive theory allows for the integration of social contextual factors into the effects model, and provides a useful framework for discussing the effects of celebrity culture and mediated voyeurism.

2.2 Social Cognitive Theory
Social cognitive theory (formerly social learning theory) attempts to explain how and why people acquire and maintain certain behavioral patterns. Human functioning is explained as the product of the dynamic interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences. This tripartite construct is dynamic and highly contextual.

Social cognitive theory uses the term *modeling* to characterize the process through which an individual observes others, interprets the observed behavior, and adjusts their own behavior in response. Bandura [1] notes that modeling may occur wherever an individual is able to observe others' behavior. The development of television is viewed by Bandura as an especially important source of behavior models, enabling people to "transcend the bounds of their immediate social life" (p. 55). To the extent that one's images of reality are mediated and vicarious rather than directly experiential and experimental, the greater the impact of the media [1]. Bandura is careful to show that modeling is a more complex process than simple mimicry or imitation, and identifies several specific functions of the process.

The observational learning process requires a model, a learnable attitude or behavior, and a conducive personal/behavioral/environmental context. In the present study, the characters in RTV programming serve as models and the Web 2.0 environment provides a new context for enacting observed behavior. The wide adoption of platforms such as SNSs among the largest demographic of RTV viewers—young adults [10]—suggest significant potential for interrelated media behavior.

2.2.1 Web 2.0: production and motivation
A production process is the enactment of an observed behavior, while a motivation process refers to the fact that the enactment of any behavior is subject to contextual incentives and disincentives. These two sub-processes will be discussed in tandem as they are related to the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies.

SNSs provide a unique platform for the *re*production of behavior observed in and modeled by RTV programming. For most of its history, "the media" was the domain of those who were, by definition, celebrities. With the wide scale adoption of media sharing, blogging, and SNSs, a much broader range of people now have the capability to create mediated identities. The SNS platform emphasizes aspects of human interaction that have been traditional associated with celebrity, such as the primacy of image and appearance in social interaction.

One behavior which may result from RTV modeling is what we term "promiscuous friending." While many users have articulated SNSs that map closely to their own external social networks, other users have SNS friend networks that contain many people who they have not actually met or have no external relationship with. Promiscuous frienders may be reproducing the fame-seeking behavior that is modeled by RTV characters. Having a large social network on a SNS site can been construed as a sign of popularity (being at the center of a large social network) and conversely as a sign of superficiality (e.g. "whores," [6] who are blatant status-seekers). In either case, a large "friends" list implies a large number of social connections, even if many of those connections have little social value in the traditional sense of friendship. In this scenario, users are actively competing for attention via expansive social networks.

The capacity to enact a behavior is insufficient grounds for most people to do so. Motivational processes like positive anticipated

outcomes must be entered into the equation. Once again, RTV provides plentiful motivational input. Within the genre of socially rewarding RTV, participants are rewarded with celebrity and cash prizes for their participation. Consistent with Calvert [7], we suggest the RTV genre demonstrates a value system which equates celebrity status and fame with social prestige and personal value.

Celebrity culture is a significant factor in the contemporary media environment. One component of this culture is the development and increasing popularity of so-called reality television programming. RTV has introduced a new idea into celebrity culture; namely, that the interactions of everyday people are worthy of the attention of broad audiences, and that anyone can become a public celebrity – special talents, looks, skills, or wealth not required. Further, the development of powerful, accessible tools for self-expression – the platforms of Web 2.0 – now make it possible for individuals to "mediate" themselves, and reach audiences on the same scale as movie stars and fashion models. Taken together, these trends suggest both motivations and predictable outcomes for online behavior. Social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding how viewers of RTV may enact specific behaviors online. Because RTV is hypothesized to model a specific set of attitudes and behaviors, viewing other categories of television content should not correlate with these behaviors. Thus, the following specific hypotheses are proposed:

> **H1**. RTV consumption is positively related to time spent logged into SNS profiles.
>
> **H2**. RTV consumption is positively related to the size of users' online social networks.
>
> **H3**. RTV consumption is positively related to the proportion of users' online social networks who have never been met face to face (F2F).
>
> **H4**. RTV consumption is positively related to sharing photographs via SNSs.

3. METHODS

A total of 452 online surveys were completed by a sample of university students. Students were required to complete the survey as part of a class exercise. Approximately 58% of the sample was female; the average age of participants was 20.3 years ($SD = 2.6$). The majority of participants identified their ethnic background as Caucasian (approximately 62%). About 16% were Asian, 6% were African-American, and 3% were Hispanic. The rest (about 13%) identified with a variety of other ethnicities.

3.1 Social Network Site Measures

To measure the length of time spent logged into SNSs, participants were asked, 'when you typically log into your SNS account, how many hours do you spend online,' and 'when you typically log into your SNS account, how many minutes do you spend online.' Overall, participants reported spending an average of 47.4 ($SD=37.7$) minutes per session. Whereas offline social networks may be conceptually amorphous and indistinct (at least until they are examined by curious researchers), SNSs constrain social activity according to their technical design. In general, two SNS users are either "friends," or they have no relationship whatsoever. One question was used to measure how many 'friends' participants have via their SNSs, and participants reported an average of 282 friends ($SD=235$).

Because of the likelihood that these 'friend' connections do not accurately reflect the makeup of user's social networks, participants were asked to estimate the number of these 'friend' connections they have not actually met in person. The average proportion of network contacts not met was 14 per cent ($SD=22$), with the majority of respondents indicating they know all of their SNS contacts. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the number of photographs they have publicly available on their SNS profiles (M=71.6; $SD=68.2$).

3.2 Television Viewing Measures

Television viewing was measured using a series of questions addressing five categories of content. Participants were asked 'how many hours per day' and 'how many days per week' they watched reality television, news, fiction, education, and 'other' kinds of content. RTV consumption was prompted with examples like the Real World and American Idol. Fiction shows were prompted with examples like The Simpsons, CSI, etc. Educational content was prompted with examples like The History and Discovery Channels. Overall, participants reported viewing approximately 30 hours of television weekly ($SD=27.8$). On average, participants reported watching about 6 hours of reality television ($SD=8.5$) and news ($SD=7.3$) weekly, 9.3 hours of fiction ($SD=9.7$), and 5.4 hours of educational programming ($SD=7.3$). The 'other' category accounted for 4.7 hours weekly ($SD=7.1$).

4. RESULTS

This section begins with a summary of relationships between variables used in this study. Age and education were negatively correlated with time spent logged in SNSs ($r=-.16$, p<.01), the number of friends participants report having connected to their profiles ($r=-.17$), and the number of photographs available online ($r=-.18$). Younger people clearly are investing the most resources into these tools. Social network size and the proportion of friends not met are strongly correlated to each other ($r=.27$), and the number of photographs available correlate with network size, as expected ($r=.47$). Also expected was the strong correlation between each of the television viewing variables.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to test the influence television viewing had on each of four dependent variables related to SNS use: time logged into SNSs, the size of participants social networks, the proportion of these networks not met, and the number of photographs shared on these sites.

In the first series of analyses, age, gender, education and aggregate television viewing were entered as independent variables and regressed onto the SNS measures. The analyses begin with aggregate television viewing to explore its influence before examining each category of television content independently. Both education ($\beta = -.138$) and aggregate television viewing ($\beta = .135$) were significant predictors of time spent logged into SNSs. Not surprisingly, younger people spend the most time managing their online profiles. Further, the more television participants watch, the more time they spend online. Overall, this model explained approximately 5 percent of the total variance. In the next model, the size of participant's social networks was entered as the dependent variable. Although aggregate television viewing was not significant, younger people tended to have larger network sizes

(β = -.234). Age was the only significant predictor of network size, and this model explained about 4 percent of total variance. When these variables were regressed onto the proportion of network contacts not met F2F, only television viewing (β = .148) was a significant predictor. As participants spend more time watching television, the likelihood that they 'friend' people they haven't actually met increased.

The last model in this set of analyses revealed that television consumption did not have a relationship with photo sharing. However, age (β = -.288), gender (β = -.266) and education (β = .241) all were significant. Younger female participants are the most prolific at sharing photos on SNSs. Further, as educational attainment increases, so too does the likelihood of engaging in this behavior.

An additional series of OLS regression models were designed to explore the roles specific content categories of television play in terms of influencing online behavior and address the specific hypothesis outlined in this study. Results are presented in table 1, below (*Note:* Because RTV was the only significant predictor variable, news, fiction, education and other kinds of TV viewing were omitted).

Table 1. Standardized beta coefficients for range of dependent variables, aggregate TV viewing.

	Time logged in, daily	Size of network	% *not* met F2F	Number of photos shared
age	-.077	-.240***	0.51	-.290***
gender	-.073	-.063	-.031	-.236***
education	-.117	.132*	-.029	.243***
RTV hrs/week	.183**	.152*	.186**	.107*
$F_{(8, 445)}$, R^2	4.02***, .06	3.56***, .05	2.40*, .03	9.33***, .144

Note: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

In the first model presented in table 1, the only variable which predicts average time logged in to SNSs was frequency of RTV viewing (β = .183). The model is significant ($F_{(8, 445)}$= 4.02, p < .001), and explains 6 percent of the variance. The addition of the individual television content variables moderated the relationship between education and time spent logged in, which was no longer a significant predictor. RTV viewing was also significant (β = .152) in the model predicting network size, as were age (β = -.240) and education (β = .132). The addition of the content variables to this model strengthened the coefficients for age and education. Younger, educated participants who watch more RTV tend to have larger social networks via SNSs.

When the proportion of network contacts not met F2F was designated as dependent variable, only RTV viewing emerged as

significant (β = .186). Here, RTV viewing alone explains more variance in the model than aggregate television viewing. In the last model predicting photo sharing, RTV viewing again was significant (β = .107). Consistent with earlier analyses, age (β = -.290), gender (β = -.236) and education (β = .243) are also significant. RTV viewing was the only significant television viewing category significant in all four models; none of the other television content categories were significant. Together, these results support the hypotheses presented above.
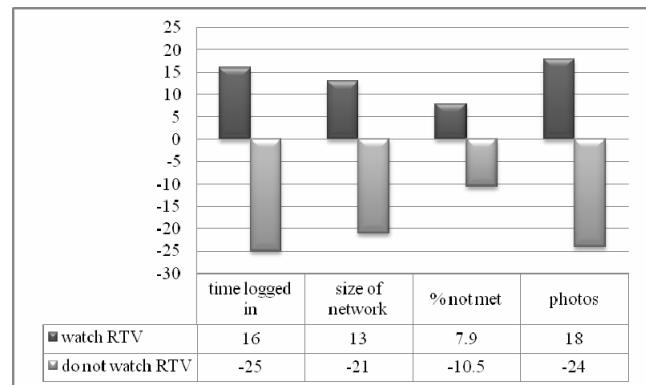

	time logged in	size of network	% not met	photos
■ watch RTV	16	13	7.9	18
▪ do not watch RTV	-25	-21	-10.5	-24

Figure 1. Systematic differences between viewers and non-viewers of RTV. *Note: data have been standardized for comparison between variables.*

To further highlight the trend in these analyses, Figure 1, above, was created to show the significance of RTV viewing in terms of each dependent variable. Because the measurement scale varies between these variables, the data were first standardized before comparing differences in mean values for each.   As Figure 1 shows, there are robust, systematic differences between viewers and non-viewers of RTV in terms of the SNS behavior indices. ANOVA analyses confirm that the between group differences are all statistically significant at greater than p<.01.

5. DISCUSSION

The evidence presented herein suggests that behavior traditionally associated with celebrities is being adopted en mass as people's interpersonal communication becomes increasingly mediated. Utilizing social cognitive theory as the theoretical foundation, a positive relationship was expected between the amount of RTV young people consume and a range of online behavior in the context of SNSs. These behaviors reflect the systematic processing of messages and behavior broadly modeled within the genera of RTV. Recall that the critical change in people's media diets over the past fifteen years lies in a shift from consumption to production. Internet users are faced with low time and financial costs as they enthusiastically contribute to the production of "mass media." This study adds a unique perspective to people's motivations to participate with the social web, and several valuable insights are revealed.

Although age had a strong negative relationship to the size of people's networks and the number of photos they share, aggregate television viewing did not. Younger people clearly had larger SNS networks, but watching television did not impact this variable. However, when the percentage of network contacts *not met* was considered, results suggest that television viewing was influential.

After controlling for the size of people's online networks, there was positive and significant relationship between television consumption and the likelihood that network contacts were relative strangers. Typically people use networking sites to connect to others with whom they share an off line connection. For example, students typically friend others with whom they have shared a class, lived together with, or met F2F at a social event. While this may be the case most of the time, the results presented herein suggest that television viewing is associated with increased promiscuity in 'friending' behavior online.

Next, aggregate television viewing was parsed into 5 broad content categories. These genres were then regressed onto the same four dependent variables used earlier to further delineate the relative influence each content category has on people's behavior in the context of SNSs and to address the specific hypotheses regarding RTV consumption. The results point to a consistent, positive, and significant relationship between RTV consumption and each of the dependent variables. Exposure to RTV programming which models a range of behavior promoting non-directed self-disclosure and positive outcomes associated with celebrity status had a strong and positive relationship with each of the dependent variables used in this study. It is also important to note that the lone RTV consumption variable explains more variance in every model opposed to the aggregate viewing variable used in the first series of analyses.

While many issues and questions remain, the current study shows that motivations for SNS use can be explained in part by traditional mass media consumption. Web 2.0 tools allow people to build and maintain extensive social networks and facilitate activity traditionally associated with celebrity. These tools reinforce the central position image and appearance hold in social interaction, regardless of the mediated nature of communication today. Although the findings in the current research begin to clarify the connection between RTV, the drive for celebrity, and SNSs, many questions remain. If stereotypical gender differences in power persist online, then future research should address in greater detail women's motivations to share photos online.

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