

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

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# We all want to be big stars: The desire for fame and the draw to *The Real Housewives*

### ABSTRACT

*This study analyses eighteen in-depth interviews with adults in the Midwest who watch Bravo's reality (RTV) docusoap franchise Real Housewives. Shifting the gaze away from RTV effects and towards the proliferation of RTV, RTV stars (celetoids) and what Graeme Turner calls the 'demotic turn', this study examines the show's appeal and whether a latent desire for celetoid-type fame exists among the main viewer groups analysed here (straight women and gay men). A desire for fame appears to be present among the men in this study, and younger men tended to conceive celetoid-type fame as desirable. This study also finds that men and women gravitate towards different character types. Straight women appear less intensely drawn to Real Housewives than gay men, both in terms of buying Real Housewives products and attempting to connect with the women on the show via Twitter. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the profusion of RTV, the demotic turn and celetoids factor into new desires among regular people for celetoid-type fame. This study also adds to recent research that shows that a desire to be famous is now characteristic of younger generations.*

### KEYWORDS

reality TV  
Real Housewives  
celetoid-celebrity  
demotic turn  
fame  
millennials

When I look at the television, I want to see me staring right back at me. We all want to be big stars, but we don't know why and we don't know how.

(Adam Duritz of Counting Crows, 'Mr. Jones')

*The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006) premiered on Bravo in March 2006 and ushered in a new era of women-oriented reality TV (RTV) entertainment. Since its inception, TV viewers in the United States have seen a variety of copy-cat RTV shows centering on the lives of women e.g., *Basketball Wives* (2010), *Mob Wives* (2011), *Love and Hip Hop* (2011), *Big Rich Texas* (2011) and *Private Lives of Nashville Wives* (2014). Currently, there are seven *Real Housewives* titles airing on rotation in the United States: *Orange County*, *New York* (2008), *Atlanta* (2008), *New Jersey* (2009), *Beverly Hills* (2010), *Miami* (2011) and Australia's *Real Housewives of Melbourne* (2014), along with nine spinoff shows. The women on these shows have become celebrities: staples in tabloids, easy targets for bloggers and among the most talked about people on social media. Recently, Bravo Media, part of NBC Universal Cable Entertainment, announced that January 2014 was the network's most watched month in history, averaging 1.1 million viewers during primetime. Driving ratings success was *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, then in its sixth season, with 4.3 million viewers across key demographics. Bravo also ranks number one for 'most affluent, educated, and engaged audience in cable entertainment' (Bravo Press Release 2014). The women-oriented docusoap, once a niche programming style, now pervades cable networks. Its increasing popularity among its target group of women aged 18 to 49 and its subsequent gay male audience also interested in this type of content makes this a rich source for sociological study.

In the United States the phenomenon of RTV is often traced back to *Candid Camera* (1948); however, its major entrance to the television canvas came at the turn of the millennium with shows like *Big Brother* (2000), *Survivor* (2000) and *The Bachelor* (2002). 'Reality TV' is now a global phenomenon and an umbrella term for a multitude of programmes with a variety of content, and no single definition can explain them all. The most cited definition includes TV shows that 'film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives as these events occur' (Nabi et al. 2003: 304). This study examines a *docusoap*; a RTV show based 'not on the documentation of exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life' (Andrejevic 2004: 102). PBS's *An American Family* (1973) has been considered the foremost docusoap in the United States. Two decades later MTV's *The Real World* (1992) aired as a homage to *An American Family*, changing the way people conceived of television. Not only did it depict the enhanced everyday lives of young people, but it also gave regular people a chance at television fame.

Typically the docusoap has been underrepresented in the field of RTV studies for bigger ratings winners and competition-type programmes, such as Fox's *American Idol* (2002). Major scholarly attention to the RTV genre is a recent endeavour, stretching back about twenty years. Most literature thus far can be divided into two categories: (1) RTV effects and (2) the appeal of RTV. This study straddles literature on the appeal of RTV and current trends in celebrity studies, particularly emphasizing 'ordinary' celebrity. The emphasis on the ordinary, or what Graeme Turner named 'the demotic turn' (2006), in media culture deals with the profusion of regular people gaining fame (in this case, RTV stars, or what Sociologist Chris Rojek calls *celetoids*), and the increasing interest in the mundane aspects of celebrity lives.

The major objective of the following research is to examine both what draws fans to *Real Housewives* and whether, and to what extent, there is an underlying desire for fame present in fans of these shows. Desiring fame has only recently been empirically examined. This desire appears to be a cultural condition among those in the United States. It may be a result of the alienation and the need for recognition that is born from the socio-economic environment of a capitalist country. Media effects literature negatively depicts RTV as a vehicle for promoting unhealthy body image, aggression and stereotyping, among other examples, but RTV is not wholly responsible for these things. Perhaps the social and cultural landscape of the United States, which formulates our values, practices, and desires, should be thoroughly re-examined before we throw RTV in the trash. The best place to begin a turnaround of RTV's negative depiction is with an examination of the two main categories of literature on RTV.

1. However, Mazeo's study focused on women with a predisposition for eating disordered behaviour and low self-esteem, a population of women who are likely more vulnerable to the content of *The Swan*.

## **MEDIA EFFECTS**

Many studies have found that the mass media, including RTV, is associated with negative body image (Myers and Biocca 1992; Botta 1999; Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn 2004; Mazeo et al. 2007; Egbert and Belcher 2012; but for negative findings see Ferguson et al. 2013). Egbert and Belcher (2012) examined a sample of questionnaires using the Five Item Perceived Realism Scale from 242 undergraduate students at a North American Midwestern university. They found through regression analysis that exposure to *Dancing with the Stars* (2005) predicted an increase in a drive for thinness. Similarly, Mazeo et al. (2007) found that watching the RTV show *The Swan* (2004) contributed to eating disordered attitudes among women.<sup>1</sup> Analogously, Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) found that exposure to idealized masculine bodies in media is related to depression in men. Studies have also shown that RTV viewers are more likely to tan in indoor facilities (Fogel and Krausz 2012) and to get plastic surgery (Crockett et al. 2007) than are non-viewers.

RTV viewing has been linked to more than a negative body image. For instance, exposure to violence and aggression in the media has been linked to violent and aggressive behaviour in real life (Wood et al. 1991; Gentile et al. 2004; Coyne et al. 2010; but for negative findings see Wright et al. 2002). Coyne et al. found that aggression portrayed realistically on RTV was more likely to be imitated than non-realistic aggression on scripted shows. Their analysis of different forms of aggression, where men were thought to use physical aggression, and women relational aggression, showed that there was more relational aggression on RTV (2010: 286), i.e., among women.

Therefore, studies show that RTV contributes to negative body image, violence and aggression, but also that it reinforces stereotypes about marginalized groups, including women (Dubrofsky 2009). Dubrofsky's content analysis of *The Bachelor* found that shows like this depict women as 'frighteningly overemotional' (2009: 353). Dubrofsky examined the portrayal of Christi from Season 2 and found she was typically captured in highly emotional states, a practice likened to the 'money shot' in pornographic films (a shot of the man ejaculating). Similarly, RTV makeover shows have been found to reinforce traditional notions of femininity, empowering women mostly in terms of physical perfection (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Gallagher and Pecot-Hebert 2007).

Analogously, some scholars found through content analysis of *Survivor* and *The Real World* that RTV reinforces stereotypes about race (Bell-Jordan

2008; Tyree 2011). Tyree's textual analysis of ten RTV shows during sweeps week from March 2005 to May 2008 finds that black participants are used as 'triggers or catalyst in arguments, disagreements, and physical altercations' (2011: 408) particularly against their white co-stars. She determined that all ten RTV shows 'had at least one participant who fit into stereotypical characters' (2011: 394). In a content analysis of three RTV shows, Bell-Jordan's study found that race was positioned as 'a point of contention' (2008: 353) among cast mates, reinforcing stereotypes and also using them to drive plot.

### **A CHANGING TIDE?**

In counterpoint to the large body of research discussed above, a recent study funded by the Girl Scouts Research Institute surveyed 1114 girls nationwide aged 11 to 17 on RTV and other forms of media (Ferguson et al. 2013). The study found that watching RTV did not predict relational aggression and was positively related to increased self-esteem and expectations of respect in dating relationships. Ferguson et al. also found that watching RTV correlates with a readiness to concede other values, such as being truthful and loyal, for fame. Other positive RTV outcomes include Hart's (2004) content analysis of Season 1 of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003). Hart found that gay men were portrayed as superheroes, which challenged stereotypical media norms and reversed the power dynamic between gay and straight men. Such studies mark a new turn for RTV effects literature since they reveal positive outcomes of viewing RTV.

### **THE APPEAL OF REALITY TV**

In spite of the above findings on RTV effects, people watch for a variety of reasons. Several studies looking into the appeal of RTV implement aspects of Katz et al.'s (1973) Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). UGT is guided by the idea that viewers have a clear use and intent for specific media. Studies conducted in this vein have found that viewers watch RTV for: voyeurism (Nabi et al. 2003; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Baruh 2009), companionship, emotional involvement, social affiliation needs (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Lundy et al. 2008; Godlewski and Perse 2010), therapeutic qualities (Andrejevic 2004; Dubrofsky 2007) and 'humilitainment' (Waite and Booker 2005). In a content analysis of Season 1 of *The Apprentice* (2004), Waite and Booker (2005) found that humiliation played a role in why people watched. They found that viewers sought pleasure in others' misfortunes in order to feel better about themselves. The appeal of RTV has also been attributed to its democratic nature because viewers can control who is eliminated (Andrejevic 2002).

Studies have also found that viewers perceive RTV as realistic by examining elements of perceived realism among viewers in the United States (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Hall 2006). Papacharissi and Mendelson examined survey data from 157 students in an introductory communication course, while Hall conducted four focus groups with 132 students from a Midwest university. Both studies found that viewers saw the content as realistic. Meanwhile, Deery examined co-production, product placement and sponsorship within RTV shows, concluding that RTV is 'advertainment' (2004: 18), or selling unrealistic lifestyles to viewers. Since RTV uses real people as opposed to actors, and since some viewers believe in the realism of these shows, they may be internalizing desires for lifestyles that are actu-

ally enhanced by network executives. For example, Teresa Guidice of *Real Housewives of New Jersey* has spoken to the media about how Bravo helped furnish her home and supplied fashion accessories for filming.

One study brings up a commonly unmentioned appeal. Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) study surveyed 239 college students at a Midwestern university using the Reiss Profile, a standardized instrument measuring 16 fundamental psychological impulses or trait motivations that help define adult personality. They found that people who enjoy RTV have an above average trait motivation to feel self-important, preferring shows that stimulate feelings that they intrinsically value most (2004: 363). They concluded that RTV viewers can 'watch the shows, see people like themselves, and fantasize that they could gain celebrity status by being on television' (2004: 374). Reiss and Wiltz point to a desire for fame among viewers. The following study will examine this desire and place it within the context of conceptual frameworks bolstering the study of celebrity.

## DESIRE FOR FAME

The concept of fame, as Brenda Weber writes, has 'been a part of social interaction since before Homer sang of Trojan wars' (2009: 220). Scholars, however, have attempted to study the long history of fame only in recent decades (Braudy 1986; Gamson 1994; Brock 2006). Braudy argues that the definition of fame relies on the socio-political system at hand and the media available for spreading images. Regular people desiring fame, however, have not been as thoroughly documented, most likely because this desire has only recently been illustrated in the mass media à la Turner's 'demotic turn'.

Boorstin (1961) and Lasch (1979) argue in their seminal texts that the desire for fame is a result of commodification, meritocracy, consumer culture and increasing narcissistic tendencies. Fame was once something that came naturally to specific individuals deserving renown, but according to Boorstin it became a modern desire among regular people due to the rise of the mass media, glamorous 'pseudo-events' and celebrity conferences. Lasch built upon this argument, noting that materialism and the therapy culture of the baby boom generation added to people believing they too deserved their chance in the spotlight. According to Laurie Ouellette (2008), neo-liberal policies in the United States in the 1990s coupled with the 1996 Telecommunications Act, helped RTV reach new heights and changed people's ideas regarding fame.<sup>2</sup> Anyone who was willing to 'pick herself up' as an enterprising individual could now achieve fame via new media communication technologies (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube).

## ORDINARY FAMEDOM

Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2010) reflected on celebrity as an academic topic, giving a statistical overview of celebrity studies coupled with a narrative analysis of selected works that have shaped this field. Tracing disparate themes, they note that a handful of articles were published between 1950 and 1970. However, in the last twenty years celebrity has become 'a topic that is emergent across disciplines with a significant growth' (Beer and Penfold-Mounce 2010: 362). The millennium brought forth substantial growth and conceptual frameworks for celebrity.

Scholars have since noted that our culture is suffused with celebrity (Giles 2000; Rojek 2001; Turner 2010; Cashmore 2006). Rojek analyses celebrity

2. The 1996 Telecommunications Act deregulated the broadcasting market in the United States to allow for greater competition, i.e. allowing any communications business to compete in any market. However, instead of fostering competition, the act consolidated a number of media companies into larger ones.

3. The interview guide initially contained 47 questions and was later cut to the existing nineteen.

absorption from three historic processes: democratic society, secularization of religion and the commodification of everyday life (2001: 13). These processes, he argues, have caused ordinary people to experience *achievement famine*, a concept referring to a 'psychological condition that results from frustrated desires for material and romantic achievement of the sort the rich and famous enjoy' (Rojek 2001: 149).

This ordinary experience of *achievement famine* brings about the prominent theme of 'the ordinary' in celebrity studies, strongly tied to the popularity of RTV (Turner 2006). Scholars inspecting the triumph of ordinary fame relate it to cultural shifts in technology, fandom and achievement (Turner 2006; Pearson 2010; Gamson 2011; Sternheimer 2011). Turner (2006) refers to this shift to the ordinary as the 'demotic turn'. Scholars such as Collins (2008) and Curnutt (2011) augment this research by analysing changing media industry strategies, and the expanding labour stock of willing participants, i.e. ordinary people at RTV show auditions.

The participants achieving the type of fame Curnutt and Collins point to will be referred to as 'celetoids'. This term, coined by Rojek (2001) and often cited (Turner 2006; Gamson 2011; Driessens 2013), has been distinguished in two ways: 'short life celetoid' and 'long life celetoid'. This study will reference 'long life celetoids', who 'achieve durable or semi durable types of fame', and are 'not distinctive for anything except their impudent ordinariness' (Rojek 2011: 165), e.g., *Real Housewives*.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to challenge the dominant framework in media effects literature, which posits that the mass media, particularly RTV, is detrimental to viewers. Additionally, this study seeks to illustrate a connection between RTV viewing and the desire for fame by deciphering the appeal of RTV alongside viewers' conceptions of ordinary fame (RTV celetoids). Literature geared towards the appeal of RTV and literature on the 'demotic turn' (Turner 2006) has not specifically asked people what they think of ordinary fame, or pointed to an underlying desire for this type of fame being related to why they watch RTV. The demotic turn, celetoids and RTV are thoroughly intertwined. This study hypothesizes that these three factors contribute to a new experience of *achievement famine*, one that calls for ordinary people to desire the fame that people have obtained on RTV. This study seeks to address this hypothesis and the gap in this literature with the following research questions:

RQ 1: What draws fans to the *Real Housewives*?

RQ 2: Is there a desire for fame present in fans of these shows?

## DATA

The data for this project are based on eighteen interviews with viewers of any of the six *Real Housewives* shows that make up the television franchise. The in-depth interviews were based on an interview guide with nineteen questions (see Appendix).<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted between June and September 2013. The first half of the interview consisted of questions pertaining to the show. The second half considered the viewers' perceptions of celebrity culture and their potential desire for fame.

The inclusion criteria consisted of any individual over 18 years of age who views any of the shows in this franchise. The demographic breakdown of interview participants is nine men and nine women. The average age of men interviewed was 28; their ages ranged from 23 to 43. The average age of women interviewed was 29; their ages ranged from 22 to 40. Including both men and women within these age ranges allows for gender and generational commonalities and differences to be noted in responses. The majority of men interviewed were gay; one man identified as straight. All female participants identified as straight.

The demographic breakdown of this study could be attributed to the recruitment process, which was designed as an opt-in study. Flyers were distributed among existing contacts with the principal investigator's information. This was the least intrusive manner in which to obtain participants, allowing them to decide to participate on their own. After the initial wave of participants opted in, the study gathered additional respondents using the snowball technique. Interviewees gave the principal investigator names or passed the principal investigator's contact information along to others in their social network.

## LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by its small sample, and therefore its findings are not generalizable to a larger group. It is also limited in terms of gender and sexuality. Queer women are not represented here and only one straight man participated in the study. However, the demographic breakdown of the *Real Housewives* franchise consists of predominately straight women and gay men. The majority of participants were white, and therefore the findings do not represent racially varied perspectives. There is also no comparative backdrop to the findings regarding viewers' conceptions of fame versus non-viewers. Additionally, given the snowball approach, some respondents have social ties. It is important to keep in mind that people with similar interests and social ties may tend to think similarly in terms of a television show.

## METHODS

Many studies on viewers of RTV used focus groups (see Lundy et al. 2008; Hall 2006), questionnaires (see Reiss and Wiltz 2004; Barton 2009; Godlewski and Perse 2010) or content analysis (see Waite and Booker 2005; Baruh 2009; Dubrofsky 2007). Studies utilizing in-depth interviews with fans of RTV docu-soaps were hard to come by.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, scholars have claimed that ordinary people may desire fame (Rojek 2001; Gamson 2011; Turner 2006), yet empirical evidence is lacking. Few have asked participants about their desires, and this is something that can be done intimately with in-depth interviews.

Seven interviews were gathered over the phone due to long distance or convenience for the participant. The remaining eleven interviews were conducted in person, one-on-one, in various locations. Each interview was recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed later in order to get an accurate record of what was said. No names will be referenced in quotations. Respondents were simply identified as Man #One, Woman #One, etc. After the researcher recorded and transcribed all the interview data, she made a spreadsheet consisting of each question and the responses to it. The study employed manual pattern coding; findings note commonalities and differences between men's and women's responses, and between generational cohorts (those in their twenties compared to those in their thirties and forties).

4. Repeated Google Scholar searches did not find other studies in this area using an intimate in-depth interview approach with fans of RTV docu-soaps.

## ANALYSIS

These findings confirm existing research regarding the appeal of RTV, but also offer new territories for consideration in appeal-oriented studies. Three major findings point to gender and generation differences in (1) what draws viewers to the *Real Housewives*, (2) desires for *celetoid-type* fame (3) and viewers' conceptions of fame. Men and women tended to gravitate towards different character types. Men also appeared more intense in their fandom of the show, specifically in terms of buying products and connecting to the *Housewives* via social media more than women. Moreover, a desire for ordinary RTV fame seems prevalent among the young men interviewed. This supports the hypothesis of this study that the amalgamation of the demotic turn and the profusion of RTV and celestoids have contributed to a new experience of *achievement famine* in viewers.

### WHAT DRAWS FANS TO THE REAL HOUSEWIVES?

The majority of responses confirm social affiliation needs (Lundy et al. 2008; Godlewski and Perse 2010) voyeurism, the vicarious experience (Nabi et al. 2003; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Baruh 2009), entertainment (Hall 2006; Patino et al. 2012), and humilitainment (Waite and Booker 2005). Men in their twenties evinced social affiliation needs more than older men and women:

It was probably my group of friends at the beginning ... when I first started hanging out with [my group of friends] that's all they talked about ... so it was probably a friends influenced thing.

(Man 3, 24).

It's all I see in magazines, on TV, and all my clients talk to me about it!

(Man 1, 24)

Confirming voyeurism and the vicarious experience, respondents mentioned the money, glamour and lifestyles documented on the show as reasons for watching RTV. Additionally, there seems to be an aspirational quality to viewing these shows:

Everything they did, like they went on vacation and got a private plane and the screen would show like 'private plane, \$100,000.' They put the prices on everything they did. It was all about the money! It wasn't about the drama, but about the money. That's why I loved them so much, oh my god I want to be them one day.

(Man 7, 24)

The most interesting thing to see is all the rich people in the different areas interact with each other. As much as it is entertaining to watch them, you kind of live through them.

(Man 9, 25)

Because of the glamour, to tell you the truth. They have attractive looking people, you know with a lot of money and it just looked exciting.

(Woman 2, 36)

The appeal of 'humilitainment' can be found in responses to the question as to how the viewers feel the women on the show treat each other. All



participants said the women did not treat each other well, yet this did not deter them from watching; in fact this held their attention:

They create drama because there's nothing better to do. That to me is entertaining and so campy ... but it's gratifying because you're like, okay that makes me feel better about my own problems.

(Man 2, 23)

They're just so mean ... and then the ones that are boring, you're like, why are they even on the show?

(Woman 1, 27)

Additionally, many of those in the younger generational cohort said they believed the poor treatment to be exaggerated or 'fake' for the cameras, in a way justifying the women treating each other poorly. Perhaps part of the appeal of this franchise lies in the fact that many believe the drama to be contrived, and therefore acceptable:

Atlanta, OC and New York were *formed*, like they asked who their friends were and stuff ... now they're just bringing people in to audition. You know it's staged, they play it out, they're acting.

(Man 7, 24)

However, most of those in the older generational cohort did not make justifications in regard to the way the women treated each other on the show:

Sometimes I'm appalled and when the episode ends I tell myself I'm not going to watch it afterwards because how can I watch friends treat friends this way?

(Man 5, 43)

They are horrible. It's why I've always liked the company of men – hanging out with my husband more than women. Just the backstabbing, the two-faced-ness. It's awful.

(Woman 4, 40)

### ***Men and women gravitate towards different types of characters***

A major difference among men and women in this study is the types of characters they gravitate towards. The women on *Real Housewives* are not wall-flowers, and most of them can be classified as 'alpha females' or dominant character types. The men in this study tended to gravitate towards the most dominant alpha female; some young men even identified with and compared themselves to characters they preferred:

I always tend to prefer the dominant character. So whoever is the natural diva leader in the group ... she just owns the room and there's no questioning whether she's actually in control. She just has that charisma to take over the room and I always aspire to be that way.

(Man 2, 23)

Bethenny Frankel ... I just related to her for some reason, like she would be me or I would be her. I love her.

(Man 9, 25)

I really prefer Teresa Guidice. She's a huge bitch.

(Man 4, 24)

Tamra, because of what she brings to the table. I know she can kind of be hated, but ... she's pretty and at the same time I just like the spice that she brings to the table.

(Man 6, 40)

Women viewers tended to gravitate to the women who were calm and levelheaded, but did not compare themselves to the women on the show:

The ones that I like the most are the ones that come in and seem totally sensible compared to the rest of the crazies ... Lydia on OC was just this calm, sensible voice.

(Woman 8, 28)

I tend to like the normal ones, I don't like the pot stirrers, or the bad girls that cause the drama'

(Woman 4, 40)

I hate to say it but I have to, I'm drawn to the victims, like the ones that get talked crap about them the most.

(Woman 6, 24)

### ***Men tend to be more active viewers***

Viewers often dismiss RTV as mindless entertainment, and therefore it is important to note whether viewers are in fact passively (mindlessly) watching the show or actively consuming its content. One way to potentially determine whether viewers actively watch the show is to see whether they buy *Real Housewives* products or follow them on Twitter. Such activities demonstrate interest outside of just passively watching the show. Eight of the nine men interviewed, all gay, bought products put out by the women on *Real Housewives*, such as wines, books and apparel, while only five of the nine women did. One man explains the importance of supporting the women by purchasing their products:

People are like, oh you're stupid for buying their crap, like yes they're stupid, but at the same time it's like ... these women worked ... Kim and Kyle were already rich growing up ... but Vickie, Nene, all these people that didn't really have much, they've worked for it, they got on the show for a reason ... and built themselves up ... So they're all successful I guess. You grow attached to them, so you want to support them.

(Man 9, 25)

About half of the sample followed characters on Twitter, six of them men and two of them women. Four individuals have tweeted to characters and received a response or re-tweet from them. The following are examples of actively consuming the show via Twitter:

Oh I follow all of them on Twitter ... I also follow all of them on Instagram ... I love seeing Heather Dubrow, one of my favorites from OC. She posts stuff all the time, she has so few followers that she'll actually comment back on people's stuff. I haven't tried yet, but it makes me feel like, oh my god she only has 500 followers, like I feel somehow connected to her, that I'm in her circle.

(Man 2, 23)

If you Tweet while watching the show, like Jersey is so big on this, they will Tweet during the show, like 'you're not going to want to miss what's coming up next.' The characters will tell you *this* is what happens.

(Man 7, 24)

Carol responded to me or 'favorited' something I did. The thing is with any of those people, any celebrity you Tweet at, you never expect to get a response. So when you do you're kind of freaking out a little. Even if it's like nothing. To be honest they're kind of nobodies, you know?

(Man 8, 28)

Men and women in the older cohort did not use Twitter to connect to these celestoids. This is perhaps because this form of social media technology is a generational norm among younger people, or because the older cohort does not need to feel connected to these celestoids the way the younger viewers do.

### **IS THERE A DESIRE FOR FAME PRESENT IN FANS OF THESE SHOWS?**

First, the majority of participants acknowledged that chasing fame is a viable career option today (see Appendix for question 11). Men and women outside of the millennial cohort acknowledged this happening but expressed disdain ('I don't like it, but yes, definitely' – Man 5, 43), while the younger participants viewed fame as a labour option:

I think if you have your sights set on it and you're determined, and by determined I mean obsessed with it, absolutely I think you can interject yourself in most any reality circuit ... and find some level of fame ... there's not a lot of prerequisites there.

(Woman 6, 24)

Yeah, absolutely. I think some people work just as hard at that as they do their own jobs ... it is a job ... the first part is getting on the show, the second part is like, what lotion can I attach my name to, to get fans?

(Man 4, 24)

### ***A desire for fame appears more prevalent among men in the sample***

Findings from these interviews suggest that some viewers do desire *celetoid-type* fame, and have attempted or would attempt to achieve it. Five men had auditioned for various RTV shows including *Chicagolicious* (2012), *The Real*

*World, American Idol, The Voice* (2011), *X-Factor* (2011), *Work of Art* (2010), and *Martha Stewart Apprentice* (2004). Two men said they had not, but also have not ruled it out, while two men said no and never. When subjects were asked whether they would ever be on a show like *Real Housewives* the majority of men gave an enthusiastic yes, with only one saying no:

Yeah I mean if I was going to do it, I'm not going to be a little sidekick, it's got to be *my* show.

(Man 1, 24)

Yes in two seconds ... if I was on camera and wanted to get famous I would be so dramatic ... I would make myself a main role, and second season I'd be in that spot light, center, holding the orange!

(Man 7, 24)

None of the women, however, had auditioned for a RTV show, and stated that they would not in the future. In terms of being on *Real Housewives*, five women said no and four were ambivalent:

Oh my god, I really don't have a firm answer. It's yes and no.

(Woman 6, 24)

Seventy-Five percent of me would be like no, I'm not about to go and sink down to that level. But the other 25 percent of me would be like this is kind of refreshing.

(Woman 7, 23)

More men said that celebrity is something they would enjoy, particularly if they could define the parameters. Many responded similarly in that celebrity would be enjoyable but only for a set time. Three women gave firm negative responses. Some made the distinction that RTV-type fame is not the same as fame based on *talent*:

Some of these housewives are so crazy because they know they can become famous from the show, then it gets to their head ... but you are not really famous until you're like Britney [Spears].

(Man 9, 25)

Would I ever want to be Cher, or Britney Spears or Madonna, or these people that can't leave the house because they'd be mobbed with fans? I think no ... I wouldn't mind being famous for being me because I could still walk down the street.

(Man 2, 23)

I mean I wouldn't mind ... being recognized hopefully for my talent ... not just for you know being on a reality show ... I would really want to be recognized for a talent of mine.

(Man 5, 43)

When men and women were asked how they would attempt to become famous the responses varied across gender. Most women shared that fame was not something they wanted to attempt:

If you have a talent, for me, it would be design ... so if I did want to, I have no aspirations to be famous but I know a lot of people do. But if it were going to be something it would be within the design circle.

(Woman 4, 40)

I would like to say that I would create or do something that was meaningful ... but if I just wanted to be famous I would probably have to go the reality route.

(Woman 1, 27)

Men's responses tended to differ:

Oh my god I want to! Everyone wants to get famous ... obviously it would be in reality TV ... but it couldn't just be me, it would have to be with a group of people ... on reality TV. I would have to apply to a show that does something that relates to me, like young professionals.

(Man 7, 24)

Well I'm a designer and I would attempt to do what these ladies have done and what Bravo has done ... I would say myself and some of my crazy friends, we would have a great design reality show.

(Man 5, 43)

### **Conceptions of fame differ among generations**

While there appears to be a desire for fame present particularly in gay men who watch *Real Housewives*, there are also differences between generations of men who watch the show and their conceptions of fame. Older men tended to consistently highlight talent as a connection to celebrity:

[On his audition for a RTV show] They were looking for people who were outside of design and would bring a little more tension and political and religious banter back and forth. When I walked away I noticed I'm probably not going to get a call back. I was a little bit more even keeled.

(Man 5, 43)

I think I'd want to be famous by doing something that was just really really well done and well executed ... Whether it would be unique scripts or it would be a unique concept for a movie or show or something. I wouldn't want to become famous unless it was so well executed.

(Man 6, 40)

Younger men tended to emphasize personality and attribute it to celebrity:

If I really wanted to [get famous] I'm sure I could find someone that knew someone ... I've tried out for reality shows and stuff ... if you have a good personality I'm sure it will happen eventually.

(Man 1, 25)

One man acknowledged the superficiality of fame today, while stating that it is a valued goal:

Back in the day you actually had to do something worthwhile and credible to achieve fame ... for me I would love to be famous ... the chances are pretty slim ... but ultimately if the opportunity arose I would choose fame over anything else that I wanted to do.

(Man 2, 23)

The younger cohort grew up during rapid advancement in communication technology, i.e. the Internet, social networking sites and video sharing, which have much to do with the changing conceptions of fame, particularly in regard to emphasizing personality over talent.

## DISCUSSION

Triggering the underlying reason for this research was Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) study, finding that people who enjoy RTV prefer shows that stimulate feelings they intrinsically value most. They hypothesized that viewers can 'watch the shows, see people like themselves, and fantasize that they could gain celebrity status by being on television' (Reiss and Wiltz 2004: 374). This study on fans of the *Real Housewives* confirms that the desire for fame is part of the appeal, an aspirational quality, perhaps even an intrinsic value among the younger generation, which is something not usually discussed in UGT studies. This also helps formulate the argument that the more intensely people watch RTV shows like *Real Housewives*, the more they may desire RTV-type fame, i.e. celestoid status. Furthermore, these findings fit within nascent research examining the desire for fame (Uhls and Greenfield 2012; Greenwood et al. 2013). Greenwood et al. (2013) found that belongingness needs and narcissism predicted a desire for fame. Uhls and Greenfield's mixed methods approach revealed that the desire for fame was the number one value among their sample of preadolescents aged 10 to 12. They define the desire for fame as 'motive or behavior to seek either positive or negative public recognition on a large scale beyond one's immediate network of friends, community, and family, independent of accomplishments in a specific endeavor' (Uhls and Greenfield 2012: 2). Or in other words, fame can be based on personality traits, negative or positive, rather than talent.

The fact that those among the older generation in this sample were not as interested in acquiring fame as the younger participants gives evidence that valuing fame is generational, and dependent on communication technologies and popular culture trends (e.g., the rise of RTV). This study shows that RTV fame is considered desirable, a desire that may offer validation if achieved, and because of this the desire for fame should be more closely examined academically since it is something people want. There is no doubt that RTV validates the guise of America's 'equal opportunity' socio-economic structure, but more importantly, the desire for fame appears to be a cultural repercussion of the constant production of RTV shows, as evidenced through the number of willing participants at RTV casting calls. The *New York Times* estimates that about 1000 people are on television at once, participating on a RTV show. Therefore, the more RTV there is on television, the more people want to be on television, and desire this coarser type of fame. It appears that young people want to be famous in any way possible. Therefore, desiring fame is conditional upon our social world, relations with others, and generationally.

The younger generational cohort in this study viewed ordinary celebrity as a type of celebrity. Howe and Strauss (2000) would call this younger generational cohort millennials; people born between 1982 and 2002. Young and

Pinsky's (2006) study considers millennials and the increasing prevalence of narcissism in American culture. Over twenty months, they administered the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a 40-item forced-choice questionnaire measuring normal narcissism or inflated self-esteem, to 200 celebrities and 200 MBA students. Generally, celebrities have more narcissistic traits than regular people. This study found that RTV celebrities scored higher than any other celebrity type such as musicians, actors and comedians, while MBA students scored about the same as the group of celebrities.

Other studies have found that the millennial generation has the most inflated self-image to date (Twenge et al. 2008). Phenomena like social networking sites (Bergman et al. 2011; Stefanone et al. 2010), materialism, 'helicopter parents' and valuing 'uniqueness' (Twenge and Campbell 2009) are all related to the inflation of self-image. This correlates to findings from a 2006 survey where 81 per cent of 18 to 25 year olds stated that getting rich was their generation's most important goal, and 51 per cent said becoming famous was important (Pew Research Center 2007). The problem here concerns the implications for a society that celebrates ordinary celebrity as a great achievement, particularly for its young people.

This study also illustrates gender differences in the desire for ordinary fame. Young men appear to desire *celetoid-type* fame over women in this sample; they tended to go on more auditions for RTV shows, were more intense in their viewing of the *Real Housewives*, and admitted to wanting to be famous more than women did. Straight women tended to shy away from the spotlight, while more men tended to seek it out or acknowledged the desire to try. Future research should enquire whether and why young gay men have a desire for fame. Perhaps it has something to do with being a part of a generation that is welcoming of varied sexual identities. If so, this is their time to shine.

Aside from appealing to viewers' latent desires for fame, *Real Housewives* is appealing for many reasons. For instance, the men and women in this sample tended to gravitate towards different character types. Men gravitated towards the dominant, lively characters, while women preferred softer, calmer characters. The men in the younger cohort even compared themselves to the characters they preferred. While comparing oneself to a famous person may hold narcissistic connotations, there may be something else at play. Considering that gay men have been historically and culturally stigmatized in the United States, viewing a show about women whose attitudes and behaviours operate outside of traditional gender norms might give these men some sense of comfort.

Women on the other hand preferred the good girls. However, most women also downplayed their viewing, saying they have the show on as background noise, and do not actively consume the content. There may be a stigma for women viewers of the show, or at least there is a reluctance to admit to enjoying a show about 'housewives' who admittedly place great emphasis on looking good. In addition to this, more men said they would be on the *Real Housewives* than women, which further suggests that gay men embrace the show more than women, who looked at appearing on the show as an embarrassment.

Men also supported characters on the show through purchasing products and connecting with them more on social media than women. Cox and Proffitt's (2012) critical analysis of Season 5 of *Real Housewives of Orange County* and their textual analysis of online comments about the show depicted a solid connection between female viewers and consumption. The authors

found that 'close interrogation through feminist political economy suggests that while [*Real Housewives*] are designed to attract female audiences, they are also designed to support media commercialism and increase profit' (Cox and Proffitt 2012: 309). A similar study should be conducted that analyses gay men as consumers since this study found that gay men are staunch supporters of the show compared to women viewers.

Moreover, the Bravo network may be of interest to some gay men since the premiere of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and other shows oriented around gay men. According to Katherine Sender (2007), these shows targeted women first and then gay men. In her critical examination of Bravo's 'dualcasting' or gay programming for predominately straight women, Sender argues that Bravo programming appears to 'endorse the adage that gay men are [straight] women's best friends' (2007: 309). Either way, this study's sample is an example of the *Real Housewives'* target demographic. Bravo has done a fine job catering to both sets of viewers, who appear to be watching for different reasons and with varying degrees of intensity.

Another way to measure this intensity is through Twitter. Recent news in technology has illustrated Twitter's symbiotic relationship with RTV viewing, and fans tweeting celebrities is a sound way to measure celebrity appeal. All of the participants who tweeted directly to characters received a response from the *Real Housewife*. Celebrities such as the *Real Housewives* are supposed to be ephemeral (Rojek 2001); they may achieve fame for a while, but they are not likely to have lasting success like celebrities who have built careers based on talent. Therefore, part of the *Real Housewives'* staying power must come from nurturing (responding to) the para-social relationships fans seek out with them via Twitter. Man 8, quoted in the analysis section saying, 'any celebrity you Tweet at, you never expect to get a response. So when you do you're kind of freaking out a little. Even if it's like nothing. To be honest they're kind of nobodies, you know?', essentially summarizes that celebrities need to respond to fans in order to stay relevant. Future research should explore RTV's relationship to Twitter, and whether or not Twitter has anything to do with allowing celebrities to achieve lasting fame.

## CONCLUSION

Analysing eighteen in-depth interviews regarding *Real Housewives* fans and their conceptions of fame is a small step towards bridging the gap between three areas of research interest: (1) the appeal of RTV, (2) the demotic turn to the ordinary and (3) the desire for fame. These three areas have a symbiotic relationship. However, studies focusing on the appeal of RTV or the demotic turn do not usually consider regular people's desire for fame in terms of why viewers watch RTV and why RTV has remained so prevalent. It appears that younger people are conditioned to desire fame, and the prevalence of RTV reveals much about the social and cultural state of the current time. *Achievement famine*, or regular people looking up to celebrities and desiring the achievement, status and material goods they possess, supports Rojek's seminal text *Celebrity* (2001). What this study has uncovered, albeit on a small scale, is that ordinary people are experiencing a *new* condition of *achievement famine*, one that makes us desire a coarser type of fame.

Additionally, this study looked at the docusoap. Since the premiere of *The Real World* the docusoap has made people famous for being their ordinary selves. Competition/game shows tend to depict ordinary people with talent (or supreme



lack of talent), which allows them to contend for a prize. The docusoap simply gives regular people a chance at fame. The millennial generation has never known a time where one could not gain fame for being oneself.

What happens if people stop attempting to achieve greatness through talent and instead choose the quickest way to entry-level celebrity in order to fulfil this desire for fame? Media effects literature holds that the media, and therefore in this instance RTV, affects society. What it forgets is that the media is first and foremost a reflection of society, and therefore future research should integrate the desire for fame in studies examining the appeal, and uses and gratifications of RTV.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview guide

1. What got you into *The Real Housewives*?
2. Which one of the characters do you tend to prefer?/Which version of the *Housewives* is that?
3. How would you describe the way they treat each other?
4. Do you usually watch alone or with people?
5. Who's the most famous housewife?
6. Do you follow any of the characters on Twitter? *Probe* (if yes or no) why?
7. Do you tweet about the show? *Probe* (if yes) – Do you mostly tweet directly to characters or about what you like/dislike about the show? (If no – skip to question 9)
8. Have you ever been re-tweeted by a character? *Probe* (if yes) – How did you feel when you were re-tweeted?
9. What benefits do you see the women getting from being on these shows?
10. Have you used any of their products or read any of their books?
11. Fame is something we see more people trying to acquire, given the surplus of reality TV shows. Do you think getting famous can be considered a viable career path in itself today?
12. How would you attempt fame?
13. Have you ever auditioned for a reality show before? *Probe* – (if yes) what show? (if no) do you think you will in the future?
14. Would you ever be on a show like *The Real Housewives*?
15. Would you rather be famous or rich?
16. Would you rather be famous or beautiful?
17. Would you ever consider plastic surgery? *Probe* – why/why not?
18. Is celebrity something you would enjoy? *Probe* – why/why not?
19. If you're still in school, what is your intended career?/What is your current career?

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