the Fantasy of Reality

CRITICAL ESSAYS
ON The Real Housewives

EDITED BY Rachel E. Silverman
7. Hate-Watching the Housewives: Gender, Power, and the Pleasure of Judgment

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Clearly, there should/could be better shows on TV that depict women in a more positive light. I feel that about half of the time these women are doing positive things—raising a family, focusing on their careers, etc. But the other half, the part most [people] actually want to watch, they are fighting, bickering, talking about one another; etc. It's the latter that makes people tune in, unfortunately.

(Anonymous, online survey, 2013)

I think sometimes I pity these women and laugh at them and the situations they get themselves in. But overall, I really just watch these shows for simple entertainment. I like seeing their fancy homes, clothes, cars, and the drama that ensues. It doesn't go deeper than that.

(Anonymous, online survey, 2013)

As The Real Housewives franchise continues to manufacture a steady spectacle of reality programming, a fundamental aspect of this mediation has been "tardy for the [analysis] party." To date, audience reception research has been underdeveloped by the media/cultural studies disciplines. But if one considers the overwhelming success of this content among female viewers, juxtaposed by the potentially harmful meanings it produces about femininity, it follows that reception studies could reveal important clues about this oppositional relationship. As the opening statements exemplify, audiences are caught in a bind between judgment and pleasure; the first quote reveals a tension between desiring better depictions of women and understanding that the fighting and bickering are what draws her to watch, and the second quote highlights a dual process of pity and entertainment. So how do we understand these viewing patterns?
One possible term to describe this viewing practice has recently emerged in the television critic community: “hate-watching.” But is this accurate? There has been a long history of women consuming sexist and patriarchal media for enjoyment, even while conscious of those meanings, frames, and implications (for example, see Radway, 1984). But The Real Housewives presents a contemporary case of explicit fan judgment that deserves closer inspection. Fans actively follow the narratives, yet actively critique characters at the same time. The following essay considers the practice of “hate-watching” within the fan community of The Real Housewives, based on responses from an online questionnaire. How do we describe the “fan” who experiences pleasure from judgment? And most importantly, what does this type of viewing pattern reveal about the orientation of women toward media that focuses on the lives of other women?

Spectatorship and Cultural Conditioning

Without directly questioning the viewing audience of The Real Housewives, mainstream media have nonetheless framed fans as indulging in a guilty pleasure that induces anxiety over how to be a woman or a housewife. For example, in her New York Times article about the franchise’s “rebranding” of the term housewife, Carina Chocano (2011) writes, “The real housewives are part of that cloud: the embodiment of the mixed messages inherent in the tangle word ‘housewife,’ not to mention in our tangled ideas of how women should live, what they should do, how they should self-identify, how they should be judged.” Here, Chocano speculates that The Real Housewives contribute to the postmodern confusion over performing “woman,” resulting in anxiety-driven knowledge consumption. Similarly, when The Real Housewives of DC project was announced, The Washington Post critic Hank Stuever (2010) proclaimed that the announcement was “sad,” and that audiences are forced into an uncomfortable position. He writes, “It’s a mush of unsatisfied emotions: feeling sorry for them and yet falling into the trap of judging them and delighting in their miseries” (E01).

Even The Huffington Post—which features its own Housewives page—posted an article that acknowledges the “guilt” associated with watching The Real Housewives. In a 2013 article meant to promote the new season of AMC’s Mad Men, an article titled, “Elisabeth Moss Loves ‘Real Housewives’” included the following: “Elisabeth Moss is on one of TV’s most high-brow shows, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have some guilty pleasures ... Elisabeth Moss, she’s just like you.” Articles such as these proudly frame The Real Housewives viewer in a culture-slumming moral quandary, yet fail to feature the voices of the spectators themselves. These articles highlight the anxiety produced by a collision of viewing practices, pleasure, and cultural scripts; they assume that “the spectator” is a generalized mass of women that endure psychic harm—anxiety, judgment—as a result of their interest in The Real Housewives.

While this mainstream evaluation of Housewives viewing practices may be more of a veiled attack on content, it nevertheless works in opposition to cultural studies-based approaches to “the audience,” which features, “a focus on individuals’ differences, usually premise as socially constructed through economic, cultural or social positioning ... cultural studies emphasizes microstudy of social arrangements and the roles of cultural products in the lives of individuals” (Staiger, 2005, p. 75). In fact, this effort to nuance “the audience” has resulted in the development of fan studies, which Henry Jenkins (1992) describes as, “…a more sophisticated understanding of how these groups [fans] relate to the mass media and draw upon it as a resource in their everyday life” (p. 1). Fan studies scholars theorize that devoted audiences are made up of individuals that are often seen as abnormal due to their “transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 17). Most importantly, fans studies scholarship works to complicate generalizations most often found in mainstream media, as exemplified above. According to Jonathan Gray (2003), “Fan studies, by contrast, have provided a much-needed intervention and corrective, researching rather than assuming, exploring rather than judging” (p. 68). Drawing from Gray’s call for intervention and research, coupled with the speculative realities that surround a program that features wealth, femininity, and conflict, it follows that there is much to gain from addressing The Real Housewives from a cultural studies/fan studies perspective.

As noted by Staiger (2005), one of the main points of interest in this type of analysis is the role of social construction vis-à-vis media consumption practices. At the same time, however, a degree of agency—working alongside social construction—is awarded under this construct, often referred to as the “active audience,” which involves the ability to decode meanings in negotiated and oppositional patterns. So how can we think about social construction and taste as they prime audiences for enjoying The Real Housewives? How can we theorize the way that the social world prepares female fans—the dominant viewing demographic of this content—to both enjoy and judge simultaneously? What type of fan is this? Is this “hate-watching?” If we begin with a survey of the social condition of women in contemporary culture, we can then start to theorize general taste formation, which could offer an explanation for a draw toward this emergent viewing practice.
Scholars in sociology and feminist theory have demonstrated that, overall, women experience a struggle for resources at different points throughout their lifetime, based on the social institution of gender (Lorber, 1994). As pointed out by feminist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir (1989), Kate Millett (1990), and others, the female sex is immediately cast as inferior based on their sexualized status and are consequently socialized based on the expectations constructed for the female gender: feminine, mother, wife, domesticated, etc. In addition to this initial identification as the “other” gender, the practices of compulsory heterosexuality, sexualization of the body, and the sexual division of labor all work as processes of inequality that perpetuate what sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway (2011) calls “gender status beliefs” (p. 12). Ridgeway argues that these social conditions support the beliefs associated with gender inequality and cultivate the process of framing (e.g., stereotyping, judging) an individual based on their gender. She writes, “...what allows gender status beliefs to persist is that they are supported in people’s everyday experience by positional inequalities between men and women that provide men with more resources and power, on average, than women have” (p. 27). These “everyday experiences” include issues such as the second shift/unpaid labor, sexual harassment in the workplace, sexualization in mainstream media, and wage discrimination. Although some women actively subvert this condition of inequality in various ways, it is important to recognize the role of social construction as a primer for the ways that women develop a taste for, and learn to decode, media messages.

**Taste Formation and Competition**

Using Pierre Bourdieu’s (1998) terminology, this gendered female habitus positions women to evaluate media culture based on a consciousness of inequality, which also has implications for formations of taste. In his sociological work, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, Bourdieu (1984) argues that class positionality acts as a socializing agent for taste; the wealth of one’s parents and the level of one’s education can determine whether or not he or she will be able to distinguish high culture from low culture. Further, those with higher economic (and social and cultural) capital are in a position to set the classification of high culture, resulting in a continued dominance over the construction of aesthetic taste.

Following this logic, but replacing class positionality with gender positionality as the fulcrum of power, the male gender—the gender that holds the most economic and symbolic capital in US cultural production (Douglas 2010)—determines mainstream cultural taste. And because *The Real Housewives* is categorized as reality television programming, it presents a challenge to women who enjoy the content due to its reflection of stereotypical female interests but also realize that it is socially categorized as “low culture.” Another way to think about this gendered formation of taste for *The Real Housewives* is that it is a direct result of the condition of competition that emerges between women as a result of gender status beliefs and the struggle over resources.

Keeping gender inequality in mind, and its role in the related processes of taste formation and social conditioning vis-à-vis audience viewing practices, social competition between women offers an important theoretical clue to the ambivalent reception of *The Real Housewives*. According to Leora Tanenbaum (2002), the leading cause of this gender-specific competition is the policing of normative femininity. Tanenbaum argues that women are positioned against one another to compete and “win” at femininity, and this process typically involves judgment and comparison to other women. She writes,

> By definition, the female role is something a woman ‘wins’ at. Being feminine entails being attractive (more than other women); dating, living with, or marrying a “good catch” (who earns more money or is better-looking than other women’s men); and having faultless children (who are smarter, cuter, more attractive, and better behaved then her peers’ children). (p. 20)

Tanenbaum also points out that despite the social advances that women have experienced in recent decades, the feminine social script—used to support gender status beliefs—continues to position women against each other. She writes, “...whether we end up following the American feminist script of thumbing our noses at it, it exacts a toll on our attitude toward women: We become divided from one another and competitive with one another” (p. 20). If we consider the content of *The Real Housewives*, this programming becomes a spectacle of femininity that could trigger these particular attitudes. Whether it’s Gretchen from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* dressed like a 1950s Stepford wife or NeNe Leakes from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* asserting her opinions, each woman embodies varying levels of femininity and privilege. From an audience perspective, viewing *The Real Housewives* becomes an opportunity to channel this competitive spirit via spectatorship and active judgment.

However, this orientation toward “competing” with cast members of *The Real Housewives* is something you will not hear from audiences. According to Tanenbaum (2002), women are more likely to engage in “covert competition” as a way to distance themselves from non-feminine characteristics such as aggression (p. 21). She argues that because of this bind, competition typically takes the form of self-hatred and indirect aggression via social sabotage.
and gossip: “Girls and women internalize the idea that being aggressive is acceptable only for men, so we direct our aggression underground” (p. 61). For women, viewing The Real Housewives, then, could be theorized as a form of catharsis, a way to dispel the competition with other women that arises due to social expectations and inequality. Women are able to “covertly” compete with Teresa, Ramona, and Phaedra through judgmental viewing practices and in the end, give themselves the “win” for various reasons. As mentioned earlier in this essay, a term for this type of viewing behavior has emerged in reviews from television critics from The New Yorker to Slate.

The first use of “hate-watching” is credited to Emily Nussbaum (2012) in her review of the NBC drama Smash for The New Yorker and has since become a popular way to describe a specific, judgmental viewing practice. Willa Paskin (2013) of Salon writes: “Hate-watching is what happens when you turn into your most judgmental self and start pointing and laughing, but without feeling a twinge of guilt or shame that your time could have been better spent.” And Christopher Borrelli (2013) of The Chicago Tribune argues that hate-watching is, “an irrational, compulsive act that mixes satisfaction with disgust and often says as much about the person hate-watching as it does the object of their hate-watching.”

Based on the conceptual mapping of the way that women compete with one another as a result of gender scripts and status beliefs, coupled with the anxiety over reality programming framed as “low culture,” hate-watching offers a possible answer for the complexities surrounding female audience attitudes toward The Real Housewives. In order to test this theory, an online questionnaire was developed and distributed through snowball sampling and social media. Questions about judgment, preferences, and thoughts on “hate-watching” were included in order to investigate the ways that self-identified Real Housewives fans felt about their orientation toward content and viewing practices. In sum, there were 82 anonymous respondents representing primarily the Midwest, East Coast, and West Coast of the United States. Of the respondents, 63% were 23–40 years old, 36.4% had earned a master’s degree, 51.8% identified as married, and 66.7% lived in a household where the average income was $76,000 and up.

Patterns of Pleasure and Anxiety

The online questionnaire included diverse closed and open-ended questions meant to reveal individual “accounts of the media” (Hood et al., 2004, p. 77). According to Hood, Schofield Clark, Champ, and Alters (2004), “accounts of the media” include reflections on what individuals do with media as well as their accountability for media use vis-à-vis “social expectations” (76). Regarding general viewing practices, 52.2% of respondents watch The Real Housewives each week and when they do, 68.2% watch alone. The majority of the participants record the episodes, a large number of respondents reported watching the shows on the Bravo channel when they can—often missing the air date—and 43.3% reported experiencing “marathon” sessions on the Bravo channel. Only 13.3% of participants reported that they watched weekly episodes on the night they first aired. The combination of recording technology and vested interest has created a pattern whereby these self-reported “fans” of The Real Housewives are in control when they consume this content. Interestingly, a later question about viewing practices revealed that some of the respondents are forced to watch this programming when their husband or children are not around. Responses to the question “Do you have any specific viewing rituals before or while you watch?” indicate that the use of recording devices work in tandem with these viewing parameters:

“Make sure my husband is not in the room”
“I have to watch it when my husband isn’t home or in another room because he can’t stand the fighting.”
“I watch it in secret.”
“I usually watch alone because no one I know would want to watch it.”

Most viewers admitted that Housewives episodes are not a “must-see” and more of a “guilty pleasure,” leading them to fit the programming around their needs and schedule rather than shift their needs and schedule around the programming.

Because it was the first cast of the franchise, The Real Housewives of Orange County was identified as the cast that most respondents watched first, but Beverly Hills emerged as the cast that this particular sample watched the most (70%). When asked why they first decided to watch The Real Housewives, respondents reported that their initial interest stemmed from curiosity, their predilection for “trashy” reality programming, and as a device to fill time:

“Because I have a penchant for smut, reality television.”
“It seemed like a train wreck that was highly entertaining!”
“Who doesn’t like watching rich, beautiful people and their drama?”
“I was drawn to the glitz and seeing the opulence, the clothes, the houses, the life of leisure.”
“Boredom.”
“Something to do while folding clothes or nursing.”

The spectacle of “drama” was heavily cited as both a main reason for why respondents liked their favorite cast and also why they disliked a particular cast;
Interestingly, some forms of drama were more acceptable than others. The ability to “relate” was also cited as a defining factor for some respondents—casts that were relatable were more likable.

Drawing on the importance respondents placed on the ability to “relate” to onscreen identities, it makes logical sense that “relating” to racial identities would influence viewing habits as well; the majority of this dominantly White research sample “related to,” or favored, the all-White casts. The two casts that involved varying degrees of racial and ethnic representation—Miami and Atlanta—represented the least-watched seasons (Atlanta, 49.3%; Miami, 20.9%). When both casts were implicated in responses, language related to issues of race was generally absent; rather, the ability to “relate” emerged, at times, as a possible linguistic device to comment on racial identification. For example, the following statement was offered as an explanation for not watching particular seasons: “I never watched Miami or Atlanta. From the commercials, I felt that I wouldn’t relate in any way to the cast of those shows.” Interestingly, one respondent astutely identified her interest in watching the Atlanta cast from an “othering” perspective: “I am curious about seeing women of color other than my own and how they interact. There is definitely an ‘othering’ aspect that I have to admit is taking place when I enjoy watching this cast. I also think they are the most hilarious.”

Beyond the examples offered above, the discourse used to describe personal reactions to *The Real Housewives* relied on adjectives surrounding behavioral evaluation rather than direct commentary on the politics of race, ethnicity, or other identity markers. The following statements are a blend of explanations for “likes” and “dislikes,” but without knowing that, they could all be read as reactions:

- “New Jersey! Maybe because they were so rich and loud.” (Positive)
- “Orange County. They are out of control.” (Positive)
- “They are too abrasive and classless.” (Negative)
- “New Jersey. Most volatile and dramatic.” (Positive)
- “The people in these casts are far too crazy to enjoy for entertainment value.” (Negative)
- “I would say Beverly Hills because their drama is quite funny.” (Positive)

Based on these initial responses that combine pleasure and judgment, “hate-watching” might work as a way to describe viewing patterns. In fact, 96.4% of respondents reported that they actively critique the show while watching. Based on the questionnaire, the top four behaviors that were most critiqued by respondents were: (1) fighting; (2) decision-making; (3) intelligence; and (4) parenting.

According to cited definitions of “hate-watching,” audiences admit expressing pleasure while judging characters on a particular program and experience no guilt or shame. According to questionnaire responses, the majority of this population describes that this pleasure is more related to experiencing a competitive “win” rather than non-reflexive, non-invested judgment. Phrases like “smarter than,” “makes you feel superior to them,” and “better about myself,” are all examples of how judging others—in this case, housewives who are often entangled in drama—can facilitate self-evaluation.

For an overwhelming majority of this research sample, self-evaluation vis-à-vis *The Real Housewives* might be influenced by class privilege: 66.7% of participants live in a household that generates $76,000 and up per year. Drawing from the “ability to relate” factor, viewers may not be able to necessarily identify with the heightened level of wealth surrounding the Housewives, but responses indicated a voyeuristic pleasure surrounding their material obsessions and leisure:

- “I was drawn to the glitz; seeing the opulence, the clothes, the houses, the life of leisure.”
- “Who doesn’t like watching rich, beautiful people and their drama?”
- “It looked like a train-wreck and the whole thing of seeing the lives of people that seem to ‘have it all’ piqued my curiosity.”
- “The people looked glamorous and I was interested in their lives.”

Rather than critique the wealth of the Housewives or reveal feelings of jealousy, the respondents in this study demonstrated a curiosity in the “lifestyles of the rich and famous” that could be evaluated as an extension of their identification with the middle and upper class brackets. For them, the *Housewives*
are not a spectacle of American wealth inequality; rather, they appear to represent upward mobility—as demonstrated in entrepreneurship—and the American Dream. At the same time, however, the ways in which the Housewives use their wealth and the ways in which they perform “class” were identified as opportunities for critique. Perhaps due to their social frames of reference and subsequent value formation, these audience members are in a position to critically evaluate the levels of “class” performed in parenting, drinking, fighting, etc., and, as demonstrated above, enjoy a sense of competitive superiority when Housewives “fail” to fulfill the heightened expectations associated with “having it all.” But is this hate-watching?

When asked to read Willa Paskin’s (2013) definition of “hate-watching” and cite whether or not they felt that their viewing practices could be described in this way, the most popular response was “sometimes” at 42.9% with “never” following next at 39.3%. In response to a follow-up question, those that “always” or “sometimes” identified The Real Housewives of New Jersey as the cast that they “hate-watched” the most (67.5%). Based on their explanations, most respondents felt that the term didn’t work because they actually did feel guilt about the time wasted and argued that their agenda was more about entertainment than an exercise in constant judgment. As one respondent put it, “That’s taking the show a little too seriously.”

In fact, many of the respondents cited that because they fluctuate between authentic enjoyment and critique, they did not feel that “hate-watching” was the most accurate term. Perhaps the association with the word “hate” to describe viewing patterns indicated a stronger investment in programming than they would like; viewers were adamant about the strictly “entertainment” purposes of The Real Housewives and viewing practices that remained on their terms (i.e., manual recording). These responses appear to resurrect the gesture of distancing oneself from “low culture,” which consequently categorizes their continued interest in The Housewives as an example of a “guilty pleasure” removed from the language of meaningful cultural practice.

Overall, rather than reject a relationship to “hate-watching,” the general reaction to the term demonstrated ambivalence:

“I always enjoy watching, because I’m interested in what they’re doing, but of course, sometimes I find myself complaining and cringing.”

“I often have guilt that my time could be better spent. In fact, I often don’t watch an entire show because of that guilt. However, I am absolutely my most judgmental self when watching.”

“I wouldn’t say that I point and laugh at these women, nor feel guilt. It’s a TV program for my entertainment—that’s it. I think some people overthink things. Real Housewives shouldn’t be one of them.”

“The shows are too mindless to hate-watch.”

Hate-Watching the Housewives

“I’m sure I fall into it at times.”

“I mostly enjoy the show for the entertainment value. I am entertained when the ladies fight or argue, but I don’t get particular pleasure from watching people being unhappy.”

Based on the way that The Real Housewives has been framed in mainstream media, discussed by friends and relatives of mine, and marketed to viewers, it seemed that “hate-watching” may have been an accurate way to describe this dual process of enjoyment and judgment. The sample used for this online questionnaire was composed of self-identified fans that reported enjoying the programming, yet also overwhelmingly admitted to critiquing the show while watching it. However, based on responses, the impulse that seems to emerge from the discourse is in fact competition, not “hate.” As discussed earlier in this essay, competition between women is an outcome of gender inequality and status beliefs, and it is not surprising that viewers of The Real Housewives report feeling better about themselves when they are at home and comfortably comparing themselves with women who have access to more resources than them, yet “fail” at what is socially expected of them.

The Spectacle of Femininity and the Competitive Gaze

The Real Housewives—from Lisa Vanderpump’s penchant for pink to Caroline Manzo’s patriarchal paternalism—offers various versions of gender scripts and sexual identity that produce a spectacle of femininity for female viewers who are primed to compare, compete, and judge other women. Based on responses from the online questionnaire, “hate-watching” fails to accurately describe this complex, yet meaningful, decoding system among these Housewives fans. Although respondents reported actively critiquing the characters, they also reported varying degrees of guilt, varying degrees of authentic enjoyment, and varying degrees of commitment to the program. Unlike the practice of “hate-watching,” viewers did not report that they critiqued the Housewives throughout the program; instead, viewers only judged “sometimes” and articulated that categorizing their viewing practices in such a way was reductive. In short, they do not “hate” The Real Housewives, yet they have an antagonistic relationship with them. So rather than “hate-watching,” perhaps it would be more accurate to describe this pattern as a result of a “competitive gaze,” which could be conceptualized as a socialized viewing practice that highlights the competitive tension between a female viewer and female protagonists. Drawing from Laura Mulvey’s (2001) conceptualization of the “male gaze” as a masculine interpretation of texts, the “competitive gaze” identifies an orientation toward media prompted by gendered socialization among women.
Although viewers covertly “compete” with the characters on *The Real Housewives* over who’s a better wife, friend, mother, fashionista, income-earner, or socialite, this form of competition is ultimately about reinforcing what it means to be a woman in contemporary culture. According to Tanenbaum (2002),

> With all these mixed messages, women are caught in perpetual vertigo. We face internal battles about the “right” way to live our lives. No matter which path we choose, we are going against something deeply ingrained in us, against a path that many other women we know are following, against a path that our mothers may have followed, even against a path we may have followed ourselves in the past. (p. 38)

The “competitive gaze” is a learned orientation; it harnesses the anxiety that most women feel about their rank: I’m better than these women, right? I don’t need to act like that, right? I don’t need to look like that, right? Despite the high level of critical evaluations of *The Real Housewives* found on the online questionnaire, respondents reported that they continue to watch because they enjoy the circus-like drama unfolding before their eyes. Their preference for judging was a normalized practice, much like the competition that unfolds between women after the television set is turned off.

### References


### Hate-Watching the Housewives


