Attitudes toward viewing and participating in Reality Shows in Israel

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This study explores patterns of viewing of reality shows and tries to explain the willingness to participate in such shows. The results of a survey of 600 Israeli adults reveal a relatively high level of viewing of reality shows and a lower, but not insignificant, level of willingness to participate in such shows. Though demographic variables provide some insight into viewing and willingness to participate, positive attitudes and parasocial relationship with favorite reality participants are stronger predictors of these tendencies. Liking of the shows and expectations for future viewing are moderately and negatively related to negative normative judgments of these shows, and positive expectations are better predictor than negative judgments of both viewing and willingness to participate. The results are discussed in light of competing explanations for viewing and for the cultural significance of the reality show trend.

Given all we know about people's concerns with self presentation and the preservation of self worth, it is often hard to imagine why anyone would agree to participate in reality shows - shows that repeatedly humiliate participants, judge them harshly, expose their weaknesses, invade their privacy, and put them through difficult and unnecessary tests. And yet, auditions for reality shows are extremely popular, as are the shows themselves, which suggests that not only are many people eager to watch others be put to the test, exposed and humiliated, but that many are themselves eager to be on such display. This study of Israeli adults explores attitudes toward reality shows in order to test a model explaining both continued viewing the willingness to participate in reality shows.

Reality Shows and the Reaction they Received

Reality shows became a most popular genre in the late 1990's and early in the new millennium, following the success of such programs of "Big Brother" in Europe and MTV's "The Real World". Reality shows come in a variety of forms from shows following police raids (e.g. "Cops") through talent contests (e.g., "American Idol") to shows that focus on surveillance in simulated environments (e.g. "Survivor"). Though scientific definitions of the genre vary, reality shows are generally seen as entertainment shows (as opposed to news or documentary shows that are meant to inform), shows that are not fully scripted, that feature "ordinary" people playing themselves rather than actors, and that offer some form of narrative structure (see: Nabi, Biely,

Morgan & Stitt, 2003). More so than other genres, the popularity of reality shows have spread across borders with great speed, as have specific formats of shows that are locally produced.

Like most new media phenomena, the rise of reality shows has been accompanied by much criticism and discussion. Though television shows that are based on reality are not new, their newfound popularity within the television industry in the new millennium, has brought with it speculations about its possible effects. For example, Hill (2005), Andrejevic (2004) and others have raised concerns about the way reality shows erode norms of privacy. Deery (2004) has argued that reality shows have taken the commercial nature of television to new heights and have further undermined the artistic integrity of television in favor of commercial considerations' direct influence on content. Finally, Jagodzinski (2005) and Javors (2004) argue that despite pretenses to the contrary, reality shows serve to disengage viewers from reality.

Nabi, Stitt, Halford, Finnerty, (2006) examined the viewing of reality shows by asking viewers about their motivations. They found that, as expected, voyeurism was reported to be a more important motivation for viewing reality shows than for viewing fiction, this was not true for all types of realty shows. Additionally, they found that many of the motivations for viewing reality shows are quite similar to those watching fictional programming suggesting that reality viewing is not a wholly distinct category of entertainment activity. Thus, reality can be seen as a specific entertainment genre whose viewing stems from similar motivations as other entertainment content, with a special interest in getting a glimpse of others' personal lives. While these findings about motivations provide us only with an indirect basis for speculations about effects, they suggest that viewers think of reality shows in much the same ways they think about other entertainment television.

But what is unique about many reality shows is the possibility that viewers can become participants. Few studies have looked at the effects of reality shows and little is known about participation in these shows. Theoretically these two issues are linked in that many theoretical claims about effects on audiences begin with assumptions about participants and the attitudes of viewers toward participants (who serve as the heroes of these shows). Thus, media effects due to identification (Cohen, 2006), Imitation (Hoffner, 1996) or modeling (Bandura, 2001) assume that viewers are influenced by their viewing of participants and their interactions. Theories of normative influence also assume that through their actions, participants help normalize nonnormative behaviors such as violations of privacy norms or other norms of decency. Therefore, exploring the relationship between participation in, and viewing of reality shows, should provide us with a better understanding of the effects of these shows on viewers and on society as a whole. Furthermore, an understanding of the attitudes toward the viewing of reality shows and toward participation in them, should allow us to examine various theories underlying the critique of this genre.

The critical Approach to Explaining Reality Shows

The critical-cultural approach to the analysis of the reality show phenomenon sees viewers as voyeurs who enjoy watching others' private affairs and the failures of others (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Jagodzinski, 2005). Viewer are seen as alienated from society, as alone and vulnerable and thus resort to participation in social experiences that are simulated. But though the popularity of producing these shows may be tied to the economy of their production and the profits they promise rather than to their popularity relative to drama or comedy, they are rather popular. In Israel, like elsewhere, reality shows have proven to be very popular. They make up a majority of prime time programming on the major commercial networks, and are second only to news and

current events programming in the rating charts. But these facts are not proof of positive attitudes toward these shows. Indeed, the viewing of reality shows can be seen as a guilty pleasure, a voyeuristic opportunity to delight in the struggles of participants. From this perspective, reality show participants are seen as victims of a corrupt sub-culture who are perhaps too weak to resist the temptation of becoming famous or infamous – as the case may be. Viewers are similarly seen as caught up in this sub-culture of instant celebrity which seeks to replace normative values of achievement and hard work, with dreams of a celebrity status granted in return for being willing to expose oneself to the public.

By allowing themselves to be thus exposed, participants -- and through their viewing, the viewers as well -- are also in violation of norms of privacy and decorum which are an important part of society's fabric. Reality show participants forfeit what are considered to be basic rights of privacy by allowing cameras to follow them and by publicizing their inner most feelings in oncamera confessionals. Even in those formats that do not include extreme surveillance, participants are tested in a public forum and risk failing or being embarrassed in public.

To clarify this point it is worth thinking of the norms used in universities for publicizing grades. Regardless of the specific systems which may vary across institutions, there are always mechanisms that guarantee privacy lest someone who has not done well be exposed and embarrassed. In contrast, reality shows publicly display tests of knowledge, of courage and of willingness to overcome fear or disgust, and delight in expositions of abject failure. It must be explained why people who in school may have been ashamed to have their grades announced in front of their classmates, would be willing to expose their failures in front of the entire nation. According to some critics, this is a result of the ability of the dominant classes, represented by media corporations, to entice participants with promises of fame and fortune, in order to entertain the masses.

A Functional Approach to Reality Shows

In his seminal work on social structure and anomie, Robert Merton (1949) argued that to understand social deviance we must shift our attention from a primary focus on individuals and their moral character, to an examination of the individual's place within the social structure. In the intervening years since its publication Merton's work has had an impact on the study of criminal behaviors; and following its impact on social thinking and research, Merton's work has also had an impact on social policies. But can we benefit from applying Merton's ideas to non-criminal deviance? For example can we apply Merton's ideas to explaining why individuals view, and participate in, reality shows? Applying Merton's work to this realm is based on the assumption that this genre of television entertainment is regarded as an inferior type of program with less artistic value, and one that has been blamed for many possible social ills (for relevant evidence see: Leone, Chapman Peek, Bissell, 2006). Thus, viewing reality shows, and more so participating in them, may be thought of as social deviance.

In Mertonian terms it is possible to think of participation in reality shows as a form of innovation. This form of social adaptation (behavior) is one where an individual accepts the values and goals of society but makes use of unsanctioned means to achieve these goals. Merton contrasts innovation with four other forms of adaptation: Conformity, Ritualism, retreatism and rebellion, each of which has a different pattern of acceptance and rejection of goals and means. Participation in Reality shows, then, can be seen as a form of innovation in that it seems to symbolize an acceptance of the socially sanctioned goals of fame and celebrity. But instead of achieving these goals through marked success in science, industry or politics, reality shows seem

to offer a quicker path to celebrity through the entertainment world for those not blessed with the talents, luck or social contacts required for traditional advancements in show business.

Whether in talent contest type of shows or competitions of other sorts getting on a popular reality show provides various levels of name recognition and face recognition even for those who do not ultimately take the big prize. It is thus possible that watching reality shows, and even more so participating in them, can be understood as a form of innovation practiced by those who do not have the same social opportunities for achieving the same goals as those for which the socially privileged may enter other social paths (e.g., business, education, industry).

According to the innovation hypothesis, the reason for participating in reality shows is that those who wish to participate, either do not feel that participation involves such negative consequences (e.g., value their privacy less), or that they believe that the loss of privacy entailed by participating in these shows is a reasonable price to pay for the celebrity they offer. Thus, rather than seeing such participation as a sign of weakness or of despair from normative ways to advance, it is possible to think of the desire to participate in reality shows as a form of human agency. It is possible to view these shows as an avenue for social mobility and adopt a generally more positive view of reality shows and participation in them.

Though the two theoretical approaches have contrasting ideological positions and begin from different assumptions, they both see participation in reality shows as stemming from a desire for fame and fortune. While the critical theorists see participants as victims, a functionalist view sees them as being more rational and as displaying more agency in trying to find a way to achieve sanctioned goals. Whereas the critical view see participants as serving the needs of elites, functionalists see participants as promoting their own agenda. But from both these theoretical foundations we can hypothesize about the importance of the relationship between viewers and participants, and understand the value of exploring the public's view of reality shows and their attitudes toward participating and toward viewing these shows.

Attitudes toward Reality Shows

Exposure to reality shows, as well as to public discourse about these shows, is likely to result in the development of various attitudes toward them: First, judgments of enjoyment of these shows are expected to evolve. If viewers like reality shows they will most likely want to keep viewing them in the future and will probably desire to see more shows of this type produced. Secondly, regardless of their personal preferences, viewers are likely to develop judgments of these shows which are more normatively anchored. They may believe that these shows are good or bad, that they are valuable or that they are worthless. Based on much of the public discourse of these shows they may, despite their enjoyment, believe that these shows are silly, abusive, and invasive but still find a guilty pleasure in them. Or, they may believe that these shows present an interesting side of human nature and promote generally positive values. This study focuses on the association between both judgments and attitudes toward viewing and the willingness to participate in reality shows.

Hypotheses

Based on both theoretical perspectives, watching and willingness to participate in reality shows is likely to be greater among those less likely to feel that they have easy access to upward mobility. Age and education are two important predictors of economic opportunity and therefore we can predict:

H1: Age will be negatively related to positive attitudes and negative judgments toward reality shows and to (H1a) willingness to participate in them.

H2: Education will be negatively related to positive attitudes and negative judgments toward reality shows and (H2a) to willingness to participate in them.

According to the functional approach, it is expected that positive attitudes toward reality shows are likely to predict willingness to participate in them. Though its hard to extract a prediction about the relationship between these two attitudes from the critical perspective, this perspective does suggest the possibility that viewing will be seen as less positive (i.e., it is a guilty pleasure) but that this will not necessarily affect willingness to participate.

RQ1: Will attitudes toward viewing reality shows be associated with willingness to participate in them?

As indicated earlier it is likely that attitudes towards the participants in reality shows are central to the experience of viewing. The stronger the attachment to these celebrities the more we would expect positive attitudes toward the genre and the more we would expect viewers to want to imitate these participants by themselves participating in reality shows.

H3: There is a positive association between parasocial relationship with favorite reality participants and attitudes toward the show and (H3a) willingness to participate in reality shows.

Finally, because there has been much public discourse about the dangers of reality shows it is expected that people will have not only attitudes representing their liking or dislike but also about the potential dangers of these shows. These negative attitudes about reality shows should be a result of concerns about their dangers and general perceptions of media influence.

H4a: Concerns about the effects of reality shows will be positively related to negative judgments of these shows.

H4b: Perception of media influence will be positively related to negative judgments of reality shows.

Besides the variables associated with the hypotheses the data used in this study included measures of overall TV viewing as well as a measure of reality show viewing. These measures were used as controls to ensure that the results reported were not simply a function of viewing habits. Additionally, by including these variables as controls, the possibility that the various attitudes are a function of viewing (i.e., that attitudes are formed to justify viewing) is accounted for and removed.

Reality shows in Israel

In Israel, reality shows became popular early in the new millennium. A variety of reality programs based on imported programs or formats were aired on one of the two commercial channels as well as across many cable and satellite channels. In the past few years Israelis are offered at least one reality TV program every night and very often more than one. These programs include talent contests (e.g., "A Star is Born" –Israel's "American Idol"), survival programs, wife-swap programs, amateur fashion models contests, dating shows, a local version of the "Swan" (changing a person's appearance), and many more. Both commercial channels place these programs as part of their prime time schedule, and the ratings of these programs are second only to the evening news programs. Almost all reality programs in Israel are included in the top ten in the ratings charts. The popularity of reality television in Israel is evident not only in ratings charts: they are often discussed in news stories, gossip columns, media criticism and public debate.

Methods

This study aims to explore three types of attitudes held toward reality show: Positive attitudes toward viewing, negative judgments toward reality shows and their social role and willingness to participate. It aims both to examine the sources of these attitudes as well as the interconnections between them. To achieve these goals, data from a phone survey of 603 adult Israeli were used.

Most of the respondents (65.9%) were born in Israel, 19.2% in Russia and the rest in other countries. Males made up 47.9% of the sample and females 52.1%; the average age was 39.2 years. The education levels were: 43.6% 12 years or less (high school) and the rest had more than 12 years of education (average of 13.3 years). As to religiosity, 49.9% defined themselves as secular, 34% as traditional, 13.2% as religious and 1.8% as Ultra- Orthodox. The data were collected for a report prepared for the Second Authority for Radio and Television in Israel, the regulatory body in charge of regulating commercial broadcasters (Weimann, Cohen & Hershman-Shitrit, 2007).

The survey dealt with many issues involving reality shows of which ten variables were included in this study. The specific measures used in this study, included demographics (age and education), overall TV viewing and viewing of reality shows, the perceived impact of reality shows on others and degree of concern about such impact (both concern and perceived effect were expected to affect one's attitudes and the intensity of these attitudes toward reality shows). The survey was originally written in Hebrew, and the interviews were conducted in Hebrew, Arabic or Russian. The surveys were translated and back translated into Russian and Arabic to ensure accuracy. The English description of the questions used below was prepared by the author.

General TV viewing was measured by a single item asking each respondent to report whether their own TV viewing was *much greater*, *a bit greater*, *about the same*, *a bit more* or *a lot more* than an average of about three hours. The reality show viewing measure was created from a mean score of ten items that asked respondents to report whether they watched each of ten reality shows (those produced by the two commercial broadcast channels in Israel) *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *often* (3) or *regularly* (4). The score ranges from 10 to 40.

Positive attitudes were measured by asking respondents to rate on three seven point Likert scales (1= not at all, 7 = very much) to what extent they thought they were likely to watch more reality shows in the future, they liked reality shows compared to other genres and they hoped more reality shows were produced. These three items were averaged to create the measure of positive attitudes.

Following a factor analysis, three composite measures were used to create the negative judgment construct; each component was composed of the average responses to several items. The first component was made up of two items measuring the extent that respondents thought reality shows were stupid and staged. The second was composed of three items measuring the extent that respondents thought reality shows were exploitative, voyeuristic, and after easy profits (Cronbach's alpha = .599). The third, was again composed of three items measuring the extent that respondents thought reality shows had too much sex and violence, treated women in a demeaning manner, and violated participants' privacy (Cronbach's alpha = .581). These three composites were averaged to create the judgments construct. The overall reliability of all eight items was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .791).

Perceived effects of reality shows were measured with a single item asking respondents to what extent they believed reality shows affected other viewers. Concern was similarly measured

by a single item asking to what extent the respondent was concerned about the effects of reality shows. To test the potential of relationships viewers develop with contestants as a key factor in encouraging viewers to be willing to participate in the shows themselves, each respondent was asked to choose one favorite contestant on a reality show and to respond to a ten item parasocial relationship scale regarding that contestant. This scale was based on the items used by Rubin, Perse and Powell (1985). This scale was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.842).

Using a structural equation modeling approach, a model was tested which predicts willingness to participate in reality shows as a function of positive attitudes and negative judgments toward reality shows, which in turn were predicted by socio-economic variables, viewing habits, parasocial relationships, and beliefs and concerns about media and reality shows (see figure 1). The testing of the hypotheses in one structural model rather than with several regression models offers the advantages of increased control and parsimony.

The model

Negative judgments of reality shows were modeled as a function of perceived effects and concern, age and education, of the extent of reality viewing and of positive attitudes. Positive expectations were modeled as a function of parasocial interaction, TV viewing, viewing of realty shows, age, and education. Finally, willingness to participate was modeled as a function of age, education, positive attitudes and negative judgments, concern, parasocial interaction, and reality show viewing.

Results

In the current sample, only 16% of the sample claimed to have never viewed any of the ten programs they were asked about. On average, each of the respondents watched, at least "seldom", more than four of the ten programs (m = 4.25, SD = 29). The shows that were most often reported as viewed "often" or "regularly" were the Hebrew version of *American Idol* (45.6%), followed by *Dancing with the Stars* (38.6%). The reports of viewing in this sample were in ordinal agreement with the public ratings data for these same shows.

Fifty one percent of respondents reported that they did not want to participate in a reality show at all, and only about 20% of respondents reported willingness beyond the midpoint of the scale. This suggests that though reality shows are very popular in Israel, relatively few report wishing to participate, but these are not an insignificant minority of the population. This finding strengthens the assumption that participation in reality shows is not yet normative in Israel and can be seen as innovative but that it has some appeal to a minority of the population.

Data Analysis

Overall, the model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 99.6$, df = 47, p < .001; NFI = 0.948 CFI = 0.971). The model explains 13% of the variance in negative judgments, 42% of the variance in positive attitudes, and 37% of the variance in willingness to participate.

The equation predicting positive attitudes and expectations demonstrated that this construct was significantly and positively predicted by overall TV viewing (β = .107, B = .131, SE = .057), by reality show viewing (β = .305, B = .779, SE = .123) by parasocial interaction (β = .482, B = .535, SE = .068), and significantly and negatively by education (β = -.146, B = -.066, SE = .021)

but not by age (β = -.042, B = -.004, SE = .004). These results do not support H1 (age) but do support H2 (education).

The equation predicting negative judgments demonstrated that this construct was significantly and positively predicted by perception of effects on others (β = .135, B = .082, SE = .033), and by concern about these effects (β = .197, B = .104, SE = .027) supporting both parts of H4. In addition, negative judgments were negatively and significantly predicted by positive attitudes (β = -.273, B = -.211, SE = .044). It is worth noting, however, that this association, while significant, is not very strong showing that the two constructs tap very different aspects of how people feel about reality shows (normative judgments versus enjoyment and expectations of future viewing).

Finally, the equation predicting willingness to participate in reality shows demonstrates that this measure was positively and significantly predicted by positive attitudes toward the genre (β = .517, B = .683, SE = .063). Significant negative predictors included negative judgments (β = .089, B = -.152, SE = .072) and age (β = -.127, B = -.014, SE = .004) but not education. These results provide support for H1a but not for H2a. Though as previously noted, parasocial relationships were a strong predictor of positive attitudes toward reality shows they did not significantly predict willingness to participate.

The positive association between positive attitudes and willingness to participate as well as the negative association of judgments with willingness to participate also provide an answer to RQ1 demonstrating that willingness to participate was associated with the attitudes toward the genre. These associations followed a pattern consistent with a rational approach (i.e., a positive relationship with liking the show and a negative relationship with negative judgments). The guilty pleasure expectations, in contrast, did not find support. Further, that the association of willingness to participate was much stronger with the (positive) attitudes than with the (negative) normative judgments suggests that viewers judge the show primarily as an entertainment genre and not as a moral event.

Of special note is the pattern of results associated with parasocial relations. Though attitudes were measured toward the genre as a whole, and parasocial relations were measured in terms of feelings toward one character from one show, these were highly correlated. Only less than a third of the sample completed this task, but for those that did, this variable was a very strong predictor in the model. When controlling for positive attitudes toward reality shows no significant direct effect of parasocial relations was found on willingness to participate, but rather only an indirect effect through positive attitude.

On the whole the socio-demographic variables follow the expected pattern, but with only two exceptions they are insignificant predictors. The attitudinal measures are much more consistent and powerful predictors of willingness to participate.

Discussion

This study examined the attitudes of Israelis toward viewing of, and participation in reality shows. The findings suggest that on the whole people who watch more TV, more reality shows and have stronger parasocial relationships with favorite reality show participants, tend to have more positive and less negative attitudes toward these shows. In turn, those who have stronger positive attitudes and weaker normative judgments are more willing to take part in these shows. If these findings seem predictable, it is perhaps worth noting that they are not in full agreement

with extant theory and that some of the findings are unexpected, and that they provide new insights into the question of participation in reality shows with which this study began.

For example, it seems that willingness to participate is not a function of unthinking imitation of other participants who may already be celebrities, or of celebrity worship. If that were the case, we would have found a direct link between parasocial relationship and willing to participate, but this relationship was fully mediated by positive attitudes. Thus, there seems to be a learning process whereby parasocial relationships create positive views of the genre in general and these generally positive views increase willingness to participate.

Another interesting finding, which does not support either theoretical perspective, is the lack of significant relationship of education with willingness to participate. More educated respondents were not less likely to have negative judgments nor were they less likely to participate. Though they did have less positive attitudes, in the context of the other findings this can be understood as simply a more temperate view of the genre. If reality shows are distractions for the masses or an innovative way out of a negative opportunity structure, education should have been a strong predictor of willingness to participate. Interestingly, age was a predictor only of willingness to participate but not of attitudes. In this light it seems that perhaps participation is neither a form of innovation nor a desperate act based in false consciousness, but rather a sign of openness to new experiences and perhaps a sign of generational gaps in relevant norms of propriety and importance.

Though reality shows are not new, their resurgence in the past decade has provided our field with a new opportunity to examine some of our theories and our key assumptions. Within the context of the debate over the relative power of audiences and texts/institutions, and the agency of television viewers versus the ability of broadcasters to exploit them, this study has shown that even without assuming viewers are purposeful or even very reflective (i.e., no direct self-report motivational items were employed) it is possible to show that their attitudes toward reality shows, their preferences and judgments are mostly coherent. Our data indicate that people seem to have complex responses toward television (i.e., positive and negative attitudes are only moderately related and therefore relatively independent, and they are predicted by somewhat different variables), and their preferences seem to be consistently related to these responses.

It is interesting that viewing reality shows was not directly related to willingness to participate, but only indirectly through positive attitudes. Clearly those who watch, engage with contestants and enjoy reality shows that are most willing to participate, but only to the extent that they develop positive attitudes toward the genre. It is thus attitudes toward the shows that are most important to considering participation, not demographics or viewing habits, and attitudes mediate several other predictors (i.e., parasocial relationship and viewing).

This study is based on a reanalysis of data collected for other purposes and as such has many limitations. The measures of positive and negative attitudes are not sufficiently parallel so as to be more comparable, and the general viewing measure is very crude. Several relevant variables that could help explain more of the variance are missing (e.g., general social attitudes, other preferences and psychological variables such as self efficacy that are likely to be associated with willingness to participate). It is also important to note that the general willingness to participate question may be masking a very different attitude toward various sub-genres of reality. It is likely that willingness to participate in a talent contest is quite different than being willing to take part in a show that focuses on one's private life (e.g., dating shows or wife swap shows) or shows that include potentially disgusting challenges (e.g., Fear factor). Nonetheless, these data provide

a useful look into some intriguing questions about reality show viewing and the seemingly strange desire of so many to participate in these shows.

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Table 1

Maximum Likelihood Estimates for the Model

Structural Component	B(SE)
TV viewing → positive attitudes	.131.(057)**
Reality show viewing → positive attitudes	.779 (123)***
Age → positive attitudes	004 (004)
Education → positive attitudes	066 (.021)**
Parasocial → positive attitudes	.536 (068)***
Perceived influence → negative judgments	.082 (.033)*
Positive attitudes → negative judgments	211 (.044)***
Age → negative judgments	.003 (.003)
Reality show viewing → negative judgments	.031 (098)
Education → negative judgments	.017 (017)
Concern → negative judgments	.104 (.027)***
Negative judgments → willingness to participate	151 (.072)*
Concern → willingness to participate	.056 (.033)*
Age → willingness to participate	015 (004)***
Education → willingness to participate	035 (022)
Parasocial relationships → willingness to participate	020 (107)
Reality show viewing → willingness to participate	042 (142)
Positive attitudes → willingness to participate	.697 (060)***

Figure 1

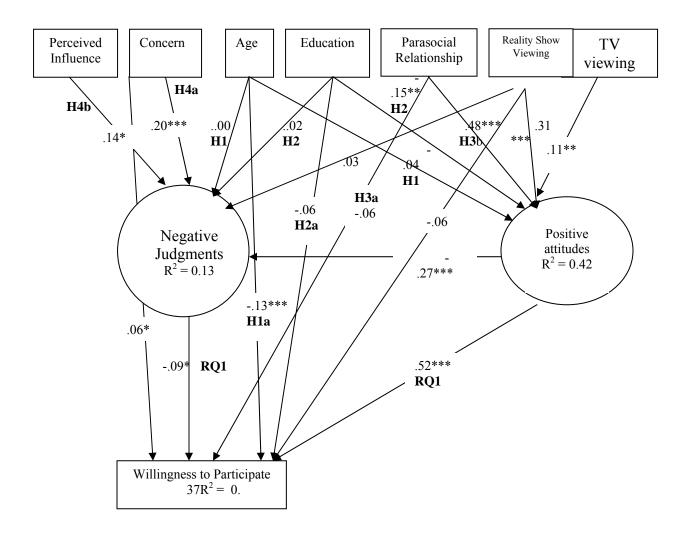


Figure 1: Standardized Maximum Likelihood Estimates for the Structural Model * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001