



TELEVISION REALITY SHOWS: USAGE AND PSYCHO -SOCIAL NEEDS OF THE AUDIENCE

S. Parimalam¹ and Dr. Deepa Vishvam²

¹Research Scholar , Department of communication and Media Studies , Bharathiyar University , Coimbatore.

² Assistant Professor , Mother Theresa University ,Chennai .

ABSTRACT :

Reality shows which were so popular in western countries had a slow start in India initially with one or more channels telecasting talent hunt programs such as singing and quiz on weekends. Soon it expanded itself with other sub-genres such as dance, crime/conflict, fun, game and adventure based reality shows. Today all most all the reality shows we watch are more, 'hybridized' and 'glocalised' borrowing the concepts from western countries and adapting to local culture. Reality shows have attracted the producers because it is cheaper, easier to produce and guaranteed of high returns. People are attracted by reality shows because of its varied nature; Real life situations filmed, participation of ordinary people as contestants, competitions and lucrative prizes, participation of common people as studio audiences, voting and promoting etc,

Advent of internet, mushrooming of electronic gadgets and wide spread of social media bring in new dimensions and new experience of watching television programs. Due to the growing use of these gadgets, Television viewing, which was once only a family activity, is turning in to an individual activity. People can watch programs any time and at any place, thus changing the traditional practice of time and space for watching television. This usage pattern has tremendous implications on the needs, interest and psychology of the viewer.

The changing technology and pattern of watching television has also changed the experience of watching reality shows beyond the actual time of viewing. It starts much before the actual viewing and ends beyond the time of Telecasting. This paper is based on the secondary sources and the qualitative data collected through in depth interviews and Group Discussions. The paper is part of the larger research on "Reality show and the Psycho social needs of Indian audience" and has used only the qualitative data collected through pilot study. This paper has used Uses and Gratification theory for the analysis and to formulate a theoretical framework.

The paper has identified the common needs recurring in the early researchers such as surveillance need, relaxation need, identification need and socialisation need and attempted to verify whether the Tamil audience watch for the same needs. The findings through qualitative data confirm that there is a significance of using Television reality shows for curiosity, identification and socialisation needs. This study adds one more dimension i.e, the need for social values which motivates Tamils Television reality shows viewers to follow.

KEYWORDS : Television, Reality shows, psychological, social, needs .



INTRODUCTION

Reality shows came into India in 1990s when Government of India began to relax its media policy and allowed privatization of media. Till then, Television and Radio were under the monopoly and control of the Indian Government. Privatization and liberalization led to the proliferation of private television channels. Today we have 889 permitted channels (Information and broadcasting, 2018) in India. Reality shows which were so popular in western countries had a slow start in India with one or more channels telecasting talent hunt programs such as singing and quiz on weekends. Soon it expanded itself with other sub-genres such as dance, conflict, fun, game,debate and adventure based reality shows. Reality shows have attracted the producers because it is cheaper (Gardyn, 2001), easier to produce and guaranteed of high returns. People are attracted by reality shows because of its varied nature; Real life situations filmed, participation of ordinary people as contestants, competitions and lucrative prizes, participation of common people as studio audiences, voting and promoting etc., Today all most all the reality shows we watch are more, 'hybridized' and 'glocalised'(Jaggi Ruchi, 2007) borrowing the concepts from western countries and adapting to local culture.

Advent of internet, mushrooming of electronic gadgets and wide spread social media bring in new dimensions and new experience of watching television programs. Due to the growing use of these gadgets, Television viewing, which was once only a family activity, is turning in to an individual activity. People can watch programs any time and at any place, thus changing the traditional practice of time and space for watching television. This usage pattern has tremendous implications on the needs, interest and psychology of the viewer. Privatization and Liberalization led to the proliferation of private television channels.

The changing technology and pattern of watching television has also changed the experience of watching reality shows beyond the actual time of viewing. (Darrin Brown et al, 2012).It starts much before the actual viewing and ends beyond the time of Telecasting (Quintas-Froute and Gonzalez-Neira, 2014). The experience of gossip in the family, chitchat with the neighbors and work place, use of social media platforms to write and share their views, express their likes and dislikes about the program have expanded the viewing experience. Knowing the interest of the people, some start their own You tube channels to update about the show and many viewers follow these You tube channels. All these expressions cannot be excluded from the actual experience of the program. These developments have made Television media appear a more interactive and participatory media where audience play a vital role in shaping up the course of the program. Hence there is a need to study the experience of the people watching reality television in the context of changing media scenario in India. Though researches have been done in other countries on what motivates people to watch reality shows there is a need to see whether Indian audience also share a commonality along with their other counter parts or there is something unique in the way Indian audience watch and the reason for watching reality shows . In India, only a few studies have been done on reality shows, Practically no study has been done from the audience psycho social point of view.

This paper is based on the secondary sources and the qualitative information collected through in depth interviews and Group Discussions in a pilot study as part of the larger study attempting to find out how and why audiences watch reality shows in Indian more specifically in Tamilnadu cultural context. As the researches done in this line are comparatively limited, the study has also reviewed literatures of studies done on other television genres. This study depends on Uses and Gratification, cultural studies and media effect approaches for the theoretical framework. The paper is part of the larger research on "Reality show and the Psycho social needs of Indian audience".

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Based on the reviews done on literatures available, researches on reality shows can be grouped in to a few broad areas 1.Impact studies (Subramaniam, Himanshu Tiwari, 2010; Anthony Patino et al,2011; Swati,2017) which cover the influence of a specific reality show on a specific group of audience such as children, youth and women. These studies are more influenced by media effect approaches 2. Nature and uniqueness of reality shows (Anita Birelessy, 2005; Manisha Dixit,2013). 3. Correlation

study which sees the correlation between the personality traits and type of program watched 4. Pattern of usage and comparative gratification between two platforms of watching television programs like television set and on line television (Nai-Se Lei,2013;Jean Marie McBride,2015;). 5. Exploratory study which includes motivation, use for watching reality shows and the types of gratification obtained (Zizi Papacharissi &Andrew L.Mendelson,2007; Kayla Hammer,2016;Amanda Laken,2009; Zhanna Bagdasarov et al,2010; Gina Danica Corrie-Metcalf,2005)

WHY DO PEOPLE WATCH REALITY SHOWS?

Audience have needs

Researchers from the Uses and Gratification school found out that the audience have specific needs, they approach media as 'one of the sources of gratification'. In the words of Mc Quail, Blumer and Brown, (1972,p 144) 'social experience gives rise to certain needs, some of which are directed to the mass media of communication for satisfaction'. General assumptions of the Uses and Gratification theory can be summed up as: 1. Audience are not homogenous 2. Audience are active and selective 3. Audience come to media with a preconceived notion 4. Audience seek specific Television shows to gratify their needs. 5. Needs vary from person to person 6. Human beings have needs and they seek mass media as one of the sources of gratifying their needs. 7. Needs arise out of one's personal, social and cultural background. 8. Media compete with other activities to address the needs of the audience.

Almost all researchers from the Uses and Gratification approach have identified a set of needs. Blumer, McQuail and Brown identified Escape, Para- social interaction, inter personal identity and surveillance as the basic needs of the audience which pull them towards media. Katz, Hass and Gurevitch (1973) have listed Cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrity needs, social integrative needs and Tension release needs. For Katz independently listed out Surveillance, Entertainment and cultural transmission (or socialization) functions. Rubin came out with another set of needs such as relaxation, companionship, habit, pass time, entertainment, social interaction, information and arousal as the motivation for watching Television reality shows. Further, these researchers as individuals or along with other researchers spotted out with more sets of needs through their various studies. Some of these needs are overlapping or repeated or different nomenclature used to mean the same as others.

COMMON NEEDS

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the early and contemporary researches on psycho social needs or motivations for watching reality shows a few recurring common needs are identified. The needs are and grouped in to four major categories. 1. Surveillance/cognitive needs, 2.Need for entertainment and relaxation, 3.Need for personal identity and para-socialisation 4.Need for socialisation/social interaction. This study makes an attempt to verify whether the Television reality show viewers of Tamilnadu go by these needs . This study also investigates whether there are other needs peculiar to Indian culture which drives the Indian audience to watch reality shows.

1. Surveillance/Cognitive Needs:

One of the common needs that many researchers refer as the motivation for using media is the Cognitive need. Cognitive needs refer to the 'desire to know, understand, and solve problems'. (www.enotes.com). People with strong cognitive needs are often described as curious and inquisitive. This fundamental need has to be satisfied before the person seeks for next psychological needs. At a primary level people watch Television for information and updating. Those who watch television for news, weather report, market rates are more an 'instrumental'users who use television for a defined purpose. Interaction with the reality show viewers through Group Discussion and in depth method reveal that they watch reality shows to know what the judges have to say for example about music, dance, quality of singing etc., They also want to learn from the participants by getting to know about their history, background as this is also motivating factor for them to follow the program and the contestant.

My birth place was Trinelvei. There, I was not exposed to anything happening around me. Here in Chennai too, we don't have a chance to know anything as we have our routine. Only through TV we come to know what is happening. That's why we watch news, neeya nana debate shows or any other debate shows. If the children watch they will get knowledge about music and they will grow. (Daily wage worker, 41)

Curiosity need: In the next level, when the need for information intensifies it leads to curiosity. Curiosity need arises out of need to know more than just the information. When the level of inquisitiveness goes up involvement deepens about the events, incidents and persons. Promos in news headlines, forecasting conflict in the serials and suspense and surprise in reality shows would heighten the expectation and tension and the keep the viewer in expectation and excitement.

Qualitative data collected in pilot study discloses that the viewers prefer to watch Conflict and crime based programs to gratify their curiosity needs,

I began to watch solvathellam unmai as a child. I don't know why but I used to get excited about the fight. They shout and yell at each other, physically attack I have not seen such fight in the family. It thrills me and watches it how it was going to be solved. (College student, 19)

As Susa.M.Ming says people want to satisfy the nosy person in a viewer. The suspense and surprise elements which we normally see in film and other fictional programs are incorporated in reality shows to pull the audience. The audience get pleasure in getting teased and curiosity gets further built up. Many researchers reveal people watch crime dramas in order to satisfy this curiosity needs. (Darrin brown et al, 2012).

Voyeuristic needs: At a still deeper level viewers watch the programs for voyeuristic reasons. Voyeurism is a distinguishing gratification factor between the reality show and the fiction (Zhanna et al). Papparachissi and Mendelson are of the opinion that voyeurism is the motivating factor for watching reality shows. Baruh, Pappacharissi and Mendelson differentiate nosy voyeurism from sexual voyeurism. Nosy voyeurism is a cyclical process. TV programs were dependent on voyeuristic elements such as the performance of intimate elements transforming, ordinary unwatchable in to something worth watching. Sexual voyeurism is something that curtains left slightly open, any chance to see what they can not otherwise see. It is a 'Peeking in to the private movements of others'. Blazer (2006) remarked that reality-based television was created to satisfy viewers' appetite for voyeurism. However, In India the producers would be careful and subtle in showing scenes of sexual intimacies. For example what is shows in Big Boss in Hindi cannot be shown in Tamilnadu as the people of southern regions are more sensitive to public display. It does not mean north is more liberative, rather the influence of Bollywood is stronger. The need for information and curiosity can be easily assessed but, it is a challenge to assess the need for voyeurism in Indian viewers.

Though the women interacted for this study attribute other reasons for watching shows on family conflict and illegal relationships, candidly agree that they have shown curiosity in knowing what happens in others families.

"I don't watch because my husband does not like me watching solvathellam Unmai. Only when the husband is not there occasionally I watch that program". (Woman labourer, 36)

It should be noted that people prefer to watch when others are not there reflects the voyeuristic tendency in them. Pilot study conducted also reveals that men don't want their women to watch the illicit relationship based reality shows. This attitude of men reflects something deeper about voyeurism and why men have to prevent women watching these programs.

2. Need for relaxation:

Studies cutting across countries and cultures have also proved that people watch reality shows primarily for entertainment and relaxation. According to Papparachissi who did an elaborative study on reality shows identifies entertainment and habitual pass-time are the primary needs for watching television program. Crime and conflict based programs also become part of entertainment as the viewer gets vicarious pleasure. Gina points out that the viewers watch programs for fun and various vicarious pleasures: to break from routine, relax, to escape from boredom and stress.

The level of seeking relaxation or entertainment may depend on the need and moods of the person and atmosphere in which one is watching. The instrumental viewers are more focussed on their purpose and intensively watch. The ritualistic viewers do so many other things along with watching the program. Researchers also have proved that those who spend more time watching Television are likely to be more ritual users. Moreover people who perceive realness in reality shows are likely to watch for entertainment.

NEED FOR IDENTITY AND PARA-SOCIALISATION

Researchers spotted out that the need for identity is manifested in various ways in television watching experience. The viewer is in search of an identity for himself or herself. In the process of finding identity, identification happens. Television viewing experience gives the opportunity for the viewer to compare, reflect and confirm certain aspects of their life with the participant of the show.

A college student in an indepth interview agrees that she compares herself with her favorite character Oviya in Big Boss the Indian(Tamil) version of Big Brother

I watched the first season of Big boss almost more than 90%. Character of Oviya influenced me. I don't know in reality whether she is like that but I was carried away by the way she conducted herself. She did what she liked to do and never cared what others would say. I could personally connect to her. I felt this is way one should be (iruntha ippadithaan irukkanum).....I have faced similar situation of being cornered, probably because of it I liked her.(College student,20)

Reality Television serves as a means of self exploration, identification and socialisation. The researchers have found out that the para- social interaction is one of the expressions of search for identity. Gina says that in a para- social television environment the viewer develops a sense of connectedness with the celebrity participant or ordinary participant. The viewer develops a relationship with the participants and identification happens subsequently.

The type and level of identification or social comparison depends on the reality show participant and the type of relationship the viewer builds on. The idea that these are real and ordinary people, gives the viewer sense of superiority and the viewer feels that he/she is not in such difficult situation. Reiss argues that Individual is looking for self importance and he calls this as a status need. The viewer feels that he/she is more important (have higher status) than the ordinary person who is shown in reality show.

The viewer is likely to develop a different type of identification if the participant is a celebrity. He or she develops a liking for the celebrity due to look and feel good, likable character, talents, sympathetic family or social background etc., The viewer looks up to him as a model and identifies himself or herself.

Whether it is ordinary person or celebrity, the identification happens at various levels. 1. The viewer may interact while the figure is on the screen. 2. May imitate the figure 3. Try to interact through social media or send letters expressing the relationship 4. Vote and promote as if he is a cadre and campaign for the figure 5. Attempt to meet or try to have at least a 'selfie'. Gina compares this identification with the affiliation that we develop with a team in sports where we want our favourite team to win and the opposite team to lose.

Baru says those audience members who feel the need to evaluate themselves should have a higher tendency to watch reality television(Baruh,2010). Baruh also says that television programs that showed more private details of a person or family's life had higher views from voyeurs in direct correlation with their social comparison tendencies. In another study with the college students Ramdhany argues that lower the life satisfaction of the students, the more they watched reality television. However, not all the viewers are involved in para- social relationship or interaction. Para-social relationships are sought by those who are lonely and isolated.

4. SOCIALISATION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Yet another motivation that the researchers have identified as the motivating factor for watching television reality shows is the need for socialisation or social interaction. At first level,

watching the favourite reality show with others present, give them a pleasure as they have instant interaction with the others, otherwise it's not possible. Second, people also want to participate in a social interaction by talking to other people about their favourite program. This gratification need may arise from self or others. Persons may watch a program for social interaction (so to fulfil his desire for interaction with others). On the other hand, he or she may watch a specific program for its popularity to seek social security otherwise the person may be rejected by the peer or social group who follow the same program. College students both boys and girls attribute socialisation through social media as the motivating factor for watching reality shows

"I used to get memes related to this show(Solvathellam Unmai). I could not follow where as my friends would all laugh and discuss. You should know the show if you have take part in this fun. This made me to start watching Solvathellam Unmai. I felt that I should be connected and started watching the show". (College student, 20)

Darrin Brown et al who have done research on crime dramas claim that crime dramas are watched in order to talk to others about the program. Talking to others both after and during crime dramas is one of the significant elements to them personally. On the other hand people who have no liking for social interaction consider television itself as a companion and experience companionship by the sound and visual of it.

Personality traits and the type of program watched

Reiss brought out another angle to uses and gratification approach to media use. He saw an association between the type of program one watches and the character trait one has. Zhanna Bagdasarov et al opine viewers' choice of media is influenced by host of personality traits. Scott J Weiland and Kaitlin Dunbar also see that there is an association between ones character traits and the type of program they seek to watch. Reiss says that the desire for vengeance is closely associated with enjoyment of competition. Reiss also says that sociable people are more likely to watch the reality shows more than the non sociable people as we can see that very motivation of watching the reality show itself is to discuss among others. In contrast people who are introvert or avoid social interaction are more likely to get pleasure spending more time in watching television. Similarly low mobility and low level of interpersonal interactions are more likely to watch reality television to fulfil their voyeuristic and companionship needs. (Papacharissi & Mendelson).

DISCUSSION

Uses and Gratification approach has great relevance even today in understanding the audience and media. The researchers on reality shows also have widely used this approach to analyse the audience needs and motivations. However, there are gaps in this approach. Although a few researchers have touched upon the social orientation need, not many studies have touched upon this area of need or pleasure which motivates audience to follow a reality shows. This is very important in Indian context as people don't watch programs just for talents and entertainments. Years of observations and interactions with reality show viewers done in the pilot study for this research makes known that the Indian audience have the desire for social values. They watch appreciate, associate themselves with the participant for the social values. Indian reality shows highlight the back story of the participants. Some of it has a high emotional content. When the viewers travel with the participant, their vulnerability-family condition, deprivation, disability and so many other back stories are added along with the main activity of singing or dancing or other activities. This makes the viewer to empathise or sympathise with the contestant or participant.

Another aspect of the participant which viewers begin to appreciate or detest is their behaviour and how they conduct themselves during their performances. Their attitude, humour, certain likable peculiar characteristics or their special achievements or interventions are presented by the program as part of the show. Viewers feel that they have a greater understanding of the participant by having come to know the stories behind them.

Yet another aspect of the value orientation is the viewers' need to have connectedness with a community in terms of region, religion, language etc. Earlier researchers have discussed how the need for socialisation, (desire to discuss the outcome or expected outcome of the show) impel viewers to watch the reality show as a chain of action and reaction. However, they have not discussed how a group or community affinity paves the way for identification with the participant. For example a Tamil participant participating in national level talent hunt singing competition naturally gets the support of the Tamil audience. In terms of singing talent, participants from other region may outsmart Tamil participant. The audience may be aware of this. Still audience supports the Tamil participant not only for singing but also because of their have affinity to the state or language or the region.

In Indian culture where multilingualism, multi religion, caste and state, naturally form communities that people would like to associate themselves with. When they find that their favourite participant belongs to his or her community, they create connections or form associations as 'mine'. Intensity of Campaigning, voting depends on the level of association one has developed with the contestant. These viewers are not aware that positioning contestants from different regions or even countries is to create audience as mass of polarised supporters is the agenda of the media to expand the market.

Yet another limitation in the Uses and Gratification study is that it has undermined or downplayed the role of media in making the audience watch the shows regularly. The channels do research on the culture, taste and psycho social needs of the people and constructs the content, structure, select participants, build characters of the participants in order to continuously feed the various psycho-social needs of the audience. The media may not influence the audience the way media effect theories were postulating but one cannot deny the strategies used by the channels to woo the audience and promoting reality shows to expand the market.

CONCLUSION

Uses and Gratification approach has brought a major a shift in the audience- media relationship. In line with their thinking most of the researches have proved that the audience watch programs to gratify their specific needs and as the audience are heterogeneous the needs vary from person to person. These needs arise out of individuals character traits, family, social and cultural context. Hence the practice of watching reality shows and reasons for watching has to be analysed in the light of the socio -cultural context. Media agenda in using the psycho-social needs of the people have to be critically analysed which the Uses and Gratification theory overlooked.

REFERENCES

1. Ciaren Mc Cullagh, Media Power: A sociological Introduction
2. Denis Mc Quail(2005), Mass Communication Theories
3. John L. Sullivan(2013), Media Audiences: Effects, Uses, Institutions and Power
4. Eunice Ivala (2007) Television audience research revisited: Early Television audience research and the more recent developments in television audience research, Research Gate, volume 33(1), pp26-41: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233051131>,
5. Jean Marie McBride (2015), Social Media & Audience Participation in Regard to Television
6. Ramdhany, E. (2009), Why is Reality Television (TV) so Appealing? An Examination of Factors Affecting Adolescent Television Viewing. *SSRN Electronic Journal SSRN Journal*.
7. Kayla Hammer, (2016), Motives for Engaging with the Kardashians', Reality Television Family, *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, Vol. 7, No. 1