



Review Article

DOI: 10.58966/JCM20232212

Revisiting “Celebrity, Social Mobility and the future of Reality TV”

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 17 May, 2023

Revised: 10 June, 2023

Accepted: 17 June, 2023

Published: 25 June, 2023

Keywords:

Reality Television, Celebrity Culture, Reality.

ABSTRACT

Reality Television is a genre that most young adults are watching. The reality aspects of this genre make it unique and exclusive. Since it is an audio-visual based show, it carries visual appeal and has many other qualities that make it worth watching in the age of media saturation. This review paper details the assumptions made by early thinkers on Reality TV, “Celebrity, Social Mobility and the future of Reality TV” written by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, emphasizing how reality TV affects the broader viewing culture.

Not only the arguments made by the researcher has been analyzed in connection with the 21st century, these have also been contextualized with respect to the reality TV’s specific presentation and the celebrity culture that is dominating. The researcher has also analyzed social mobility in the current age.

INTRODUCTION

We are observing the age dominated by various media podiums and multiple opportunities to pick from for informative and educative purposes. Among so many choices, such as short films, documentaries, docu-dramas available on social media sites, mushrooming of countless over the top media platforms (OTT), paid and unpaid applications available to make very explicit media choice, television embrace a special place in the minds of the spectators. Although some may contend that this medium’s popularity has decreased after the advent of new media platforms emerging at a very fast pace, television is still treasured by most people. One reason for this remains the formats that television serves, ranging from docufiction made for TV films, miniseries, micro-series, prequels, remakes, and drama hits. In order to withstand in the competitive abundance of media scenario, television is seizing the attention of the masses through a very popular category of shows called “Reality TV.”

As defined by Oxford Dictionary reality television is “unscripted entertainment programming, has existed

since the emergence of television in the late 1940s. Hidden-camera programs, daytime talk shows featuring ordinary people as guests, and cop shows involving real police officers are some early strands of reality television in the United States and Europe. The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a surge of prime-time reality formats that combined dramatic entertainment and documentary conventions, including “docu-soaps,” reality sitcoms, adventure games, and makeover programs. Because of their cost efficiency and adaptability, these formats and their cultural offspring have become a staple of television production across the globe.”

The starting of reality TV in India was nothing less than a revolution in the television or audio-visual based media industry with the shows such as Boogie Woogie and Sa Re Ga Ma Pa. Of no surprise, almost all the programmes famous among the youth and being most watched by the people are ‘Reality Shows’ such as Big Boss, Dance Plus, Roadies, Indian Idol, Kaun Banega Crorepati. A substantial number of audiences continued watching these reality TV shows even after the pandemic hit worldwide. Although

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Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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there has been 30% waning from the pre-covid era but according to broadcasters and media buyer's report published in Livemint reality shows such as Big Boss and Kaun Banega Crorepati in India is beholding a boost of 15 to 20% increase in rating (as on 2nd November 2022). Researchers have also found that these non-fictional unscripted narratives are irresistible for viewers, once they get in into its format.

"Options for audiences have increased significantly with more channels, OTT platforms, uptake of regional programming, as well as international content exposure. We have to not only retain our loyal base but also attract the newer lot. Innovation on all fronts – content, technology, production design, and value for money – will continue to play a key role in this. I also see an opportunity to expand reality shows from popular genres such as song and dance to lesser exposed genres such as knowledge and skill" (Livemint.com, 2022)

Richard M Huff writes in his book 'Reality Television' that "the reality television draws loads of family viewing and the majority of the genre appeals to younger, more elusive viewers."

In India, reality TV emanated only after the nineteenth century, with big hits coming on screen. It started with the shows dedicated to talent hunt demonstrations among ordinary women and children, and then moved toward featuring celebrities in a row. Few Examples of reality TV in India can be singing talent hunt shows such as Antyakshari, Indian Idol, SaReGaMa, Fame Gurukul, Super Singer, little champ etc. then there are series of reality shows can be dancing talent hunt shows, game shows and others. Audience have seen shows like Boogie Woogie, KBC, bluff Master, deal or no deal, and the interest still endures with shows such as Dance India dance, Big Boss, Split Villa, Roadies, Emotional and Celebrity Uncensored.

This reality TV culture has serious and grave concerns, as Anita Biressi, Professor of Media and Society, University of Roehampton, UK and Heather Nunn have discussed. With reality TV shows ruling the television broadcasting formats, genre and broadcast timings, TV has mislaid itself as an educative ideal in the increasingly pressured and edgy media environment.

In the presented research paper, the researcher has revisited the article "Celebrity, Social Mobility and the future of Reality TV" written by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn with special emphasis on how reality TV is affecting the broader viewing culture. The objectives of the research paper are to;

- Revisit the arguments made by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn in their paper.
- Set out the context for the assumption made by them with respect to reality TV and Celebrities.
- Critically trace out the status of celebrity and social mobility in the present reality TV scenario.

This paper will discuss the argument made by the

researchers one by one. Researchers contended that Reality TV has replaced all intellectual adventures. This argument is in force since the media landscape is shifting and reality TV is providing people with the alternative in the form of Reality shows; without any regulatory authority over the content or pace of the show, audiences find themselves obsessed with characters playing real life roles and exposing them in front of real camera. This kind of fascination with the contestants and the format of the show lead to a kind of narcosisting effect, where the public at large ponder that they are the important chunks of the reality-drama going on, while still being mere viewers watching through the screen of their television.

Second argument upstretched by the researcher was based on the fact related to 'limited exhibitionist challenges' in reality shows. The argument remains valid because a wide range of reality shows offer its contestants the opportunity to display these encounters. This exhibitionism is not restricted to the exhibition of wealth, prosperity, physique or other physical aspects. Most sensitive and penetrating issues such as addiction, fame, money, miscarriage, affairs, love life and heartbreak all are unveiled openly. Contestants yell out everything ahead of camera or their fellow competitors. When these contestants make their heart out in front of the camera, they are conscious that millions of people must be watching them. It may look cliché but really, they are exhibiting their most personal specifics details, which is how reality TV celebrities are becoming new Exhibitionist.

Further, an argument was grounded upon the statement that reality TV has "*emotional outpouring of confessional culture*" in it. This argument is in connection with the previous one, because reality shows can be perceived through the lenses of interpersonal conflicts and emotional proclamation on camera. This emotional proclamation is intense most of the time that also affects the audience, who are regularly exposed to the reality programme. The confession ethos and culture lead the celebrities and other contestants to make emotional appeals based upon the revelation they do, after the high-end drama and conflicts. These high-end dramas and conflicts among contestants occasionally exceed humane behavior and in extremely difficult settings. Morality, entertainment, and politics all are played on screen, keeping in mind the response of the viewers and the urge of people to watch more of the conflicts and confession both raise interest of the audiences.

"*Manipulative misuse of camera*" discussed by the researcher is still relevant because we can straightforwardly witness varied camera techniques used by reality shows. In order to portray the conflict drama and the exhibitions of emotions, the camera is used in multiple ways. The celebrities who are in the setting of reality shows recognize this manipulative language of camera, leading them to adapt to the manipulative camera

logics. The setting of reality TV is such, that the bunch of camera focus on the emotions, expressions, and confession that gradually represented as the interesting content for the audience. Various facet of reality is displayed through these ever-watching optical devices called camera in the shows like Big Boss.

Reality TV has also been debated by researchers “*as a medium for easy pleasure.*” Reality TV’s winning streak is necessarily depraved news for society because all other TV formats served the purpose of entertainment, but this genre has all the rudiments of life, full of conflict, drama, race to win, normalizing cruelty, blame game, belligerence, superficiality is providing the pleasure to the audience. Reality TV’s content reflects how regressive we truly are by putting contestants into inexplicable situations, recording the absurd situation and genuine reactions. When people watch celebrities screaming and yelling at each other over unresolvable issues, it helps as an affordable distraction from their own lives. When people find others in such an emotionally loaded scenario, it becomes grim for them to disengage and detach until the drama ends. It remains an easy pleasure tool for the audience, making it difficult for them to disengage from these shows.

After putting their consideration about the already discussed aspects of reality TV ‘the future of reality TV’ also stresses upon some neutral or certainly inclined features of reality TV. These features argue positively about reality TV, confessing it “*a result of contemporary expansion and democratization of public culture.*” When the people accept these shows and welcome each episode being broadcasted, they advocate through their decision that transition in the culture is witnessing the expansion of the values and codes of conduct. Social or group conduct and socialization also witness expansion, which is shown through the expression of everyday events, conflicts, and drama.

The reality TV and shows falling in this genre also serves as “*an avenue to deconstruct the components of fame.*” Celebrities are often exposed to us as a character through TV serials; despite being protective about them. This celebrity culture displayed by reality TV put a high-volume exposure to celebrities’ personal lives in front of us. Contestants, while their emotional outpouring deconstruct the various components of their fame. Over time they talk about the substance abuse with or outside the personal space, they ponder about the isolation, mistrust. They also reveal openly about the ‘authentic self’ that is far away from their ‘celebrity self’. All the positive, negative addiction and adaptation are also served to the viewers by deconstructing them. The ‘on screen’ discussion about the ephemeral nature of fame experience, deconstruct the fame in the minds of viewers and often the new image established by the contestant remains with the audience for lifetime.

The pathos tricks played by the characters in the

reality TV trigger the emotion of the audience. Even the ‘negative emotions’ can be enjoyable to feel; therefore, Emotional investment by audience stays with the reality shows. Moreover, audience tends to see the dark side of the human nature. Many time audiences feel attached to the contestant, while participating virtually in the difficult decision-making scenario. It often reflects to do what an audience will do in the similar situation, because the theme of behaviors, betrayal, connections, compromises and entire setting or scenarios are familiar to the audiences.

“Reality shows are ironically named because they are often far from realistic scenarios. Even though these programs are guilty pleasures for so many, we can use them as good conversation starters with friends and as food for thought within our own minds as we consider our values and how-to live-in ways that demonstrate those values.” Psychology Today

The researchers also argued the setback of Celebrities before the public gaze about celebrities participating in reality TV shows. This argument makes sense in the 21 century, witnessing the huge participation of celebrities in reality TV shows, providing them with the benefits of moving from pre-celebrity to the proto-celebrity stage. Those already in the proto-celebrity stage can shift to the promotional celebrity stage in the fame cycle. But reality also shows the setback of celebrities, who often play very impressive and win-win role in the other format. This real setup plus camera also allows viewers to watch their celebrities’ role model fighting, crying and breaking for tiny issues. Although these setbacks of celebrities while ‘playing’ the game seem enjoyable to the audience, this setback can lead the celebrity to a certain distinct kind of image formation.

Since the audience also possesses media literate capabilities, they pass judgment about any participant’s setback, behavior patterns, and reactions at point of impulsion.

“When a reality television cast works, it offers viewers a range of interesting narratives, background of the participants, and discussions about the nature of fame (both its attractions and its problems). It allows audiences to imagine where in the fame cycle participants are, where they ‘deserve’ to be, and affords audiences the power to assign them accordingly.” (RA Deller, 2016)

The audiences having the media literate capabilities to understand these narratives but most of these shows confront difficult storytelling problems that the best shows resolve in highly creative ways. These narratives are often easy to guess but difficult to decode. As a requirement of post broadcast phase this genre must confront the challenge of maintaining viewer engagement through uncoated illusions and that exactly happens in TV Reality shows. This implies to the fact that the assumption about the future of reality TV with respect to celebrities and reality narratives portrayed on camera.

Another crucial but significant issue discussed in the research is related to the excessive and exaggerated representation of fame or misery. This point argues that in reality TV shows' too much" leads to infame. Too much money, fame, emotional outrage, carelessness, sympathy towards other contestants, and multiple cameras can hit the true spirit of the game being played in reality. Although these would become an element of enjoyment for the audience members but for a celebrity, these can serve as factor for infame.

The future of Reality TV

The discussion based upon the arguments suggest various point with respect to the reality TV, some other observation on the part of the researcher also suggest that reality TV is a genre that allows the contestants to 'be themselves.' The complex relationship pattern between producers and contestants makes it possible for the viewer to watch plenty of emotional conflict, execrated content, and the entire drama. This relationship between the celebrity contestants and the producer is always based upon negotiation; contestants are labor working for the producers to produce provocative and multifaceted relationships in front of the camera.

The intricate complex pattern of interaction among the producer and participant leads to exhibitionist challenges in reality shows. The contestation over manipulative camera use can be seen as one enriching adventure for the audience. Producer has the flexibility to present any story wrapped within the produced footage. The interaction between the real, ludic, and fictitious creates an interesting storyline for the producer.

Specifically, this flexibility related to the storyline depends upon the tension it creates among the contestant and enjoyed by the audience. The performative context of the participant of the reality TV depends upon the emotional Labour used by the participants, which makes it unique and draws more interest than any other genre. The uniqueness of reality TV can be seen as a cultural phenomenon; it means it portrays the culture in varied settings.

Since there are chances of distortion, the reality constructed through visual are not always real. This distortion leads to manipulated represented of the cultural phenomenon, which is always questionable.

Now the question arises, where is the reality in the reality TV?

The reality lies in unscripted and unplanned situations. The reality can be witnessed in abrupt emotion and reactions. There are fair chances that these emotions and settings are not as real as it pretends to be. The context behind them remain entertaining, and all the character's setting and the emotion represented in reality TV has entertainment value.

"TV simultaneously diffuses and amplifies the

government of everyday life, utilizing the cultural power of television (and its convergence with books, magazines, the web, and mobile media) to assess and guide ordinary people's ethics, behaviors, aspirations, and routines. At a time when privatization, personal responsibility, and consumer choice are promoted as the best way to govern liberal capitalist democracies, reality TV shows us how to conduct and "empower" ourselves as enterprising citizens." (Laurie Ouellette, 2008)

Reality TV circulates informal "guidelines for living" that we are all (at times) called upon to learn from and follow. These are not abstract ideologies imposed from above, but highly dispersed and practical techniques for reflecting on, managing, and improving the multiple dimensions of our personal lives with the resources available to us.

"Personal advice and instruction are part of the mix, but they are infused with, and tempered by, elements of voyeurism, suspense, humor, and emotional intensity. Many reality programs owe less to the illustrated lecture than to the converging conventions of the televised game and the staged experiment." (Imre, 2016)

Laura Grindstaff shows the similarities and differences between daytime talk shows and reality television in the production of identity and the expenditure of emotional labor and "real" celebrities.

Recent argument with connection to reality in reality tv is about "educational channels like Discovery are producing reality TV hits like The Deadliest Catch and Monster Garage. Another way reality TV has changed is that it is much more graphic now." (DV Singh, 2009)

With the rising interest of the public in seeing the reality in television, the channels and the emotional producer are showing whatever sensational they get from any source, particularly through the emotions and conflict that arose in the environment in which contestants live. More and more sex, violence and hazards have become part of content of reality shows.

Some may criticize the use of emotional outrage, conflict, and obscene scene to be part of the script researcher has observed that "There is an expectation from media persons not to mediate and dilute the information but deliver it as it is. Whereas market demands journalists to present the reality more sensational, glamorous, and saleable. Live telecast of matches is a nice example of reality television when audience is left to decide and grasp the content, as they like it." (DV Singh, 2009)

This quote is simply true for the reality show and about the preference of the audience with respect to their choices around glamour, sensation, and reality.

In a research Gavin Wood, director of production India Freemantle Media argues that the ingredients of an ideal reality show are simple, "It must appeal to all. It is a craft; it is a drama that unfolds in front of you." (Gavin Wood, 2022) These appealing elements of reality TV need to be real and pretending to be real, because once people know



the exact storyline, it can hit the interest. Moreover, people love to watch conflict, emotion, suffering of others, and drama depicted as reality in these shows.

“So, what causes us to derive entertainment from the suffering of others? Certainly, there may be catharsis involved, but that is also achieved through fiction - we do not need to see a real person suffer in order to have a cathartic experience. Perhaps we are simply happy that these things are not happening to us, but that seems more reasonable when we see something accidental and spontaneous rather than something deliberately staged for our amusement.”

This statement also raises question about the content, representation of reality TV, and preference of the people in the present world.

“Comments from various reality TV producers often fail to demonstrate much sympathy or concern with what their subjects experience - what we are seeing is a great callousness towards other human beings who are treated as means towards achieving financial and commercial success, regardless of the consequences for them. Injuries, humiliation, suffering, and higher insurance rates are all just the “cost of doing business” and a requirement for being edgier.” (Austine cline, 2019)

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE DISCUSSION

After the discussion related to reality TV celebrities and broader viewing culture, it can be concluded that the Television Reality shows are no doubt a medium for easy pleasure to the viewers. It gives them dynamic viewing experience, including high volume exposure to celebrity life, talk about the authentic self of celebrities in varied interesting narratives, and unscripted and unplanned situation. Spectators also watch the dark side of human nature and the deconstruction of fame that provide them guilty pleasure.

The setting of reality shows sometimes lead to celebrities' fame because it creates tension among the contestants and they demonstrate their authentic self while playing the game and laboring for the producer. The spectators can decode the complex pattern of interaction.

Here it can be concluded that the arguments made by the researchers in the paper “Celebrity, Social Mobility and the future of Reality TV” still stands valid and supports all the narratives about reality TV and their impact set by them. Now viewership is not confined to only TV screens but available on the fingertips so the audience has also magnified and varied. Reality TV's realistic representation of life situations and celebrities living, feeling, fighting the same makes the audience connect to the participants more than the scripted daily soaps and cinema. Reality TV has given contestants and celebrities a platform to exhibit their life, reality, experiences before people via screens with very few limitations. Reality shows are being used as platforms to come out with dark secrets, life experiences,

misery, struggle, exploitation etc. for participants be it celebrities or a layman. This specific genre is not confined to some particular emotion but contains almost all possible but unscripted situations, resulting in immense enjoyment for the audience. These reality shows present the famous, strong, and vulnerable side of celebrities and other contestants, which can affect or possibly impact their image before the viewers.

Reality TV shows exhibit the reality from the producer's point of view that definitely questions the reality of reality TV shows. Keeping all these in the line of argument, it can be concluded that assumptions made by the researchers stand valid with respect to celebrities, broader viewing culture and reality TV. Although there can be more discussion about social mobility with respect to reality TV genre, the context is getting richer with each passing day, and hopefully would be located in further research on the issue.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE: Absar, S., Verma, A. (2023). Revisiting “Celebrity, Social Mobility and the future of Reality TV”. *Journal of Communication and Management*, 2(2), 139-144. DOI: 10.58966/JCM20232212

