

Reasons Why Youth Watches Reality-Based Crime Shows On Television

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Abstract: This study explores the reason(s) why youth watches reality-based crime shows on television and what kinds of emotion(s) these shows evoke in them. Reality-based crime shows, also called crime docudrama, are a hybrid form of programming which mixes drama and documentary style of presentation together. Each episode re-tells a crime chronicle using actors and narration in a way which is supposed to be aimed at generating awareness about crime in society. Since the crime-reality shows are being positioned as tools of information and awareness, and becoming popular on Indian television over the recent years, whether the youth watches these shows to gain the same must be studied because they decide the sociological future of a society. Using a quantitative survey method with a non-probable convenience sample gathered from 4 colleges in Mumbai, this study found that the youth does watch reality-based crime shows for gaining awareness and the predominant feeling evoked in most respondents was awareness/alertness. Although crime docudrama may exert a positive impact on society such as spreading awareness and providing tips to fight crime, a significant amount open-ended responses showed that crime shows inspire imitative crime and create fear of crime in the minds of people.

Keywords: reality-based crime shows, uses and gratification, crime docudrama, crime shows.

I. Introduction

Research on crime shows has an extensive history of multiple studies done in the past few decades where such programming was scrutinized with a variety of perspectives, the most popular being the relation between crime drama viewing and fear of crime, extent of accuracy in what they portray and the plethora of effects these programs have on their viewers.

This study takes a unique approach at studying **crime drama** on television by using the Uses and Gratification Approach¹ to understand why the youth, in particular, prefers to watch reality-based crime shows on television. This study is focused on uncovering the reason(s) why these shows are watched in the first place. The secondary objective of this study is to explore the emotion(s) that these shows evoke in the viewers (youth).

Television - “an electronic system of sending images and sounds by a wire or through space²” remains the single most important platform for marketers, especially advertisers (Edensor, 2015) (Gaynor, 2016) (Olenski, 2013) (Mandese, 2013). It has proven to be more engaging and powerful than audio stimulus in past research and remains influential even in the currently expanding world of new media (Druckman, 2003).

Reality-based crime shows have become popular in Indian television only recently. The programs studied in this research are those that specifically mention the semi-fictional, if not completely non-fictional, nature of their episodes through their narrative style and ample disclaimers. Crime docudramas are distinctly different from regular reality shows like talk shows and news as docudramas as they occur in real time, but rather reenact them from first-hand or often second-hand accounts. Therefore why such programs, with a relatively smaller presence on television, are watched by youth was studied.

II. Review of Literature

Introduction and history of crime shows

If we were to glance the headlines of newspapers television or internet news programs or review of popular literature or films, we would find ample evidence of the massive media coverage that is given to crime and criminals (Marsh Ian, 2014, p. 19). The entertainment television sector covers crime through three kinds of programming: documentary-style, fictional soaps and a combination of the two called by Fishman & Cavendar (1998) as “**hybrid programming.**” Programs that fall under the category of hybrid programming are also called *crime docudramas*, *fact-fiction shows*, *crime-reality shows* or simply *reality-based crime shows*. Such programs generally portray a dramatic reconstruction of real crime incidents, in a way so as to educate the masses about crime (spread awareness) and teach individuals how to prevent and/or combat crime, should they ever need to. (Afaqs news bureau, 2013) (Mehrotra, 2012) (India TV News Desk, 2014) (Srivastava, 2014) (Zee News India, 2012).

Television

Television - “an electronic system of sending images and sounds by a wire or through space” significantly shapes and affects the minds and personalities of its viewers through the content that it broadcasts {(Denis, 2005) (Gerbner, 1970) (Sparks, 2006)} but when looking at these effects, it becomes important to see it from two perspectives – effect of its content and reason(s) why certain content is viewed.

Glenn Sparks (2006) concurs, “Before we study the impact of the media messages that we consume, it is important to understand what leads people to the media in the first place” (Sparks, 2006, p. 64). Following are some common reason(s) why people watch television in general:

1. Learning
2. Addiction
3. Companionship
4. Arousal (sensation seeking – adrenaline rush)
5. Relaxation
6. Escape
7. Passing Time (Sparks, 2006)
- 8.

Research on crime shows

Crime shows (under the genre of violence-based programming and otherwise) has been subjected to all forms of qualitative and quantitative examination. Early research on crime in media was derived largely through the perspective put forth by Gerbner and his colleagues' in the cultivation theory analysis. His theory propounded that an increase in the number of hours spent viewing (violent) content on television, significantly increased the probability of cultivation of the content's dominant perspective among its viewers.

Gerbner defined resonance – a phenomenon when television reality and actual reality closely resemble each other – as the situation “when one's everyday environment is congruent with and reinforces television images, the result is a phenomenon we call resonance” implying that if an aspect of television's reality could be identified in actual reality by a viewer, it could increase the chances of the lines between both realities to blur. Stating television's function as one of “enculturation”, Gerbner and Gross (1976) claimed that people watching four or more hours of television, tended to believe that the real world is more “scary” and “mean” than what it might be in actual reality which later became known as the ‘Mean World Syndrome’.

III. Research Design

Introduction

This study is focused on investigating the reason(s) “*why youth watches reality-based crime shows on television*” for which a quantitative survey was administered among 4 colleges situated in Mumbai. Since this is an analytical study, no hypothesis was formulated.

Research method for the current study

This study is approached from **analytical/empirical/diagnostic** perspective of research focusing on *why* youth watches a certain kind of program. While descriptive research attempts to describe or identify, analytical research attempts to establish *why* something is happening or how it came to be and to try and identify a cause- effect relationship.

Data is collected using the **quantitative** method. Since the main aim was to determine a set of reason(s) for watching a particular television program and attempt to generalize the findings to a large populace with similar/same socio-demographic attributes, it was felt necessary to use a quantitative method of collecting data i.e. questionnaire.

Research setting

The research setting refers to the place(s) where data is collected. In this study, data was collected from 4 colleges from Malad, Mumbai – *Ghanshyamdas Saraf College of Arts & Commerce, Vidya Vikas Universal College, Prahladrai Dalmia College of Commerce & Economics, and Smt. T. S. Bafna College (M.D Shah Mahila College)*.

Sample

This study used the *non-probability convenience (availability) sampling* to administer questionnaires to prospective respondents located in 4 colleges in Mumbai. Not every youngster in the said colleges or in the rest of Mumbai stood an equal chance of being included in the sample due to spatial and temporal constraints involved in the research and due to the fact that when this study was conducted, students were not present in the respective colleges in fixed groups, around specific times or in a manner through which a simple random sample could be drawn.

Method of analysis

A simple frequency count method was used for all the questions in both the questionnaires. Close-ended as well as open-ended questions were coded and after data entry into an Excel Sheet, a simply frequency count to calculate percentages and mean scores (as and where applicable) was done.

IV. Findings & Observations

Data of all 116 respondents was tabulated and coded in Excel, where data from 102 viewers and 14 non-viewers entered separately, after which a frequency count was administered for all responses to calculate results. Non-viewers of crime shows (i.e. do not watch crime shows) were coded as per the supplementary questionnaire administered to them, and analyzed separately.

Summary of findings:

Majority of the respondents (48% N=29) watch 1-2 hours of television each day.

Majority 29:

The 29 respondents that watch 1-2 hours of television watch crime shows and maximum frequency count was received for Crime Patrol (N=25) and Savdhaan India (N=19) within which 1 respondent mentioned CID. All of these 29 respondents watch their favorite crime shows (as mentioned) every day or at least every alternate day which implied that in the small segment of time that they dedicate to TV-viewing, a major chunk goes in viewing crime shows. This deduction is based on the fact that all the crime shows considered in this study have an average run time of 45 minutes (excluding advertising breaks). This group of 29 individuals dedicates themselves to crime shows majorly because of awareness (frequency count 18) 78 out of 102 respondents (viewers – who watch reality-based crime shows) watch television for approximately 1-2 hours meaning that they dedicate at least more than 50% of their time to watching crime shows. 59 out of 102 respondents watch crime shows at least daily or 1-2 times in a week proving that crime shows are relatively popular among the youth.

Crime Patrol and Savdhaan India received the highest frequency count (no. of mentions) by both, regular viewers and non-viewers of crime shows with Crime Patrol receiving

the maximum frequency count (66 out of 187 for viewers, 6 out of 18 for non-viewers).

Interestingly, a few of the respondents admitted that they were unaware that the reality-crime shows they liked to watch were based on true incidents. These respondents which constituted 8 out 102 have been separately analyzed and results are summarized in a box below titled “**Special Eight**” because to them, reality-based crime shows are just like any other drama-based soap opera.

Therefore, (most) viewers of reality-based crime shows:

- Watch television for at 1-2 hours.
- Watch crime shows every day, every alternate day or at least 1-2 times in a week.
- Watch Savdhaan India and Crime Patrol the most.
- Are aware that crime shows are based upon true incidents.
- Like to watch crime shows because of they want to gain awareness and because such shows are based upon real stories.

V. Conclusions

This study set out to explore the reason(s) why youth watches reality-based crime shows on television. Also called crime “docudrama”, reality-based crime shows are recent in Indian television’s history and limited in variety when compared to Western programs. This study, being the first of its kind in the socio-demographic context of India and genre of crime docudrama, analyzed the responses of the youth aged 15-25 years. Results showed that most youngsters watch less than 3 hours of television every day but in the time that they spend on television, a substantial amount of it is reserved for watching crime shows almost every day or at least once in a week. This kind of exposure could have a plethora of effect(s) but the allure of these shows remains in their most heavily advertised prospect of “*awareness*” which was found to be the primary reason for watching such shows.

However, the flip side of the coin conjures a much darker and scarier picture. Awareness could limit itself to knowledge of how the police or judicial system works, what loopholes in the police procedure can be exploited and how the ‘perfect’ crime can be committed. A frightening trajectory, but still a highly probable one – at least in the case of youngsters for their naïve minds and underdeveloped moral cognition cripples their reasoning in stressful situations and may contribute in increasing the number of imitation of crime(s). Quite a number of cases of imitative crime where teenagers and youngsters especially had been inspired to indulge in criminal methods for material gains.

¹ “A version of individualistic functional theory and research that seeks to explain the uses of media and the satisfactions derived from them in terms of the motives and self-perceived needs of the audience members.”
 McQuail (2010, p. 572)

² (Merriam Webster, 2017)

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