Exploring appreciation of talent-searching reality TV

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The purpose of the present paper was to investigate which factors contribute to the evaluation of reality TV, and in particular talent-searching shows. Appreciation of Idols was set as an indicator of the experienced level of overall enjoyment for this format. The assumed determinants of influence on appreciation were: identification, fairness and the content. All constructs individually proved to have a significant influence, combined they explained 40% of the variation. While content explains the most, it is not entirely clear whether fairness or identification adds than the most value within the model. However, the data seem to indicate that the level of identification may be more essential within the process of evaluation.

Introduction

While many theories try to explain what effect the media have on the public and why, this present study focuses on one type of entertainment, namely *reality TV*, and in particular talent-searching programs such as: Idols and X-factor. Reality TV has become an umbrella term for all shows with audience-participation. Some scholars have already tried to provide theories that explain why people seek certain media content, however, most of these theories have their focus on the more traditional media repertoire (e.g. movies, talk shows, commercials, soaps etc.). Within the last decade, the entertainment media introduced more shows with an interactive paradigm; letting the audience (help to) decide the outcome of the show. This interactive style is almost always framed in a competitive format where contestants are evaluated on their performance(s), the better you are, the more chance you have on succeeding to the next round or even winning the show. The audience/viewers are asked to give their opinion by voting on their favorite candidate, often through texting his or her name to the game show, hereby trying to actively involve the audience.

Big Brother was the first show to implement this element, broadcasted in Holland at the end of 1999. The idea was to share a living space for several weeks with members of the public, whilst (television) cameras were continuously monitoring everything. In the end, the viewers decided the winner. As with other shows, the people on the show invoked response to the audience. Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the term 'parasocial interactions' as a label for the responses viewers have to people on the screen.

U&G

One of the theories that helped us shift our attention from the fact that an audience is not a passive, but an active media user is the uses and gratification theory (U&G). Since its inception in the early 1940's (Ruggiero, 2000) it has come a long way, and today U&G is generally seen as a section of many media research (McQuail, 1994). The basic idea behind this theory is that it tries to asses and looks for the motivation why people select certain media and the needs that the media gratify, In other words: U&G research studies how and why people use media in general (Giles, 2003). For example, McQuail (1987) identified four subcategories of why people select particular media, namely: entertainment, information, personal identity and personal relationships/interaction (Dainton & Zelley, 2011, p.197).

Perhaps the most interesting subcategory for this study is personal identity. The concepts originated from the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1979) and later Tajfel and Turner (1979), (Blumer, 1979). Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that people categorized themselves and others to be part of different social groups and evaluate these categorizations. To belong to the group and the appraisal placed on it, is defined as social identity. Research has shown that these categorizations or group membership (in-group vs. out-group) also might be a motivation for media selection; such as : culture, ethical background and nationality (Zillmann et al., 1995; Mastro, 2003; Trepte, 2004), gender (Knobloch et al. , 2005; Oliver, 2000; Oliver, Weaver & Sargent, 2000; Trepte, 2004), age (Harwood, 1997, 1999), and even institutionalized groups such as school classes (Tarrent, North & Hargreavers, 2001).

Disposition-based theories

Another interesting concept relating to peoples preferences for entertainment, and that recognizes that enjoyment is an individual phenomenon, with subjective evaluations and personality traits as key components are: Disposition-based theories (Rayney, 2003). The first theory in this collective, the disposition based theory of humor was developed by Zillmann and Cantor (1972). The theory describes how people appreciate jokes involving disparagement groups. The same principles were later applied to the appreciation of drama (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) and sports spectatorship (Zillmann, Braynt & Sapolsky, 1989), hence the name Disposition-based theories.

To elaborate the importance of the disposition-based theories within this study is that they include both the concepts of liking and disliking of the parties involved. Earlier studies of humor appreciation failed to consider the dislike people may have towards the group or person who served as the butt of the joke. Therefore Zillmann and Cantor (1972) proposed a continuum of affective dispositions people form whilst witnessing a joke, ranging from an extreme negative to an extreme positive affection. This affiliation is formed quickly as we identify the roles and activities of the characters involved and then react with empathy towards positive associated experience and react with adverse when negative experiences are associated. Of course the appreciation will be higher when more negative disposition are held towards the disparaged character, and will be less humorous when positive dispositions are held towards the disparaged character. Zillmann and Cantor (1976; p. 101) argued, "Appreciation should be maximum when our friends humiliate our enemies, and minimum when our enemies manage to get the upper hand."

As mentioned above, to evaluate the appreciation of drama and or sports, the same principles of the disposition theory of humor were applied. With drama, the theory predicts that enjoyment will increase when liked characters experience positive outcomes, and disliked characters suffer negative outcomes. Once again the feelings viewers have are of great significance, however, unlike a joke that gives us an excuse to violate social sanctums, affection in drama must be morally justified (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Viewers must therefore continually monitor and judge the characters morality on the actions he or she makes. The affective dispositions, again ranges on a continuum of affect, but are subject to change due to events in the narrative. Once characters are liked or disliked, we are able to either empathize with or against them, and ultimately enjoyment will increase (or decrease) in proportion to our dispositions as the outcomes as we wish are portrayed.

As can be derived from the disposition-based theory of drama, empathy is placed on moral justification, and that these justifications govern the affective dispositions people form (Zillmann 1994). It is not unlikely to think that the moral compositions people have may vary because of individual differences. Thus people may differ in their sophistication and manner in which they approach moral reasoning (Kohberg, 1981; Rest, 1979). An interesting factor within the complex constellation of moral reasoning is fairness. Zillmann and Bryant (1975) established that fairness contributed to the level of enjoyment when they asked children to rate fairytales. They found that when children believed the ending to be unfair,

appreciation declined significantly. Further support for this notion can be found from a study done by Raney (2002). He tailored two different crime related movies in which the perpetrator got punished. The punishment remained the same, but the crime itself was altered (sexual abuse vs. non sexual abuse), participants viewed one of the two versions and rated the video on enjoyment. Results indicated that the evaluation of fairness (deservedness of the punishment) and empathy towards the victim predicted the enjoyment of the clip. However, within the sexual abuse (rape) condition, only moral sympathy towards the victim predicted enjoyment. The author suggested that people who evaluate the heinous nature of rape see it as equally disturbing, and the punishment as equally deserved. This may render cognitive attitudes towards punishment and vigilantism in extreme cases inconsequential between viewers.

Zillmann, Bryant, and Sapolsky (1989) have conducted several studies to test the disposition based ideas within sports spectatorship. They found that enjoyment increases or suffers when their favorite team is winning or losing. As with humor and drama, the more extreme your affection is, the more you enjoy or detest the success or downfall of a team and/or person.

Content

While there are numerous theories trying to explain the why in entertainment research, surprisingly little insight is found within the literature on media content itself. Rather, many studies focus' lies on the motivation for media selection (e.g. U&G as described above) and other psychological, cognitive, affective and behavioral components. Examples are: Mood-management theory, selective exposure hypothesis and the disposition-based theories (also described above). Thus it seems that content-selection is taken for granted and relies heavily on commonsense. However, it would be inadmissible to exclude the content itself in the present study, partially because the interest lies beyond the simple "who does what" question, and secondly the format under scrutiny deviates from more tradition media repertoires, thus may be reason enough to watch by itself.

Although these theories have been introduced before the onset of an interactive style, they will serve as a foundation for this exploratory study. As mentioned in the first

paragraph, the empathy is placed upon talent-searching reality TV and in particular Idols, which will be used as an anchor, from which the data will be interpreted. U&G will serve to predict why we watch Idols and with particular interest towards personal identity and personal relationships. There is reason to suspect that the ideas behind the disposition-based theories will serve as mediating factors contributing towards the experienced level of enjoyment. Therefore constructs as: identification, the level of fairness and content are predicted to all play an important role in overall enjoyment of Idols, and ultimately peoples' appreciation of the show, determines the likelihood of viewing a new season.

Thus the main research question is: Do factors such as: Identification and fairness weigh enough to explain the appreciation of talent-searching shows; such as: Idols. If the premises hold value, they incite to ask a second question; whether or not we can predict if the audience will feel intrigued to watch another season. This latter question will be based on the findings of the main research question. Therefore three hypotheses have been proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The more people can identify themselves with the candidates on the show, the higher their overall enjoyment will be.

Hypothesis 2: If people believe the show to be unfair, their overall enjoyment will drop.

Hypothesis 3: Intention to watch a new series of Idols will depend on peoples overall enjoyment.

Method

An online survey has been developed based on the theories mentioned above (U&G and the disposition based theories). Three constructs were measured via 5 point Likert-scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questions have been posed in Dutch because of possible language barriers within the population. First some general questions were posed concerning the reality format *like* Idols. (X-factor, Holland got Talent etc.). In the

last section of the survey participants were kindly requested to take Idols in mind whilst answering the questions.

Independent Variables

Identification

Questions relating to identification have been based on previous research concerning the same concept, for example, Cohen and Perse (2003) found a positive correlation between Identification and general attitudes, background and feelings. Feilitzen and Linne (1975) demonstrated that children identified themselves with characters that were generally similar to themselves, such as children in a show. Harwood (1997) showed that people prefer shows in which the main character was close to the viewer's age. Questions concerning identification were for example: "I find it important to be able to emphasize with the candidates".

Fairness

Fairness related questions were based on studies that have shown that in sports joy will diminish due to unfair play (Raney, 2003b). Brewer (1996) conducted a study regarding the appreciation of stories with justice and fairness as dependent variables, significant higher scores were given to those stories whom were fair and morally just. Examples are: "I believe the show to be fair" and "the best shall prevail".

Content

Content related questions have been added because the content itself is basically the fingerprint of a program, that what makes a program differ from other shows, thus may be reason enough to see Idols. These questions are important for they can be used in conjunction with both identification and fairness, to investigate more thoroughly the magnitude these variables hold. Eight questions were formulated; questions relating to content were for example: "the performers make the show" or "I find voting an important element of the show".

Dependent Variables

Overall enjoyment

Participants were asked to give Idols a grade from 1 to 10. One meaning absolute dislike of the show, a score of ten meaning that the show fulfills all expectations and is excellent.

Future View behavior

Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they would watch another series of Idols if broadcasted. The options ranged from 'all episodes' to 'none', with two options in between. Overall enjoyment will serve as predictor to investigate future viewing behavior.

Participants

Participants have been recruited via social media such as: Face book and Hyves (the Dutch version of Face book). 70 people participated (31 men, 39 women) with a mean age of 32, SD = 11.98.

Results

First a correlation matrix has been constructed to see how the variables correlate with each other, table 1 summarizes the results. As can be seen, all variables have a decent positive correlation with each other, this is important for if no significant correlation was found, the model would render mood.

Second a regression analysis has been performed for all the independent variables individually on the dependent variable: the overall enjoyment (grade). Overall enjoyment has been used to predict future behavior (if people will watch a new season of Idols). A summary of the results will be shown below.

Table 1.

A correlation matrix of the variables: identification, content, fairness, grade and view next season

Correlations

		Identification	content	Fairness	Grade	View next season
Identification	Pearson Correlation	1	,722[**]	,640[**]	,530[**]	,275[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,021
	N	70	70	70	70	70
content	Pearson Correlation	,722[**]	1	,623[**]	,617[**]	,225
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,061
	N	70	70	70	70	70
Fairness	Pearson Correlation	,640[**]	,623[**]	1	,476[**]	,314[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,008
	N	70	70	70	70	70
Grade	Pearson Correlation	,530[**]	,617[**]	,476[**]	1	,414[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	70	70	70	70	70
View next season	Pearson Correlation	,275[*]	,225	,314[**]	,414[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,021	,061	,008	,000	
	N	70	70	70	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Identification

The concept of Identification (consisting of 8 items) proved to have an important contribution to the overall enjoyment of Idols if used alone $F_{(1.68)}= 26,557$; $P< .001$, and explains about 28% of the variation, $R^2= .281$. A pretest showed a Cronbach's Alpha = .812 after removal of two of the original questions, leaving eight items, a posttest revealed a Cronbach's Alpha = .816.

Fairness

The concept of fairness (consisting of 8 items) also significantly influences the overall enjoyment of Idols $F_{(1.68)}=19.972$, $P < .001$, and it alone explains 23% of the variance, $R^2= .227$. The pretest showed a Cronbach's Alpha = .812, posttest Cronbach's Alpha = .732.

Content

The content (consisting of 9 items) proved to be good predictor for overall enjoyment of Idols $F_{(1.68)}$=41.727, P= .001 and alone explains 37% of the variance R^2= .371.

Because items concerning the concept 'content' involved questions both including performer and performance, a related T-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the two types of content $T_{(69)}$= 8.85, P< .001, with a mean difference of 2.73 in favor of performer. However due to the low reliability score Cronbach's Alpha = .604 and Cronbach's Alpha = .673 for performance and performer respectively, this has not been split in the final analysis. A pretest showed a Cronbach's Alpha =.844, Posttest Cronbach's Alpha =.757.

View next season

The regression analysis showed that previous experience with the program Idols significantly contributed to peoples intention to watch another series of Idols $F_{(1,68)}$= 14.057, P< .001. However the appreciation in general alone, explained only 17% of the total variation, R^2= 0.171.

Third, a regression analysis has been performed to reveal that all three of the independent variables significantly contribute to the explanation of the variance on the overall enjoyment, $F_{(3,66)}$= 14.772, P< .001, and explains around 40% of the total variance, R^2= .402. However, further analysis revealed that only the content explained a significant difference within our model $T_{(69)}$= 3.13, P< .001.

Additional analysis

Gender

Significant difference between gender and overall enjoyment was found $F_{(1,68)}$= 8.864, P< .05. Women ranked their enjoyment almost 1.3 points higher than the men did. No other significant differences between genders were found.

Educational background

A one-way-ANOVA revealed a significant difference between people with different educational background concerning the level of experienced fairness $F(3,66)= 4.199$, $P < .05$. Closer inspection revealed that people with a bachelor- or masters degree were more severe in their verdict, rating fairness 4.3 points lower than people with an HBO background $T(56)= 3.375$ $P= .001$.

Level of identification

A significant difference was found between people with a high level of identification in comparison to with people a low level of identification $T(69)= 2.015$, $P< .05$. Indicating that higher grades were given by those whom held higher levels of identification.

No other significant differences were found during further analysis of the data.

Discussion

The purpose of the present paper was to investigate which factors contribute to the evaluation of reality TV, and in particular talent-searching shows. Factors of interest were: the level of *identification*, whether or not people believed the show to be *fair* and the *content*. Additionally, prior experience with this type of format, obtained by asking participants to give Idols a grade, was used to investigate the possibility of predicting future interest in talent- searching shows.

The main finding of this study was that indeed the factors under scrutiny are in accordance with the level of enjoyment in talent-searching reality TV. Although the constructs individually contribute significantly towards the evaluation of the show (fairness about 20%, identification about 30%, content a mere 37%), together they explained about 40% in the evaluation of this type of format. The finding that content has the largest share is not surprising, commonsense dictates that it is very unlikely that a show or program will be watched when the content is not appealing. However, the real interest went towards the contribution of both identification and fairness.

Although it is not entirely clear whether identification or fairness added the most explanatory value, the data here seem to favor the level of identification. This notion comes

from the fact that people with a high level of identification, systematically rate Idols as more enjoyable than people who hold a lesser degree of identification, no such relationship was found within the fairness paradigm. Another finding is that identification explained more variance than fairness did. Although the latter inference may be tantalizing, note however, that this must be interpreted with great care; other covert variables may be in play, but more importantly no significant difference was found between these variables within the model. Final support for this notion may be garnered from closer inspection concerning the composition of content related questions. This stems from the fact that the content could be roughly divided into act and actor related components. Although the distinction between these two elements was too weak to use them separately, participants placed greater empathy towards actor rather than the act itself.

Support for both the variables *identification* and *fairness* is abundant. Fairness finds its support in studies that investigate intrinsic satisfaction when behavior and consequences (reward versus punishment) were altered, higher levels of enjoyment were obtained when the consequence was seen as just (Brewer, 1985; Raney & Braynt, 2002; Zillmann, 2000). Identification finds support for media selection: culture, ethical background and nationality (Zillmann et al., 1995; Mastro, 2003; Trepte, 2004), gender (Knobloch et al. , 2005; Oliver, 2000; Oliver, Weaver & Sargent, 2000; Trepte, 2004), age (Harwood, 1997, 1999), and even institutionalized groups such as school classes (Tarrent, North & Hargreavers, 2001), implying that identification indeed contributes toward the purpose of the activity (in this case enjoyment, for nearly 70% indicated that entertainment was the main reason for watching Idols).

An interesting study done by Miller (1998) was that when he tailored the protagonist in such a way that children could easily identify with him/her, their sense of justice was amplified. The present study failed to replicate his finding. Note however, that the present study lies outside the realm of earlier studies. Unlike series, soaps and movies, the protagonists' in talent-searching reality TV differ with each series, and are not based on personality but rather on talents and skills. Nevertheless consensus is found between the different formats. Therefore the present study contributes towards our understanding of the media phenomenon. The finding that identification contributes towards enjoyment is in line with Fiske's (1989) idea that identification is rather a referential approach to the content

presented, and helps to see the point of view of the characters involved, which ultimately lead to higher enjoyment (Cohen, 2003).

Finally, prior experience with Idols was used to predict future interest in another series. The results indicate that indeed high levels of enjoyment intrigue people to watch. However, prior experience alone accords only for 20% of the intention, and closer inspection of the data revealed that nearly 50% of the participants seemed reluctant to watch a new series Idols at all. Nevertheless the analysis showed that prior experience has a significant influence, that with the correlation (see table 1) that proved reasonable (R= .414), confirms (at least partially) the third premise. A possible explanation for this finding is perhaps the excessive amount of access to programs *like* Idols, thereby making a distinction between the programs extraneous. Furthermore, it is not entirely unlikely to think, that the people who enjoyed Idols, also watch similar programs (X-factor, The Voice of Holland) thus the finding may indicate an 'overall' interest rather than sole interest in Idols alone.

One finding that has yet to be explained is the significant difference found on the fairness-rating between the top educated people within the population, namely: HBO and university. It is at this moment unclear where this deviation stems from, for no other differences were found between any of the populations. Apparently, people whom enjoyed university seemed the most austere on this scale compared to the other forms of education. Because the only distinction between educational backgrounds was found on fairness, it seems unlike that the manner in which universities inculcate reasoning may underlie this finding.

To the best of knowledge, the present study stands alone, thus making inferences about this genre perilous. However, data obtained from this study are solid, and may be used as a stepping stone towards a more elaborate understanding. An interesting prospect would be to see whether the same mechanisms hold value in other talent-searching media content. For example: Project Catwalk, Master Chef and American next top model which are also reality based, but not entirely the same. Nevertheless, the model presented explains about 40% in the evaluation of this type of entertainment. Leaving more than half unexplained, it is vital that more attention is dedicated towards reality based television to augment our understanding. Authenticity may be embedded because it draws on characteristics such as: sincerity, devotion and intentions. Further, the model failed to incorporate the competitive element of the game. It is not unreasonable to think that the 'thrill of the game' may be (additional) reason to watch this type of programs.

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Appendix A

Instrument

First some general questions were posed concerning the background of the participant.

1. Geslacht

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Vrouw

2. Opleiding

- ☐ Middelbare school
- ☐ MBO
- ☐ HBO
- ☐ WO

3. Gemiddeld kijk ik … uur per week televisie.

Participants were asked to select a score (from 1 to 5) to indicate whether or not the statement was applicable to them, where 1 means you strongly disagree, and 5 meaning you strongly agree with the statement.

Identification

4. Ik vind het belangrijk om me in de kandidaten te kunnen verplaatsen.
5. Ik vind het belangrijk me in te kunnen leven in de kandidaten.
6. De achtergrond van de kandidaat vind ik belangrijk.
7. De kandidaten zijn 'gewone' mensen zoals jij en ik.
8. Omdat iedereen mee kan doen, maakt dat de show juist leuk.
9. Ik vind het belangrijk dat ik mij kan identificeren met de kandidaten.
10. Ik heb het gevoel dat ik de kandidaten leer kennen.
11. Een belangrijke reden om te kijken is, omdat de kandidaten gewone mensen zijn.

Fairness

12. Ik geloof dat de show eerlijk verliep.
13. Ik vond dat de jury te veel invloed heeft.
14. De meest talentvolle kandidaat zal winnen
15. De beste kandidaat zal winnen.

16. De beste kandidaat zal winnen.

17. Als een kandidaat slecht presteerde was ik blij als hij/zij eruit lag.

18. Ik was het vaak eens met de kijkers-stemmen.

19. Ik was het vaak eens met de jury.

Content

20. Stemmen vind ik een belangrijk element van de show.

21. Als er niet (meer) gestemd kon worden, was Idols minder leuk.

22. Het jury commentaar vond ik leuk.

23. Ik ben benieuwd naar het optreden van de kandidaten.

24. De optredens maken de show.

25. De kandidaten maken de show.

26. Omdat iedereen mee kan doen, maakt dat de show juist leuk.

27. Ik stem (als ik stem) op een optreden.

28. Ik stem (als ik stem) op een kandidaat.

29. Het geslacht van de kandidaat vind ik belangrijk

☐ Ja
☐ Nee

30. Mijn voorkeur gaat uit naar een

☐ Man
☐ Vrouw
☐ N.V.T.

31. Als mijn favoriete kandidaat NIET doorgaat stop ik met kijken

☐ Ja
☐ Nee

32. Als mijn favoriete kandidaat NIET doorgaat, maakt het niet meer uit wie er wint

☐ Ja
☐ Nee

33. Als mijn favoriete kandidaat NIET doorgaat, ga ik tactisch stemmen

☐ Ja
☐ Nee

34. Per seizoen heb ik een aantal favorieten

☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ N.V.T.

35. Hoeveel procent van de uitzendingen keek u ongeveer

- ☐ 0 – 20%
- ☐ 20 – 40%
- ☐ 40 – 60%
- ☐ 60 – 80%
- ☐ 80 – 100%

36. Een volgend seizoen ga ik zeker kijken

- ☐ Ja, alle afleveringen
- ☐ De meesten afleveringen
- ☐ Sommige afleveringen
- ☐ Ik ga niet kijken

37. Wat zou u aangeven als belangrijkste reden om naar Idols te kijken.

- ☐ Vermaak
- ☐ Ik volg een kandidaat
- ☐ Iedereen kijkt het
- ☐ Leedvermaak
- ☐ Het concept spreekt me aan
- ☐ Muziek/optredens
- ☐ Ik kijk alleen de finale
- ☐ Ik kijk alleen de voorrondes
- ☐ werk

38. Ik geef Idols in het algemeen een ...