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Survival of the Stereotypical: A Study of Personal Characteristics on Reality Television Show

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ABSTRACT:

Reality television has become ubiquitous in primetime, and the programs featuring competitions boast followings in the tens of millions.Yet, the genre also stands to reproduce many cultural stereotypes through its various contests. Like primetime dramas, reality programs offer ongoing stories for audience members to follow, but unlike dramas, viewers get to watch "real people" realize lifelong dreams or make fools of themselves in front of everyone.

Indeed, as this paper will reveal, contestants on reality programs frequently tend to be stereotyped by age, gender and race, among other factors, and the programs thus may affect the perceptions of viewers who do not realize the extent to which they, too, stereotype others based on group characteristics

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Introduction:

Since the advent of television, people have enjoyed watching the dubious adventures of others. In recent years, however, the relatively light humor of these fictitious programs has given way to moresevere and cynical forms of entertainment, such as the humiliation and ultimate elimination of contestants on "reality" television programs. A reality show stars a non-celebrity or a volunteer who wants to participate in the program, and the core role is to see what their reactions in certain scenarios are, and how they face given situations.

In some ways, this gives the audience a connection with the show's stars as they feel that they are "real and normal" people representing them. This is why the reality shows are hitting big time in the TV scenes because the audience empathizes with the show's stars. Unfortunately, this is also why reality shows have a negative impact on the audience — because they tend to think, act, and feel, like the show's stars, and in the process lose their own sense of critical thinking and "real" emotions towards certain situations.

Reality television has become ubiquitous in primetime, and the programs featuring competitions boast followings in the tens of millions (Nabiet al. 304). Yet, the genre also stands to reproduce many cultural stereotypes through its various contests. Reality Television is a genre of television programming that presents purportedly unscripted dramatic or humorous situations, documents actual events, and usually features ordinary people instead of professional actors. These people are put in some altogether extraordinary situations or unnerving locations and are told to act in a certain way by the story editors, so that they are able to strike an emotional chord with the gullible glue watchers of TV. Highly sensitized and overtly manipulated, these scripted realities are responsible for spoiling the smooth fabric of our society, thus encouraging money mindedness, voyeurism and sadistic pleasure. Some popular types of reality shows are game shows, talent hunts, dating shows, supernatural and paranormal shows, talk shows, etc. These shows, despite all criticism, have become an essential part of our daily lives and a spicy topic of idle gossip at social gatherings.

Indeed, as this paper will reveal, contestants on reality programs frequently tend to be stereotyped by age, gender and race, among other factors, and the programs thus may affect the perceptions of viewers who do not realize the extent to which they, too, stereotype others based on group characteristics. Shugart, for instance, describes how reality court programs reinforce dominant conceptions of discipline through representations of class and race/ethnicity, noting, astutely, that court programs have relatively little to do with legal situations and "more to do with the exposure, review, and lifestyle of the participants'. Reality programs offer unimaginable zeal for audience members to follow, but unlike dramas, viewers get to watch "real people" realize lifelong dreams or make fools of themselves . Because the programs are not scripted and do not employ directors ,*per se*, viewers may draw conclusions about the competitions as if

contestants were unaware that anyone was watching, let alone filming. Then there are shows like Bigg Boss, infamous for its wildly explicit contents, conversations laden with expletives with people eventually coming to fist fights, couples going all touchy-feely on screen. You cannot even blame only American television making its way surreptitiously in the Indian market. There are Indian production houses who produce shows considered 'unacceptable' in Indian sensibilities.

You have Roadies, Emotional Atyachaar etc where people openly abuse each other by hinting at the promiscuous natures of each other's mothers and sisters. The entire nation stays glued to the television and watch with unwavering attention when the camera zooms in on a man and woman canoodling in a corner or when a man is called 'impotent' by the anchor of the show. People download episodes of these shows, discuss them over steaming cups of coffee etc. And then people turn around and hold these shows responsible for tarnishing the image of the Indian culture and heritage.

This article examines personal characteristics and order of elimination on three reality television programs: *Survivor India*, big Boss and Indian *Idol*. The paper examines whether programs that purport to give every contestant an opportunity for success appear to do so, or whether the programs merely help to preserve the status quo and the cultural assumptions Stereotyping and Order of Elimination on Reality Television 81*30.2 Spring 2008*therein. Given the relatively modest amount of scholarship on reality programming, the paper seeks to help fill a void, adding a content study to existing research.

Review of Literature

Although one could argue that the known presence of a video camera fundamentally alters "reality," more than 40 television series since 2000 have been characterized by the term "reality television" (Deery 2). Programs have included *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, Indian *Idol* and *Big Boss*, among others, giving media audiences captivating stories to follow and broadcast corporations fortunes to collect. As an example, as Deery points out (3), it took CBS the equivalent of one minute in advertising revenues to recoup the 1 million prize it offered a victor on *Survivor*, the final episode of which (in season one) drew51.7 million viewers (Nabi et al. 304). With that many people watching, it becomes important to consider the images and representations emanating from such programs, especially since producers tout the programs as "real,"

thus implying that behaviors observed during a given episode are essentially the same as those one would observe "in reality."Deery sheds light on why studying contestant characteristics and order of elimination might be worthwhile, and potentially meaningful toward understanding cultural stereotyping in broadcast content: "Reality TV represents, among other things, the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone

as well as everything has a price and that people will do pretty much anything for money . . . Audiences tune in to see how far the process has advanced, whereas producers capitalize on the spectacle of greed to generate their own profits" (2). Deery discusses how the target audiences

for reality television show little interest in subjects of intellectual import, opting instead for "sensational, un editorialized, intimate action in the personal, confessional, or therapeutic mode" (4). If, in fact, that is the case, one might expect the producers of reality programs to recruit contestants who represent extremes, such that audience members will grow fond of certain characters.

In advancing disposition theory, Zillmann suggests that audience enjoyment of a media production is contingent upon audience members' affective dispositions toward characters in the production, as well as the outcomes those characters experience (225-239). "Simply stated," Raney explains, "the theory predicts that enjoyment increases when liked characters experience positive outcomes or when disliked characters experience negative ones..Discussing this theory of media enjoyment, Raney notes that audience members tend to form alliances with characters in dramas and that enjoyment tends to increase with the opportunity to make a moral judgment. Because the contestant pool on many reality television programs tends to be heterogeneous, viewers have the opportunity to form alliances with certain characters, supporting those characters a bit more each week, and at the same time, hoping that contestants opposite the favored ones fare poorly—perhaps to the point of utter humiliation.

Disposition theory has been applied to several genres, but because reality television is a relatively new phenomenon, it has not served as a conceptual framework for this type of programming. Further, because disposition theory focuses on the viewing experience, as opposed to production choices, its fundamental assertions are mentioned in this paper primarily to inform the process by which reality television engages audience members. To become engaged in a media production, viewers need to care about the characters they observe—at least to some extent—and one way producers might go about "hooking" viewers is by maximizing perceived differences among the contestants and, in some cases, exploiting their lifestyles. As Shugart argues, backgrounds and behaviors of reality television participants assist in contextualizing the predicaments in which the contestants find themselves. "It is this competitive aspect of reality shows that is more troublesome from a cultural standpoint. These shows are, in fact, metanarratives in the purest sense; they are more about their own carefully constructed reality than they will ever be about authentic reality" . Creating rivalries thus stands to capture the attention of viewers, and the greater the number of viewers, the greater the advertising revenues (Podlas 141-172).

In discussing the extent to which audience members consider elements of media productions "real," Shapiro and Chock point to perceived *typicality* (166). Specifically, the more typical the characteristics of individuals and situations are, the more "real" they may appear to audience members. Gorham explains what is at stake when productions capitalize on this notion, advancing (stereo)typical images in the interest of profit maximization and little else: By automatically priming racial stereotype congruent interpretations of subsequent media texts, and by doing so repeatedly and consistently, stereotypes in the media can maintain unjust, harmful, and dominant understandings

of race by influencing the way individuals interpret media texts (244).Through the work of Omi and Winant, as well as that of Hunt, and Bonilla-Silva, media stereotypes of race, in particular, can be contextualized in broader social terms. For instance, suggesting that social structures and everyday experiences are *organized* such as , "Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, confidence,aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed . Hunt observes that "what we *know* about race at any given point in time is composed of commonsense ideologies, expectations, rules of etiquette – representations. And these representations are linked to important economic, political and cultural forces – forces
which shape, *and are shaped by*, the shifting meanings undergirding racial categories" . Media representations, the authors explain, do not merely mimic—or seek to mimic—reality but in fact may suggest new ways of acting, feeling and thinking, and while audiences may dismiss media representations as "entertainment," societal messages contained in such productions may have lasting effects (for additional discussion, see Bennett 408-425; Dubrofsky39-56; Ferris et al. 490-510; Annette Hill 79-107; Alice Hill 191-211; Nabi etal. 421-447; Roberti 117-134). "In the United States," Vera and Gordon suggest, "whites have seen themselves as the norm while seeing racial others as all alike. Whites have seen and portrayed people of color in distorted ways that spread negative images throughout our culture and, via our media, throughout the world" .
.With regard to reality television, Patkin observed animosity between younger and older contestants on *Survivor: india* (15). Animosity developed, Patkin suggests, when older contestants did not keep pace with the physical tasks assigned to group members. From the standpoint of exploiting differences, this tension between younger and older contestants on reality television appears to reflect organizational cultures more generally. As an example, in a cross-cultural study, McCann and Giles observed younger workers to perceive older employees as more negative, non-accommodating and self-centered, regardless of the culture at hand (1); television thus stands to reproduce cultural assumptions while purporting to expose instances of flawed thinking and stereotyping (Cavender 155-172; Foster 270-289).In sum, stereotypes that seep into media productions stand to impact the viewer regardless of whether the viewer realizes it, or even whether the viewer disagrees with the stereotypes (Gorham 229-247). But reality television frequently travels well beyond subtlety and into the domain of outright humiliation. Contestants often are eliminated from reality programs one by one, and with assistance from "surviving" contestants, audience members are both tacitly and overtly encouraged to detest the eliminated contestants because of apparent shortcomings; after all, if the individuals were "stronger" or "brighter," none of this would be happening.

Methods

In considering programs to evaluate, we based our decision, first, on a definition of "reality-based television programming" offered by Nabi et al.(2003):Programs that film real people as they live out events (contrivedor otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur. Such programming consist of several elements:

(a) people presenting themselves .
(b) scenic environments,
(c) without a dialogue,
(d) events placed in a narrative context,
(e) for the primary purpose of entertainment and recreation .

Given this definition, in addition to reasons that follow, we chose to examine contestant characteristics and order of elimination on three programs: *Survivor*, Bigboss, and Indian *Idol*. We selected these three programs, in particular, because of their respective popularity and because each one has a different means of contestant evaluation/elimination. These differences may offer insights on techniques used by producers to retain "demographically preferred" contestants .Podlas identifies law suits that have been filed by contestants who characterized their respective contests as rigged. One of the most common complaints, concerns the practice of "selective editing," whereby producers manipulate what actually transpires by omitting certain scenes, and in some cases, showing scenes out of order to throw light on popular contestants. Thus, on *Survivor*, even though contestants vote one another off the island, as it were, editors may construct stories to appeal to certain demographics. When audience members cast votes to eliminate contestants, selective editing has the potential to undercut the integrity of a program entirely .The premise of *Survivor* is for contestants to outlast the elements and one another, and it is the contestants, themselves, who control the order of elimination. Contestants stay "alive" based on the extent to which they contribute to the overall "survival" of the group, with one contestant vote each week. Scholars suggest that while "survival" skills certainly assist contestants in remaining on the program, the real key to success is managing the "social milieu," establishing (perceived) trustworthiness and "like ability" .

The third program in the study, Indi*an Idol*, is a talent search in which television audience members vote on which contestants they want to continue. Before audience members get to cast their votes, however, contestants must advance beyond preliminary rounds, in which judges decide on 24 finalists (12 from each gender). In the preliminary stages, judges wield considerable power in deciding which contestants stand to help build ratings and which should be dismissed and perhaps embarrassed on national television. As l observes, those who "win," or at least make it to the final rounds, tend to be those who stand to make the networks monies beyond the actual competition. DVD, CD and book sales are three examples.

In selecting programs with differing approaches toward contestant elimination, we sought to examine potential instances of humiliation in more than one setting, as humiliation. They note that humiliation occurs when someone in a position of power launches a deliberate attack on another, and for purposes of the current paper, the important point is that humiliation is an attack on actual self—something that is not readily
Changeable (Hartling and Luchetta 259-278). We thus considered it important to examine instances in which individuals from different gender, race and age cohorts were "kicked off" or "fired" from their respective contest. Because any one season of these programs could have been anomalous, we analyzed three seasons of *Survivor*, the first two seasons of *The big boss* , and the first three seasons of In*dian Idol*, creating a total candidate pool of 116. We coded each candidate for three demographic variables: Gender, race, and age.

Race categories included, north Indians, south Indians, Eastern India
and Other, allowing that some of these terms reflect ethnicity more than race
We thus categorized members of minority groups apart from southern India . "As in reports, 80% of all characters on television are white, and males out number females three to one (81). While the 16% of black characters on television eclipses the 12% population figure, Eastern constitute just 2% of TV characters while composing 9% of the Indian population. Sothern Indian and North India combined, account for less than 1% of characters on television, and importantly, approximately75% of all television characters are between ages 20 and 50; in the real world, just one-third of the population falls between those ages (Potter 81).

Finally, just 2% of characters on television are over age 65, compared to11% in the actual population (Potter 81). Thus, television tends to distort demographic realities, and in regard to race, we found that to be the case early on .In terms of age, we consulted program websites—specifically, the online biographies of competitors—to categorize competitors in one of the following age brackets: 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, and 41+.
For exploratory purposes, we also recorded marital status, sexuality of competitors (if stated), nature of occupation, and hair color.
With respect to statistical analyses, we recorded the order in which all contestants (n=116) departed their respective programs, listing the contestants in order and indicating alongside their first names their age, race and gender. We ran basic frequency analyses in describing the individuals included in the study and used cross-tabulation and chi square tests, where appropriate, in exploring whether differences existed across age, race, and gender in terms of the programs on which contestants appeared. South India historically have been stereotyped as entertainers (e.g., athletes, musicians), while eastern Indian shave been portrayed more as stoic individuals in white-collar occupations (Greenberg and Brand 273-314). Finally, Northern India have been portrayed as younger than Western Indians as well as disproportionately overweight (Kaufman 37-46). The following section reports the results of our study, indicating whether reality television stands to reproduce common cultural stereotypes.

Results

Beginning with a descriptive report, 81 (69.8%) of 116 contestants in this study were North Indians, followed by 22 (19%) Western Indians and 13(11.2%) individuals from other minority groups.
The sample consisted o 56 (48.3%) males and 60 (51.7%) females, and the two genders showed relative parity across age.

Overall, 13 competitors (10.5%) appeared in the 16-20 age bracket, 40(35%) appeared in the 21-25 bracket, with 28 (24.1%)in the 26-30 range, 13 (11.2%) in the 31-35 bracket, 8 (7%) in the 36-40range and 14 (11.5%) in the 41-plus.
With regard to marital status, 78 competitors (67.2%) indicated they were single, followed by 22 (19%) who said married, and 16 (13.8%) whose status could not be determined. Just three of 26 competitors (11.5%) who revealed their sexuality said they were gay or lesbian. Nearly one in two competitors (56 of 116; 48.3%) held white-collar positions, compared with19 (16.4%) in blue-collar jobs ,15 (12.9%) students, six (5.2%) retirees, and20 (17.3%) undetermined.

The appearance variable related to hair color is reported later. *Race.* As the collapsed frequencies and row percentages in Table 1indicate, Eastern Indians made 22 appearances, nearly six in 10 of which were on Indi*an Idol*. Despite having more than three times as many competitors overall, just two more southern Indians (n=15) than eastern Indians (n=13) participated on Indi*an Idol*. Among other minorities, 46.2%appeared on Indi*an Idol*, compared to just 18.5% of southern Indians. Mirroring that, about one in three southern Indians appeared on *The Big Boss*, compared to fewer than one in five indian Additionally, southern Indians appeared in much higher numbers on *Survivor*, and the differences observed in Table 1 were highly significant, *2* (4, n = 116) = 16.43, $p < .01$.

Table 1
Cross-tabulation of race by reality television program

	Survivor	Bigboss	Indian idol	total
Eastern Indians	13	5	4	22
Northern Indians	6	3	4	13
Southern Indians	15	40	26	81
Total	34	48	34	116

Gender. Table 2 reveals a relatively even dispersion of men and women across the three television programs. Overall, 19 (31.7%) of 60 female appearances came on *Indian Idol*, compared to 24 (40.0%) and 17(28.3%), respectively, on *Survivor* and bigboss. No differences in Table 2 showed significance, *2* (2, n = 116) = .24, p= ns.
Table 2

Cross-tabulation of gender by reality television program

	Survivor	Bigboss	Indian idol	total
MALE	**15**	**24**	**17**	**56**
FEMALE	**19**	**24**	**17**	**60**
TOTAL	**34**	**48**	**34**	**116**

Age. Table 3, a cross-tabulation of age across the three reality television programs, offers some noteworthy findings. Here, all contestants in the first age bracket appeared on Indi*an Idol*, as did 53.7% of contestants in the second bracket. Contestants must be between ages 16 and 25 to appear on *Indian Idol*, and one could certainly expect minors to appear exclusively on that program. Nonetheless, one might have expected more contestants from the second bracket to appear elsewhere. Mirroring that pattern, not a single competitor aged 41 or over appeared on big boss,and just two (22.2%) of nine competitors ages 36 to 40 appeared on that program. Because Table 3 contains seven cells with zero observations, we did not compute chi square.

Table 3
Cross-tabulation on the basis of age

AGE	Survivor	Big boss	Indian idol	total
16-20	**13**	**0**	**0**	**13**
21-25	**21**	**13**	**6**	**40**
26-30	**0**	**12**	**16**	**28**
31-35	**0**	**3**	**10**	**13**
36-40	**0**	**6**	**2**	**8**
41 PLUS	**0**	**13**	**1**	**14**
TOTAL	**34**	**48**	**34**	**116**

Appearance. Table 4, a cross-tabulation of gender across hair color, reveals that the majority of female contestants had brown hair, as opposed to blonde. Yet, the table also reveals that, compared with male competitors, higher percentages of women had blonde and brown hair, respectively, and
Fewer had black.

Table 4
Cross-tabulation of gender on the basis of hair color

	BLONDE	BROWN	RED	GREY	BLACK	OTHER	TOTAL
MALE	**4**	**30**	**2**	**5**	**14**	**1**	**56**
FEMALE	**10**	**39**	**1**	**4**	**3**	**3**	**60**
TOTAL	**14**	**69**	**3**	**9**	**17**	**4**	**116**

Discussion
This study has demonstrated that, in many respects, reality television reproduces cultural stereotypes and societal expectations and assumptions. Beginning with the race demographic, north Indian appeared the most frequently—and enjoyed the most success—on *indian Idol*, an entertainment talent contest. African Americans enjoyed little success on *The Big boss* and they scarcely appeared on the *Survivor* programs. An implication of such patterns is the perpetuation of stereotypes about Southern Indians and their capacity to entertain people of all races. White males, it would appear, tend to make stronger executives, where "serious "work and "difficult" decisions must be made (Kinnick and Parton 429-456).
Data revealed, somewhat remarkably, that while the study included more than three times as many whites as African Americans, just two more whites than Blacks appeared on Indian *Idol*. More than four in five white competitors appeared on the other two programs, compared to approximately three in five African Americans who appeared on *Indian Idol*.
Networks, and one way of doing so is to ensure that women and contestants from minority groups are retained for much of a given season. Large numbers of women and minorities are less likely to quit watching when they can identify with certain contestants, as disposition theory would suggest. In sum, the two programs Indian *Idol* . The *Survivor* programs shed stereotypical light on what it means to grow old in Indian society (Cohen 599-620). Competitors on these programs purportedly had to demonstrate to one another how important each was to the overall "survival" of the group, and as one might expect, the older competitors—especially older

women—were not deemed terribly important. Thus, the *Survivor* programs appear to have perpetuated the age-old patterns of Hollywood, namely that men grow more distinguished with age, thus continuing to star in movies in their seventies and eighties, while women simply grow older (Cohen 599-620; Roth 189-202). As Cohen posits, "To be old in our society is to be devalued. To be old and female is to experience double oppression" (599). It should be noted, though, that *Sur*-Stereotyping and Order of Elimination on Reality Television 95*30.2* With regard to appearance, this study did not find evidence that a majority of women on reality television tend to have blonde hair and thus appear more glamorous or urbane. Of course, that may be the result of how reality programs come together. Producers look for interesting people (i.e. those who can help to generate high ratings), and in assembling reality "casts, "they likely try to locate competitors who appear opposite one another along variables such as appearance and personality. Such casting assists viewers in building alliances with certain competitors while growing to dislike others .Future research on reality television might address how (and if) the demographics of reality programs change as the programs become more popular, thus commanding larger sums in advertising. Studies should continue to compare the types of programs on which competitors from various races and ethnicities compete, for as the current study has demonstrated, the aggregate numbers can mask show-specific patterns. Ecological fallacies such as these can in turn mask stereotypical assumptions and the exploitation of those assumptions for the entertainment of millions—and the monetary gain of a few. Ultimately, reality television offers a clear window through which to examine cultural stereotypes and the consequences those stereotypes yield for members of different groups.

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