

The interactive nature of reality television: an audience analysis

ABSTRACT

This article explores the motivating factors for viewer participation in the reality television programme, *Project Fame*. It looks at the interactive component of reality television, arguing that viewers are active in their media consumption. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the uses and gratifications theory as well as the cultural studies approach to reception theory.

On a methodological level, this study applies qualitative research methods in order to determine what factors motivate viewers to participate interactively in the television programme. Supported by the categories of need gratifications, this study concludes that cognitive, affective and personal integrative needs motivate viewers to utilise the various interactive opportunities and that viewers expect gratifications from participating interactively. In addition, reception theory is used to further explain viewers' active participation and interpretation of media messages in a social and cultural context.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of media audience research has seen many a transformation in media theory and research perspectives. The main shift in focus showed a move from the traditional research of the impact of the media on its audience to researching what audiences do with the media. According to Williams (2003:190), “the change in thinking about media audiences coincided with the technological advances that have enabled the media to cater for more specialised audiences”. These technological advances also brought about a change in television genres. The last decade certainly belongs to the genre of reality television and its striking rate of popularity among television audiences.

Hellman (1999:112) claims that the audience is the ‘new king’ in the relationship between the media and its consumers. The change in the television environment has forced broadcasters to become audience oriented. Two main reasons are identified to substantiate this perspective. The first is the financial basis of television programming. Advertising has become the main source of funding for broadcasters, and audience ratings play a crucial role in justifying programme choices and encouraging advertising revenue. The second reason is audience fragmentation as a result of channel multiplication. The continuous multiplication of choices has created an unpredictable audience and a saturated television market (Hellman, 1999:112).

In recent years broadcasters and producers have realised the value of extending the television programme beyond the confines of the television set, and of utilising other media to draw and retain audiences. The goal is to make the television programme a social construct whereby the programme is integrated into everyday life.

1. INTERACTIVE REALITY TELEVISION

Defining reality television has proven to be problematic, since reality television often blurs the line between fact and fiction, even though it claims to represent reality (Cavendar & Fishman, 1998:3). As it is generally understood though, reality television has the following attributes (Kilborn, 1994:421):

- The recording of events in the lives of individuals or groups
- An attempt to simulate these real-life events by means of dramatised reconstruction
- Packaging this material into an attractive programme with entertainment value that can be marketed on the strengths of its ‘reality’ credentials

Project Fame, the case study for this research project, clearly exhibited the above-mentioned attributes, i.e. it recorded the events in the lives of a group of individuals as they were preparing themselves for a career in the music industry. Practising and preparing for a musical event classifies as real-life events, but the producers added the element of drama by forcing participants to live together in one house and by restricting their contact with the world outside. The unfolding events in the *Project Fame* house were often packaged in highlight programmes and marketed through the local print media.

It seems that the attributes of reality television resist the confines of the traditional categorisation of programmes into a specific genre. However difficult it might be to place a theoretical definition behind the genre of reality television, this does not imply that broadcasters and audiences do not think of television in the context of genres (Holmes & Jermyn 2004:6). Even though a concise definition of the genre remains illusive, reality television, this has established a universal understanding among viewers. Several reality programmes such as *Project Fame*, *Big Brother* and *Pop Idols* have become a global format adapted to each country's own conventions. The interactive component associated with reality television is one of the main reasons that contribute to audiences enthusiastically supporting the genre.

Audiences choosing to engage in activities that extend beyond merely watching the show are seen as 'fans' of the show. Bielby, Harrington and Bielby (1999:36) explain:

In the business of television, viewers matter more than fans, but the product itself matters more to fans than to other viewers. The distinction between a television viewer and a television fan is an important one. To 'view' television is to engage in a relatively private behaviour. To be a 'fan', however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative.

In other words, viewers are more important to broadcasters than are fans, but the programme itself is more important to the fans than to the viewers. Fans invest more time and emotion in their viewing experience by not only watching the show, but also participating in activities such as voting, Internet participation, et cetera.

In the South African context, various programme formats have adopted the interactive experience. Talk shows such as *3 Talk* give viewers the opportunity to call in live or send SMS responses to the programme. Soapies have their own websites for fan participation and often launch competitions where the viewers choose their next actor/actress for a role in the programme. Educational programmes cater for the needs of scholars by giving them the opportunity to call the programme and ask subject-related questions.

Interactive opportunities offered to viewers of *Project Fame* include the following activities: voting for participants via the Internet, telephone or SMS; sending a text message for broadcasting; visiting websites with information on the programme; entering a chat room for a discussion on the programme; attending official appearances of the participants; participating in opinion polls; and utilising the interactive opportunities accessed via DSTV.

Interactivity extends to multiple levels and degrees of participation. For the purposes of this article, two levels of participation have been identified, namely: primary and secondary interactivity. Primary interactivity refers to audiences' engaging with the television show itself. Viewers have the option of not only engaging with the text, but they are also given the power to change the text, such as voting for a contestant or sending an SMS for public display during the show. When applying this level of participation to *Project Fame* for example, it refers to viewers who would vote for their favourite contestant and thereby influence who remains in the house and who gets to leave.

The first level then involves the actual television programme and the various ways in which audiences can engage with that text. Secondary interactivity refers to programme-related participation, where the television show is the subject matter, but interactivity does not influence or affect the text that is being broadcast. Examples include discussions with fans on the Internet, participating in opinion polls and attending the official appearances of the contestants.

While audiences gain more control over the television-viewing experience, producers have no choice but to extend the television programme beyond the confines of the television monitor itself.

An understanding of the interactive audience has never been as crucial and necessary as the current reality television trend reveals. Yet an understanding of audiences has never been as elusive and unpredictable as understanding reality television fans is proving to be.

2. AUDIENCE-CENTRED THEORIES

This research study applies two communication theories as its premise namely the *uses and gratifications theory* and *reception theory*. The uses and gratifications theory introduced a new phase in mass media research by challenging the traditional focus from what the media do to the audience, to what audiences do with the media (Schrøder, 1999:39). It furthermore focuses on why audiences use media and the purposes for which it is used (Chandler, 2004).

Although there are several versions of the uses and gratifications theory, three basic assumptions form the core of this theory. Firstly, viewers are seen as active participants who use the media for their own individual purposes; secondly, viewers can identify these purposes and know how to express them. The third assumption acknowledges not only that variations do exist between individuals' use of the media, but also that it is possible to identify basic patterns and habits in uses and gratifications (Williams, 2003:177). The uses and gratifications theory also distinguishes between expected gratifications sought before media exposure and the actual gratifications obtained after media exposure (Bryant & Heath, 2000:363).

It is important to distinguish between the theory and the method application of the uses and gratifications theory. When applied as a research method, the uses and gratifications theory provides researchers with a research method that assists with data collection. However, for the purposes of this study, the uses and gratifications theory is applied as a theoretical component of the study, i.e. the assumptions of this theory serve as the theoretical approach to obtain data and to support the interpretation of the data. Therefore, the theory is adapted to a qualitative design and research methods.

The dawn of the 21st century again marked the revival of the uses and gratifications theory and research. The technological revolution resulted in scholars such as Johnson and Kaye (2002:54), Luo (2002:4) and Stafford (2004:3) advocating the value of the uses and gratifications theory in interactive technology research. According to Johnson and Kaye (2002:54):

The calls for the uses and gratifications approach to studying the Internet echo the pleas of several uses and gratifications scholars to adapt that approach to the study of emerging communication technologies.

Although the uses and gratifications approach was traditionally linked to television audiences, many researchers have found the approach very well suited to especially Internet research. It is specifically the assumption of active involvement in media usage that has made the uses and gratifications theory applicable to interactive research (Luo, 2002:4).

Numerous studies have been conducted in order to determine and categorise the needs gratifications obtained from media consumption. Since this study is not focusing on television alone, but also on the interactive component as well, the categories applied in current Internet uses and gratifications research are adopted for the purposes of this study. Many scholars such as Lin (1999:79), Bryant and Heath (2000:362), and Hunter (2005) elect to apply the five categories of needs as identified by Katz, Gurevitch and Haas, namely cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and escapist needs.

Cognitive needs involve the strengthening of information, the acquisition of knowledge and the understanding of our environment. Another dimension that is also satisfied in obtaining information is curiosity and exploratory drives (Bryant & Heath, 2000:362). Within the context of this study, cognitive needs include: reading more about *Project Fame* and utilising the opportunity to watch the contestants on the 24-hour channel.

Affective needs refer to emotional experiences and the strengthening of aesthetic and pleasurable experiences. The pursuit of pleasure and entertainment is one of the most basic motivations for media consumption (Hunter, 2005). The study investigates which elements of *Project Fame* provided the most pleasure and entertainment to viewers. *Personal* integrative needs relate to the confirmation of credibility, confidence and stability as well as the status of the individual. The personal integrative needs originate from the individual's desire for self-esteem (Severin & Tankard, 1992:273). The applicable question in this category is whether or not the interactive opportunities presented by *Project Fame* succeeded in meeting personal integrative needs.

The need for affiliation and social contact is addressed in the social integrative needs. Individuals continuously search to strengthen contact with family, friends and the world (Bryant & Heath, 2000:362). With the ever-changing technological environment, a new social subculture is emerging, where face-to-face communication is being replaced by cellphone technology and Internet chat rooms. Once again these opportunities are promoted by *Project Fame*, and the study focusses on whether viewers utilised these opportunities and why. The fifth needs gratification, escapist needs, refers to the desire to escape, to release tension and seek diversion and the study investigates if viewers turned to *Project Fame* to escape problems and if so, determine the reasons why this specific programme was chosen (Severin & Tankard, 1992:273). From the foregoing discussion the key assumption is that it is possible to classify the motivations for interactive participation under cognitive, affective, personal interactive, social integrative, and escapist needs.

One of the main shortcomings of this theory is the emphasis on the psychological aspect of media consumption to the exclusion of social and cultural influences. Media consumption more often than

not entails a social activity with friends or family. Therefore, meaning and gratifications are influenced by social and cultural interaction and not merely by internal psychological processes alone (Williams 2003:178). In order to address this shortcoming, another theory is also applied, namely the cultural studies approach to reception theory.

With the uses and gratifications theory initialising a shift in focus from a passive to an active audience, the next trend in audience-centred theories builds on the concept of an active audience. Hall (1981) made an invaluable contribution regarding the development of a theoretical model of preferred reading to explain the different positions readers (viewers) take when using and interpreting media messages (e.g. television programmes). According to Hall's theory the focus should be on the communication process as a whole - from the moment of producing a programme to the moment of audience exposure to that particular message. The audience interprets (decodes) television messages according to three possible decoding positions (also called interpretation strategies): the dominant reading (interpretation) where viewers accept the referential (dominant ideology) meaning produced by the text. Then follows a negotiated reading which is produced by viewers who agree to an extent with the dominant messages but reserve the right to modify their views. The third position is oppositional, where viewers reject the dominant meaning (ideology) encoded in the text. Because texts are polysemic, they are open to numerous interpretations and readings, and a correlation does not necessarily exist between the encoding and the decoding of the message (Hall, 1981:130).

For the purposes of this study, the same approach is adopted as with the encoding-decoding model, assuming that interpretation is a process of negotiation between readers and text situated within specific social and cultural contexts (Fourie, 2001:244). This assumption also gives credence to the active involvement of viewers while watching television.

The *Nationwide* study supported Hall's theory of at least three possible ways of reading a text and also proved that different groups ascribed different meanings to the same text (Morley 1992:117). The conclusions drawn from this study highlighted the fact that people are not passive in meaning construction, and that in order to understand media interpretations, it is crucial to examine both the text and the social and cultural experiences contributing to meaning production (Williams, 2003:197). Therefore, reception theory allows researchers to investigate the readers' negotiation with texts in the process of interpretation against the background of their social and cultural circumstances.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 *The research problem*

Reality television has emerged as a strong competitor for traditional programming in the television arena. This is evident from the many reality shows being broadcast on national television such as *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, *The Apprentice*, *On Site* and *Pop Idols*. With advanced technology allowing viewers to interact with the text itself, the viewing experience is no longer confined to the

television set. Combining the interactive component with the genre of reality television creates a dynamic relationship between the text and the audience, as viewer participation usually influences the outcome of the show.

The primary research problem is formulated as follows: What motivates viewers of the reality programme *Project Fame* to participate actively in this programme?

The secondary research problems are: What gratifications do viewers seek from participating actively in the reality programme *Project Fame*? What gratifications do viewers perceive to have obtained from participating actively in the reality programme *Project Fame*?

It is important to note that although this study distinguishes between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained, the goal is not to determine the correlation between the two variables. The objective is merely to determine whether the participants sought gratifications from interactive participation and whether the perceptions existed that the gratifications had been obtained. Once again it is important to mention that the aim of this study is not to investigate the possible discrepancies between the two variables.

3.2 Research questions

Based on the above-mentioned research problems, the following research questions were addressed to obtain answers to the explorative objectives of the study:

- What motivates viewers to participate actively in the reality programme *Project Fame*?
- What gratifications do viewers expect to obtain when participating actively in *Project Fame*?
- What perceived gratifications have been obtained by participating actively in *Project Fame*?
- How frequently do viewers vote for characters in *Project Fame*?
- How often do viewers watch *Project Fame*?
- Which interactive opportunities do viewers utilise?
- Do social and cultural influences affect the interpretation of messages as communicated by the programme *Project Fame*?

3.3 Defining key concepts

The research problem and research questions refer to 'active participation'. Within the context of this study 'active participation' refers to interactive opportunities that viewers may utilise to enhance the viewing experience, excluding the traditional viewing of the programme, but including the interactive opportunity to choose which camera angle to view.¹ (See Section 2 for a discussion on the interactive opportunities presented by *Project Fame*).

3.4 Research objectives

The objective of this research study is to explore the relationship between the genre of interactive reality television and its audience, and gain a better understanding of the dynamics influencing

¹ DSTV Channel 37 offered viewers the option of choosing between four different camera angles. By using a split screen, four different camera angles were broadcast simultaneously and through the interactive guide, viewers could choose which one of the four channels they preferred to watch at any given time.

this relationship. This research study aims to explore why viewers choose to participate interactively in the reality television programme *Project Fame*. It also focuses on the various gratifications expected and received through interactive participation in this television programme. The goal is not to provide final answers to the research questions or problems, but to identify and investigate key aspects of the relationship.

3.5 Theoretical approach

The following are the theoretical assumptions underlying this study:

- Certain factors such as cognitive, emotional, social, escapist and personal needs motivate viewers to participate interactively in the reality programme *Project Fame*.
- Viewers expect and receive gratifications when they participate interactively in the reality programme *Project Fame*.
- Social and cultural influences affect message interpretation and interactive participation.

3.6 Research methodology

For this study a qualitative research approach is applied to obtain data, focusing specifically on exploratory research. The goal of the study is to explore the different factors that influence and motivate viewers to participate interactively in reality television. Therefore, the nature of this study does not require the generalisation of data, and a qualitative approach allows for more valuable answers to the research questions.

3.7 Research design

Participants in this research study were chosen based on the following criteria: they were Communication students at the University of Johannesburg, they had access to DSTV (digital satellite television), they watched at least 60 minutes of *Project Fame* once a week and they participated interactively at least twice for the duration of the show. Research conducted by Hill (2002:330) and Palmer (2002:303) reports that reality formats possessing the attributes of programmes such as *Big Brother* are very popular among sixteen-to-thirty-four-year-olds who are seen as upwardly mobile. The profile sketched was internationally matched by all versions of the show. University students clearly fall under the target audience. Communication students study mass media phenomena and the assumption is made that they have an advanced interest in the mass media and are therefore more likely to expose themselves to television programmes than are other students. Furthermore, all of the sixteen contestants in the *Project Fame* house were students just before entering the competition, thereby increasing the possibility of student viewers watching the programme because they relate to the contestants.

Only one interactive reality show, *Project Fame*, is chosen as the focus of the study, since it was the most recent broadcast of an interactive reality show at the time of the study. Due to the explorative nature of this study, probability sampling is not an objective. The most frequently used

and often most applicable non-probability sample for focus group interviews is purposive sampling, as is the case in this research study (Vaughn et al., 1996:58).

The participants for each focus group interview were recruited from five different Communication classes. A survey was circulated and the students were requested to complete the survey if they watched *Project Fame*. The survey included the name, contact number and required population parameters for prospective participants.

A total of 169 students completed the survey. Of the 169 students, 110 did not meet the requirements of the study, i.e. they did not have access to DSTV or they did not participate interactively in the show, seven of the entries were incomplete, leaving 52 potential participants. For the purposes of this study, 35 participants were recruited – seven participants per group, including those who participated in the pilot study.

Based on the information supplied in the survey, the students who indicated that they participated in multiple interactive opportunities were approached first, since the focus of the study is on interactive participation. Students were selected based on their willingness to participate and their availability. Once the list of all the students who participated in multiple interactive activities was exhausted, the next step was to contact students who had indicated that they did interact participate, but to a lesser extent. Once again, these students were selected based on their willingness to participate and their availability.

Four focus group interviews and also a pilot study were conducted. Participants were also requested to complete a pre-group questionnaire that allowed the researcher to identify differences in viewpoints expressed in the group and expressed in the individual questionnaires. The application of triangulation principles i.e. the pilot study and the pre-group questionnaire, ensured validity and reliability.

For the purposes of this research study, the categories identified by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (see Section 3) provided the provisional category structure for the questions in the moderator's guide. The categories are cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and escapist needs.

The unit of analysis for this study is the thematic unit. Each statement is therefore considered to be a unit. A statement could be one word or multiple sentences relating to a specific theme (Baxter & Babbie, 2004:247).

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Interactive participation

The pre-group questionnaire provides valuable information about the popularity of various interactive opportunities, as well as on the frequency of utilising these opportunities. Although this information

provides more quantitative data, it is crucial that it be examined as it sets the context for the qualitative data interpretation. Furthermore, this kind of information assists in identifying possible trends and preferences, and it supports possible conclusions drawn from the qualitative data.

Table 7.2a indicates, on an individual level, the frequency of watching the programme and the frequency of interactive participation.

The following codes are used in the table:

GP = group

PT = participant

Watch = frequency of watching *Project Fame* on a weekly basis.

Vote = frequency of voting for the whole duration of *Project Fame*.

Web = Did the participant access the *Project Fame* website?

DSTV = Did the participant access the DSTV Interactive Guide?

Appearances = Did the participant attend public appearances of the contestants?

SMS display = Did the participant send SMS messages for display?

Table 7.2a: Individual interactive participation

GP	PT	Watch	Vote	Web	DSTV	Appearances	SMS display
1	1	7	6	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
1	2	1	0	No	Yes	No	No
1	3	1	2	No	No	Yes	No
1	4	4	10	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2	1	4	12	No	Yes	No	No
2	2	3	12	Yes	No	No	No
2	3	3	7	No	No	No	No
2	4	7	12	No	Yes	No	Yes
2	5	7	3	Yes	No	No	Yes
3	1	1	0	No	Yes	No	Yes
3	2	1	0	No	Yes	No	No
3	3	7	12	No	Yes	No	Yes
3	4	3	0	No	Yes	No	Yes
3	5	7	3	No	Yes	No	Yes
4	1	4	2	No	No	No	Yes
4	2	3	8	No	No	No	No
4	3	5	26	No	Yes	No	No
4	4	3	2	Yes	Yes	No	No
4	5	7	4	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

By comparing the viewing frequency with the interactive opportunities utilised by the participants, it is possible to identify patterns between the two variables. The data highlighted in dark gray are the data of the participants who watched *Project Fame* on a daily basis and the data highlighted in light gray are the data of participants who met the minimum requirement of watching *Project Fame* once a week.

All the participants who watched *Project Fame* on a daily basis voted multiple times during the show. All these participants also sent SMS messages for display on television. Besides voting and sending SMS messages for display, all of these participants utilised at least one more interactive opportunity, this resulting in the utilisation of three or more different interactive options during the show.

In contrast, the participants who watched the show only once a week utilised only two or even fewer interactive opportunities and most participants did not vote for the contestants. The data suggest that a correlation exists between viewing frequency and interactive participation. It seems that the more the programme is watched, the more interactively the viewer participates, and, that less time is dedicated to watching the programme, the less interactive participation occurs. However, since the data obtained through qualitative research methods, it is impossible to generalise the findings and impossible to conclude that there is a causal relationship between the variables. It is merely possible to identify a trend and a pattern.

Another interesting trend is that those participants who watched the programme regularly, participated in activities that resulted in textual intervention, or primary interactivity, whereas participants who watched the programme less frequently, engaged only in secondary interactive opportunities. The conclusion is that the more individuals invest in the viewing activity, the more directly they are involved with the text, and the more likely they are to participate in the interactive opportunities created by the producers of the show. Furthermore, it indicates the importance of a perceived 'power shift' to the viewer, i.e. no longer are scriptwriters determining the storyline, but it is actually 'written' by the viewers of the show (regardless of how limited these perceived powers may be). Fans of the show seem to value the 'importance' of their vote and the opportunity to determine the outcome of the show. This suggests that there is an increasing demand by fans to participate in the production of the text rather than merely to receive the text.

Table 7.2b is a summary of the different interactive opportunities and how many respondents in this study participated in each interactive opportunity.

Table 7.2b: Interactive opportunities utilised

Group	Number of participants	Vote	Official website	Public appearances	DSTV guide	SMS display
1	4	3	2	1	3	2
2	5	5	2	0	2	2
3	5	2	0	0	5	3
4	5	5	1	1	3	2
Total:	19	15	5	2	13	9

From the above data, it is clear that the most popular interactive opportunities are voting for the contestants and accessing the DSTV Guide, followed by SMS messages sent for display. All of these interactive opportunities could be exercised while watching the programme and with the least amount of effort. Accessing the website and attending public appearances require an enhanced investment from the viewers. The data seem to be consistent with the theory that the least effort required, the more likely viewers are to participate (Heater, 1989:221).

4.2 Cognitive needs

As discussed in Section 3, cognitive needs refer to curiosity, exploration and the acquisition of knowledge. From the focus group interviews, it was clear that *Project Fame* received much media coverage. Most of the participants did not buy the magazines with the specific goal of obtaining information about the programme. They would rather read articles if they happened to be in the magazine than buy a magazine specifically for an article. The most likely explanation is that other secondary texts such as the *Project Fame* website and the DSTV Guide fulfilled these needs.

Once again it seems that the tendency to exert the least effort is emerging. Another possibility for the popularity of acquiring knowledge through the DSTV Guide is the ‘instant’ society we live in. Instant gratification seems to be as important as the need to acquire specific knowledge. The DSTV Guide equals immediate access to information, while searching for articles implicitly suggests delayed gratification. For producers, these results suggests that combining minimum effort with instant gratification is a recipe for success if applied to interactive television.

As the fact the DSTV Channel broadcast the daily living of the contestants in the *Project Fame* house, the viewers had the option of watching the contestants 24 hours a day, seven days a week and watched them do everyday mundane things, such as sleeping, brushing their teeth and eating. Different opinions were aired in respect of watching the mundane activities. The participants who did enjoy watching mundane tasks seemed to agree that curiosity was the main reason for doing so, and it gave the participants the opportunity to measure their own actions against those of

others. By including mundane activities into the programme structure, it can be argued that producers enhanced the sense of the 'real' being communicated to audiences.

The participants were also asked whether they felt as if they were spying on the contestants because the surveillance cameras were broadcasting every movement 24 hours a day. Most of the participants agreed that since the contestants of the show knew that they were being watched, they (the viewers) did not feel they were intruding and spying on them. It seems as though the act of voyeurism is justified by the contestants' knowledge of the cameras and the audience. It is also interesting to note that none of the participants commented on the infringement of privacy, and that the conventions associated with the genre made voyeurism and intrusion morally acceptable. The question is whether these practices will still be perceived as morally acceptable, when applied within other television genres.

From the focus group interview it is possible to draw certain conclusions about the cognitive needs and gratifications of the participants in this study. Firstly, the participants who enjoyed the act of voyeurism seem to support the claim that voyeuristic behaviour is motivated by curiosity. Although driven by curiosity, it appears that voyeuristic opportunities also result in an emotional gratification. The DSTV Channel gave the participants 24-hour access to observing the contestants and satisfying their curiosity.

Secondly, the participants who wanted to acquire more information about the programme, actively and consciously chose to seek that information. In order to obtain this information, the participants turned to very specific interactive opportunities to meet this need, namely the *Project Fame* website and the DSTV Guide. This implies that utilising these two interactive opportunities was goal oriented, that a need existed, and that specific mediums were chosen to meet this need, and furthermore, that cognitive need gratification occurred either by accessing the *Project Fame* website or the DSTV Guide, or both.

4.3 Affective needs

The affective category refers to the participant's emotional experiences, the need for entertainment and the pursuit of pleasure. Within this definition, the first question asked was, what the participants enjoyed most about the *Project Fame* experience. Across the board the participants seemed to agree that the most enjoyable experience was watching the Sunday night Gala Shows. An interesting observation is that not one participant mentioned the interactive activities as the most enjoyable component of the experience. This suggests that in the pursuit of pleasure, the viewing activity remains the ultimate enjoyment, and that interactive features enhance the experience and exist as a means to an end, but that the end itself is the viewing experience and not the interactive participation.

Although most of the participants experienced some form of emotional involvement with the contestants of *Project Fame*, there were others who did not share the same kind of experience.

It seems as if emotional involvement in the show depended on participants' commitment to, and time invested in, the show itself. The participants generally agreed that they did feel a connection with some of the contestants and that they could relate to them. However, they did not necessarily feel that they knew them personally as individuals.

The focus group interviews revealed that although the degree of emotional involvement in the programme varied from participant to participant, emotional involvement did occur. The significance and importance of emotional involvement on the interactive component are evident, as various participants stated that emotional involvement in the programme had motivated interactive participation. The more the viewers identified with the contestants of the show, the more motivated they were to vote for them.

In summary, it is possible to conclude that in their search for entertainment and pleasure, the participants in this study turned specifically to the viewing experience to fulfil this need. Inevitably, most of the participants became emotionally involved with the contestants in the show. Emotional involvement in turn gave rise to the need to express support and encouragement. By voting for their favourite contestants, the participants actively responded to the need to express support. This once again suggests that the participants were aware of their needs, that they chose a specific medium to fulfill the need, and that the selected medium provided the required gratification.

4.4 Personal integrative needs

Personal integrative needs refer to the confirmation of the individual's credibility and self-confidence, and the status of the individual within various communities. The first question related to this category focused on whether the participants believed that their individual votes for the contestants influenced the outcome of the final results. Even if participants expressed different opinions in response to this question, it did however reveal a very interesting notion. Several participants did not believe that their votes made a difference, yet they still continued voting. One possible explanation for the notion of voting despite a lack of confidence in the individual vote is that voting meets a different need than that of personal integration. As mentioned in Section 5.3, the participants used voting as a vehicle to express their support for the contestants.

The participants revealed that the scrolling SMS text on the screen played a more vital role than did their participation in the voting process. The interactive option of sending SMS messages to the show, which would be broadcast as text, was utilised to meet personal integrative needs. It provided the participants with the opportunity of comparing their opinions with those of others and they often read the scrolling SMS text when seeking confirmation or support from other viewers. The conclusion is that the need for personal integration differs for each participant. The voting process itself does not necessarily meet the personal integrative needs of the participants. In the study, the participants either welcomed different opinions to theirs or became upset when others disagreed with them. Several participants attempted to confirm their credibility by persuading others to change their point of view. The participants who sought to confirm their status and confirm their point of view utilised the SMS text broadcast to meet this specific need.

4.5 Social integrative needs

The individual's need for interpersonal communication and social contact is addressed in the social integrative category. None of the participants mentioned any of the interactive opportunities in relation to meeting social integrative needs. It rather seems that the viewing activity itself provided gratification since the viewing of *Project Fame* usually took place within a social context, and that *Project Fame* itself became the subject of discussions. However, none of the interactive opportunities offered by the show was utilised to fulfil the need for social interaction.

One possible answer could be that the need for social contact did not exist within the *Project Fame* context. In other words, participants did not expect the programme or the interactive activities to meet this need and therefore did not even consider the possibility of utilising the programme to meet these needs. However, it is important to note that there may be a significant difference between the *Project Fame* television community and the *Project Fame* Internet community. Research conducted by Hill (2002:333), on the UK *Big Brother* audience, revealed a clear distinction between television viewers and the Internet users of the show. A German research study also confirmed these findings (Hill, 2002:333). Therefore, if this study is applied to the *Project Fame* Internet community, it may show that Internet participation alone meets social, escapist, affective, personal integrative and also cognitive needs. The distinction between two audiences or viewer communities has significant implications for future audience research (see Section 6 for a discussion).

4.6 Escapist needs

Escapist needs include the desire for diversion, the release of tension as well as the need to escape from certain circumstances. The DSTV Channel offering 24 hours of access to view the contestants certainly provided the opportunity to escape. Although many participants often watched this channel, it is still the actual viewing activity and not the interactive activities, that gratifies the need to escape. The majority of participants changed their daily routines and habits to be able to watch the programme. When asked the question as to whether *Project Fame* made them forget about their problems, the participants seemed to agree that it did to a certain extent provide escape from the daily problems, but that the viewing experience could not override serious problems. It is important to note that none of the interactive opportunities met the need for escapism.

It is once again necessary to mention that, had the study included or focussed on the *Project Fame* Internet community, different results may have been obtained.

4.7 The social context of interactive participation

When analysing interactive participation according to reception theory, this study examines the influence of cultural and social factors on the communication process. One of the primary messages that the producers of *Project Fame* endorsed was the call for interactive participation. When asked why the participants chose to utilise the interactive opportunities, various responses were evoked.

However, none of the participants indicated that social or cultural factors influenced their decision to participate in the programme. In other words, conforming to social norms and peer pressure neither played a role in nor impacted on the decision to participate. One possible explanation is the fact that the different interactive opportunities encourage individual participation and result in a solitary act, rather than incorporating social activities.

The pre-group questionnaires provide some interesting information in respect of to the cultural dimension of this study. One of the questions requested the participants to identify their favourite Project Fame contestant. The first focus group consisted of three black women and one coloured woman. The three black women all chose blacks as their favourites, while the coloured woman identified a coloured participant as her favourite.

Focus Group Two included four white women and one coloured woman. All four white women supported contestants who were also white, while the coloured woman supported a black contestant. The third focus group comprised three black women and two black men and they all selected black contestants as their favourites. Focus Group Four consisted of three white participants and two black participants. Once again the black participants supported black contestants, while the white participants supported white contestants. Most of the participants in all four focus groups explained that the reason for choosing a specific person as their favourite was that that person had the best voice and singing ability.

Based on the above-mentioned information, it is possible to conclude that culture does influence the perceptions of the participants. All the participants watched the same programme with the same contestants, yet when it came to identifying the best contestant, each cultural group identified the best contestant as someone belonging to their own culture. This indicates that the different cultural groups have different perceptions and different evaluation frameworks. The way in which the participants perceived the contestants of the programme influenced their decisions on whom to support and for whom to vote. Therefore, although cultural and social factors did not directly impact on interactive participation, they did play a role in the outcome of the show and did have an indirect influence on interactive participation.

5. CONCLUSION

Interactive reality television is changing the face of audience research and is presenting researchers with new challenges. Firstly, the concept of a 'mass audience' needs to be redefined. The days of the hypodermic needle theory where mass audiences were passively exposed to radio or television programmes are long gone. Instead, advancing technology is constantly creating a more fragmented audience. As mentioned before, research is currently revealing that the television viewers of a reality programme differs vastly from the Internet community. Thus, it is possible to identify at least two audiences (within interactive reality television) with different needs, expectations and characteristics, which will most probably render different research results, even if both groups are exposed to the selfsame text.

Furthermore, interactive reality television is also changing the traditional communication environment. It seems that face-to-face communication is now making way for 'faceless' communication over Internet chat rooms, where each chat room has its own conventions, culture and Internet language. There is a chat room for people who 'love to hate' the show, and there is a chat room for people supporting the show (once again fragmenting an already fragmented audience). Very often the chat room becomes an emotional support system for many individuals, where not only the programme content is discussed, but also private problems and personal stories are shared. This tendency in turn impacts on cultural studies, as well as on interpersonal communication research.

With reality television incorporating the latest technology into the viewing experience, it has metaphorically opened Pandora's box in the audience research field. Mass communication researchers are faced with unpredictable technological changes which results in unpredictable, more specialised and fragmented audiences, which in their turn exceed the expiry date of the relevance of audience research studies, so to speak.

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