

THE BASIC DESIRES OF MALAYSIAN AUDIENCE IN WATCHING REALITY TELEVISION: THE CASE OF *AKADEMI FANTASIA*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the popularity of reality television in general and *Akademi Fantasia* in particular from the perspective of basic desires of television audience which was advanced by Reiss and Wiltz (2004), i.e. that people watch reality television because of their basic motivation and desires most important to them. The question here is which of these desires are applicable in explaining the reasons why Malaysian audience watch reality television and what is the relationship between the motivation profile of the *Akademi Fantasia* viewers and the basic desires.

Keywords: *reality television, human behaviour, sensitivity theory*

INTRODUCTION

The study of psychology is compelling as it is related to topics we can apply in everyday life. Psychological research and the discipline as a whole can be pervasive and is applied in many areas, including medicine, law, business and education (Huffman et al. 1987). Psychological theories play an important role in audience studies back in the earlier days. Early media researchers such as Klapper, Schramm and Tannenbaum all had an academic background in psychology. Psychoanalytic perspectives on media choice are not new (Hoiyer 1998).

Psychology is the scientific study of behaviour. It has four basic goals: to describe, explain, predict, and change behaviour (Huffman et al. 1987). Bruno (2002) explained that behaviour can be divided into three aspects; cognitive processes, emotional states and actions. Cognitive process is what the individual thinks, emotional states relate to what the individual feels, while actions refers to what the individual does. According to Schultz and Schultz (1994), psychologists believe that a behaviour has a cause. Human behaviour is sometimes perplexing and we wonder why people behave the way they do. When we start to question why people behave the way they do, we are actually questioning their motives or internal factors that

energise and direct that behaviour. Motivation refers to factors (like needs, desires and interests) within an individual that arouse, maintain and channel behaviour towards a goal (Huffman et al. 1987).

In their attempt to explain why people are inclined and motivated to watch reality television programmes, Reiss and Wiltz (2004) postulated that this can be attributed to specific combinations of 16 basic desires of human motivation which they called Sensitivity Theory. According to Sensitivity Theory, we have the potential to experience 16 joys as a consequent of direct or vicarious experiences. Additionally, according to the theory, we watch television as a convenient, minimal effort means of vicariously experiencing those joys repeatedly. Vicarious gratification, according to Bruno (2002), means substitute gratification. Psychologically, it acts as an alternative to the real thing. Reiss and Wiltz (2004) say that people prefer television shows that stimulate the feelings they intrinsically value the most, which depends on individuality.

This statement is related to a research by Zillman and Bryant (in Gunter 2000) which concluded that media-related behaviour is connected to different motives and needs. Media exposures happen by design and not accidentally as many believe. This design comes about as people expect to have certain needs satisfied by doing so. This expectation attracts them to watch certain television programmes, listen to particular radio stations or read specific text publications (Gunter 2000).

Reiss and Wiltz (2004) theorised that people watch reality television because of their basic desires and to arouse joys associated with the desires most important to them. These days, it is becoming increasingly hard to avoid contact with reality television shows. Reality television shows have become so popular that they have been considered a social phenomenon (Biltreyst 2004). Their research found that in America, people who liked reality television shows tended to be more motivated by status, social contact, vengeance, order and romance, and less motivated by honour.

Reality television shows have garnered the same exceptional response in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the most phenomenally successful reality television show to date is *Akademi Fantasia* (Corben et al. 2005). Given the huge success of *Akademi Fantasia*, this article is aimed at examining the psychological factors that drive the audience to watch the programme. By replicating Reiss's profile, our research aims to discover viewers' basic desires in watching *Akademi Fantasia*. It is aimed at finding out the reasons for the success of the programme which has now entered its fifth season in 2007.

THE THEORY

Sensitivity theory is anchored to the understanding of human behaviour. It postulates that people go through life seeking to experience 16 basic desires, or motives, and the associated joys. Individually, they tend to concentrate on those that are strongest and most highly valued and ignore stimuli that are irrelevant to their basic motives. This theory is called sensitivity theory or the theory of 16 basic desires (Reiss 2000b).

There are 16 recognised basic desires in sensitivity theory. Individuals differ in how we prioritise our basic desires, thus resulting in different kinds of individuals

and personalities (Reiss, 2004a). According to Bruno (2002), personality plays an important role in almost everything we do. Personality is like a psychological fingerprint, where an individual's personality is unique and one of its own. People behave according to their respective personalities. Psychologists consider an individual's preference of activities, persons or objects as an important aspect of personality. On this note, a person often judges matters spontaneously and unintentionally by the quality that he values most (Cohen 1966).

Table 1:
The 16 basic desire or motivations and the joys associated

Motive Name	Motive	Joy
Power	Desire to influence (including leadership)	Efficacy
Independence	Desire for autonomy	Freedom
Curiosity	Desire for knowledge	Wonderment
Acceptance	Desire for approval	Self-confidence
Order	Desire to organize (including desire for ritual)	Stability
Saving	Desire to collect	Ownership
Honour	Desire to obey a traditional moral code	Loyalty
Idealism	Desire to improve society (including altruism, justice)	Compassion
Social Contact	Desire for peer companionship (including desire to play)	Fun
Family	Desire to raise own children	Love
Status	Desire for prestige (including desire for attention)	Self-importance
Vengeance	Desire to get even (including desire to win)	Vindication
Romance	Desire for sex (including courting)	Lust
Eating	Desire for food	Satiation
Physical Exercise	Desire to exercise muscle	Vitality
Tranquillity	Desire for inner peace (prudence, safety)	Safety, relaxation

(Source: Reiss 2004a)

Everybody is motivated by each of the 16 basic desires, but to different extends. A Reiss Desire Profile is a rank for individual's basic desires, a display of an individual's

16 sensitivities. For example, a military officer might have a profile which highly values the basic motives of power, honour and physical strength while a painter may have a high value for desire profile which covers romance, tranquillity and independence (Reiss 2004b). The 16 basic desires are considered to be elemental end motives. Sensitivity Theory holds that many human motives can be reduced to combinations among the 16 basic desires (Reiss 2004a).

The experience of a basic desire produces joy. Degrees of joy is experienced depending on the basic desire experienced. For example, when we have a desire for knowledge, and obtain it, we experience the joy of wonderment. According to Sensitivity Theory, joys differ in kind and people seek to maximise joys that are most important to them according to their Desire Profile (Reiss and Wiltz 2004). The 16 basic desire or motivations and the associated joys are as in Table 1.

In terms of relationships, the general principle in sensitivity theory is *“like-mindedness attracts, opposites repel, and the longer time the relationship continues, the more powerful is the influence of compatibility of desire profile”* (Reiss 2000a: 163). Misunderstanding can easily occur between two individuals with conflicting desire profile (Reiss 2000a).

Sensitivity theory was introduced by Reiss and Haverscamp in 1998. It was achieved by asking thousands of people from diverse backgrounds to rate a list of 328 items of possible ultimate goals and motivations in life according to various theories and studies. The result of the initial study supported a 15-factor solution. Later, the researchers added a 16th factor, saving, which they said is a crucial end motive which they had overlooked initially.

On the basis of these results, the researchers had constructed a self-report instrument, called the Reiss Profile of Fundamental Goals and Motivational Sensitivities (Reiss 2004b). Havercamp and Reiss (2003) have conducted a study in order to explore the reliability and validity of self-reported motives. The reliability and validity coefficients for the instrument significantly exceed those reported for many personality tests such as Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2.

Sensitivity theory represents a combination of Aristotle’s analysis of motivation, introduced in the year 300 and Allport’s concept of individuality introduced in 1961 (Reiss 2004a). In Aristotle’s search for basic motives, he had distinguished between means and ends. Means are ways to produce something else, while ends are self motivating goals desired (Reiss and Wiltz 2004). Allport (in Huffman et al. 1987) differentiated individuality in people through traits. Traits are behavioural characteristics individuals may possess. Allport categorised traits into four segments; common traits, unique traits, cardinal traits and central traits.

Sensitivity Theory represents an alternative to the uses and gratification approach in media psychology. Sensitivity Theory is similar to uses and gratifications in terms of the perspectives and assumptions of (i) media use is motivated, (ii) people actively select media consumption based on their needs, and (iii) media compete with other activities for selection, attention and use (McQuail and Windahl 1993; Reiss and Wiltz 2004).

However, it differs in the sense that it connects media experiences to the 16 basic desires and does not predict that gratification leads to increased global or generic satisfaction. Instead, it predicts that gratification leads to joys specific to the basic desire that it fulfils (Reiss and Wiltz, 2004). In other words, Sensitivity Theory

identifies the specific gratification an audience member gets out of his/her media exposure vis-a-vis the 16 basic desires of a human being.

Abraham Maslow had presented a categorisation and prioritisation of motives in 1954. This description is known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Bruno 2002). According to Maslow (in Huffman et al. 1987), human needs and motivations can be ranked into higher and lower needs. There are eight levels of needs, and he believed that once freed from the lower needs, humans are drawn to satisfy the higher needs to help them grow and develop. Many of the needs described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs resemble basic desires presented in Sensitivity Theory. Basic desires which can be found in Maslow's hierarchy are eating, physical activity, tranquillity, romance, acceptance, curiosity, power, status, social contact and order.

Studies were conducted to evaluate how the 16 basic desires are related to behaviour. Because motivation has diverse applications, studies on various issues such as media choice, spirituality, sports and school achievement can be conducted. In Reiss and Wiltz (2004), 239 adults were evaluated using Reiss Profile of Fundamental Motives and Motivational Sensitivities. These adults consist of reality television viewers and non-reality television viewers. It was found that reality television viewers tend to be more status oriented than the appropriate norm. The more reality television shows a person liked, the more status oriented he/she was. It also found that people who watched and enjoyed reality television placed a higher value of vengeance than people who did not watch such shows. Moreover, reality television viewers tended to be more motivated by social life, less motivated by honour, more concerned with order and more motivated by romance than non-viewers.

Weiss (2004a) also wrote a paper on spirituality based on his research in 2000. He tested 558 adults who identified themselves as very, somewhat or not religious. How religious a person identified himself to be was associated with above average Reiss Profile motivational scores for honour and family. Apart from that, religious people also recorded below average scores for vengeance and independence. In other words, people choose to be religious out of loyalty to their parents and heritage. Low vengeance may reflect religiosity's value of kindness and compassion. Low independence may indicate that one may have a desire for psychological support (probably reflecting the desire for support from God).

As 16 basic desires are said to be fundamental to human behaviour, a research was conducted in order to prove that it could explain not only deeply meaningful activity like religion, but also recreational activities like sports. Reiss, Wiltz and Sherman (in Reiss, 2004b) had administered the Reiss profile to 415 college students who had participated in zero, one or two or more sports in high school or college level. It was found that athleticism was found to be associated with physical exercise, social contact, family, vengeance, power and low curiosity (Reiss 2004b).

P. Kavanaugh (in Reiss 2004b) had tested the Reiss Profile on 49 high school students who were doing poorly in school in order to understand their sensitivity. It was found that these students have low levels of curiosity, honour, idealism and moderately high levels of vengeance and social contact. This result implies that these students were easily frustrated by intellectual effort (low curiosity), psychologically disconnected from their parents (low honour) and society (low idealism) but were connected to peers (high social contact).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of our study is to examine the popularity of *Akademi Fantasia* against the postulates of Reiss and Wiltz (2004): that people watch reality television because of the motivations and joys they deem most important. Specifically, the study examines the functions of the 16 basic desires in influencing people to watch *Akademi Fantasia*.

Based on the basic desires, the research questions can be framed as follows;

- RQ1:** Is there a relationship between the desire for power and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ2:** Is there a relationship between the desire for independence and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ3:** Is there a relationship between the desire for curiosity and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ4:** Is there a relationship between the desire for acceptance and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ5:** Is there a relationship between the desire for order and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ6:** Is there a relationship between the desire for saving and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ7:** Is there a relationship between the desire for honour and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ8:** Is there a relationship between the desire for idealism and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ9:** Is there a relationship between the desire for social contact and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ10:** Is there a relationship between the desire for family and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ11:** Is there a relationship between the desire for social status and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ12:** Is there a relationship between the desire for vengeance and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ13:** Is there a relationship between the desire for romance and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ14:** Is there a relationship between the desire for eating and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?

- RQ15:** Is there a relationship between the desire for physical activity and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?
- RQ16:** Is there a relationship between the desire for tranquillity and *Akademi Fantasia's* viewing preference?

This research topic is chosen for several reasons. First, it is to assess the validity of Sensitivity Theory as measured within Malaysian context and on a local television programme. Second, our study will contribute to the understanding the popularity of *Akademi Fantasia* within the socio-psychological context, including its appeal to the viewers 'basic desires'. Finally, it is an attempt to measure the success of a reality television which has grown to become an important television genre all over the world today.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Method

This research focuses on audience's reported basic motivation in life, which supposedly, can be linked to their watching preferences. Thus, research technique that was used in this research is quantitative method, using survey questionnaires. This method was chosen because it is appropriate for this study.

The questionnaire was circulated among the residents of Mukim Sungai Petani in Kuala Muda, Kedah. The population of Mukim Sungai Petani residents in the year 2000 (latest information available) was 156,805 person. The researcher listed down all the existing housing estates and villages in Sungai Petani. Respondents chosen to participate in this survey depends on who was at home when we collected the data. Only one person per household was selected to respond. Data collected were analyzed using SPSS (*Statistical Package for Social Science*) version 12.0 software.

Pilot Test

A pilot test was conducted in order to ensure the questionnaire's reliability. This test involved 27 respondents who were asked to complete the first draft of the questionnaire. The first draft consisted of 85 questions, including demographic questions. Most respondents answered the questions within 20 to 25 minutes. Later, comments on the difficulty and the layout of the questionnaire were asked. Most of the respondents had complained that the questions are too many and are a bit tricky. They have to really concentrate and think before answering. There were also a lot of complaints on the questions of romance and sex. The respondents think that such questions are not appropriate and suitable to be raised in the context of Malaysia. No comments were received on the layout of the questionnaire.

The collected data were then run in SPSS in order to check its reliability. Initially we observed that many of the variables had low negative Cronbach Alpha values. The reason behind this is because of the slant of the questions. Some of the questions were negative and some were positive, causing two different directions in the Alpha. In order to eliminate this problem, coding of the negative questions was reversed. Once reversed, the Cronbach's Alpha of the variables were no longer negative. Anyhow, according to Zaidatun Tasir and Mohd Salleh Abu (2003), a

reliable Alpha value 0.6 and above. Some of the Alpha did not reach that value. In order to increase the Alpha, certain unreliable statements were deleted according to the biggest *Alpha If Item Deleted* value in that variable. There were two variables which are permanently removed from the questionnaire. The first one is the variable 'eating', as its alpha is very low (0.212) and there was no other way to increase it. It is also believed that the variable eating is of little importance to the research. The second item deleted is 'romance'. It was decided that the variable should be removed as there were too many complaints on its inappropriateness.

Exploratory Data Analysis

After all the data from the sample were collected, an exploratory data analysis was conducted. The analysis was done in order to determine which statistical test (parametric or non-parametric test) is suitable to be used in this research. In this analysis, the Test of Normality was conducted on the dependent variable, which is the frequency of respondents watching *Akademi Fantasia*. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test assesses whether there is a significant departure from normality in the sample. Results show that the data distribution is not normal with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov value of 0.248 and the p value of 0.000 which is less than the significant value of 0.05. This shows that the data are not normally distributed.

Plotting was also done to see whether the data were normal or otherwise. Figure 1 shows the Normal Q-Q Plot of the data distribution. The graph of dependent variable is not normal since there are deviations from the diagonal line.

Thus, according to the test of normality and the normal Q-Q plot, it is concluded that parametric test is not suitable to be used in this study as the data is not normally distributed. The deciding test was the Chi-Square test of significance.

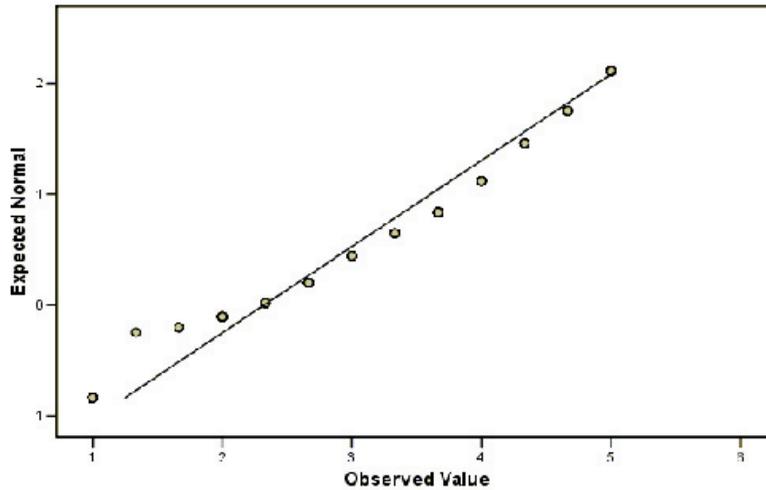
Data Analyses

Before analysing the data, recoding had to be done in order to prepare them for the analysis. Every negative item was recoded using the "Automatic Recode" application. The value for each negative item was reversed. Then, different items for each variable were computed using the "Compute Mean" application in order to obtain the variable's means. Since the data has now become two decimal data, they have to be recoded again using application "Recode" in order to avoid future problems in chi-square tests.

Descriptive analyses were conducted in order to analyse the demographic profile of the respondents. The analyses included frequency and percentage of respondents. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are age, gender and education level. Descriptive analyses were also carried out in order to see *Akademi Fantasia's* viewers', voters', and chatters' frequency according to their demographic characteristics.

Chi-square test of independence is a good way to tell whether there is an association in a bivariate percentage table (Neuman, 2003). It was chosen as an analysis in this research as it is a non-parametric test which can test whether there is a statistical relationship between two variables. According to Hayes (2000), Chi-square test can be used to see whether there is significant relationship between some characteristics or behaviour. This method can be used if data is on the nominal size and an independent measure design is used.

Figure 1:
The Normal Q-Q Plot



RESULTS

The Basic Desires of *Akademi Fantasia*'s Audience

In determining the relationship between basic desires and watching preference, the chi-square test of relationship was used. 14 basic desires are studied to find their relationship to viewer's watching preference. After calculation, it was found that each of the basic desire and watching preference table has a degree of freedom of 1. Probability of error threshold is decided on 0.05. According to the statistical table for chi-square test, the critical value for χ^2 with a degree of freedom of 1 and probability of error threshold of 0.05 is 3.84.

Table 2:
Basic desires and their level of significance

Basic Desire	Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	Significant Value (p)	Phi-Coefficient (Φ)
Power	0.370	0.543	None
Independence	0.033	0.855	None
Curiosity	4.725	0.030	-0.154
Acceptance	0.131	0.717	None
Order	0.136	0.712	None
Saving	0.085	0.770	None
Honour	0.009	0.926	None
Idealism	0.762	0.383	None
Social Contact	5.347	0.021	-0.164
Family	2.801	0.094	None
Social Status	4.116	0.042	-0.143
Vengeance	0.134	0.715	None
Physical Activity	0.524	0.469	None
Tranquillity	4.426	0.035	0.149

There are four basic desires out of the 16 that have significant relationship with viewers watching *Akademi Fantasia*. The highest significance is for the basic desire of social contact. This means that most *Akademi Fantasia* viewers have significant desire for social contact. The second largest significant relationship concerned the basic desire of curiosity. Significant but small relationship were reported on the basic desires of social status and tranquillity. The remaining 10 basic desires did not show significant relationship (refer to Table 2).

In contrast, Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) research gave 6 basic desires which gave a significant relationship with viewers of reality television, which are social contact, honour, order, social status, vengeance and romance. Two of the basic desires are the same between the two studies conducted, which are social contact and social status.

Table 3 below shows the significant basic desires and the characteristics associated with the audience of *Akademi Fantasia*. The audience are found to watch *Akademi Fantasia* as a topic of discussion and source for interaction as it was very popular during its seasons. The audience are also interested in having fun and being entertained. This can be achieved when audience get involved and get to know the show's contestants. Furthermore, the non-fictional characters make the identification direct.

Table 3:
Characteristics of *Akademi Fantasia's* audience

Basic Desire	Characteristics
Social Contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme as a topic of discussion and interaction. • Wants fun and entertainment. • Get involved with the characters in the programme. • Identify with characters which are non-fictional.
Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy classes conducted in the academy. • Learn how to overcome fears, strategise, acquire something they need and get co-operation through the contestants. • Seeks novel stimulations.
Tranquillity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides comfort and reassurance by replacing neighbours and friends. • Recognition of the characters brings feelings of security. • Distraction from tragic world events.
Social Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels superior when comparing self with participant. • Fantasise about gaining the same celebrity status as the ordinary people in the show.

The audience of *Akademi Fantasia* are also found to have the desire to learn and explore new things. They enjoy watching the classes conducted in the academy. Apart from that, they learn while watching the contestants overcome their tasks. The show is also popular as reality television is a new genre and it is full of surprises.

In a way, *Akademi Fantasia* and the participants are like family and neighbours to the audience as they are the ones who accompany the audience daily. That provides comfort and reassurance to the audience. It also serves as a distraction from tragic world events and stressful experiences.

It was also found that *Akademi Fantasia's* audience wants to feel superior to others, which, in this case, are the participants. Audience also crown the participants with celebrity status. Since the participants are normal, ordinary people, audience are able to fantasise about achieving the same glory and fame as the participants.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be concluded that the factors which influence viewership of *Akademi Fantasia* are the desire for social contact, curiosity, tranquillity and social status. These desires are related to motivations to have fun, wanting new and exciting experience, learning, valuing tranquillity but liking to feel important. The best vicarious way for them to have all this is to watch television, and *Akademi Fantasia* seemingly provides the choice for them.

In comparison to Reiss and Wiltz's (2004) research, only two of the basic desires are the same as their outcomes; social contact and social status. However, this is expected, as Reiss and Wiltz (2004: 374) stated, "*Many different shows are classified as 'reality television', so, current or future shows (studied) may have an appeal different from the shows evaluated here.*"

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