



ISSN Print: 2664-7699
ISSN Online: 2664-7702
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.53
IJHA 2025; 7(2): 395-400
www.humanitiesjournals.net
Received: 12-08-2025
Accepted: 16-09-2025

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The Psychological Impact of Reality TV: Exploring Viewer Responses through Cognitive Appraisal Theory

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2025.v7.i2f.248>

Abstract

This study explores the emotional and psychological impact of reality television on student viewers in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, through the lens of Cognitive Appraisal Theory. Utilizing a cross-sectional quantitative design, data were collected from 111 college students (61 males and 50 females) who regularly watch Tamil reality shows such as Bigg Boss Tamil, Super Singer, Jodi Number One, and Cooku with Comali. The study employed purposive sampling and used a self-administered questionnaire to assess constructs of coping, anxiety, and stress. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, with chi-square tests and cross-tabulations revealing significant associations between viewers' cognitive-emotional appraisals of reality show content and their psychological outcomes. While some participants perceived reality shows as emotionally calming and supportive for coping, a substantial number reported heightened anxiety, mood fluctuations, and stress-related symptoms, including sleep disturbances. This research highlights the dual role of reality TV in being a coping strategy as well as the psychological provocation, depending on the personal assessment. The findings highlight the importance of appraisal coping congruity in the mental health outcomes prediction, thus providing implications to both future media psychology research and mental health intervention development.

Keywords: Cognitive Appraisal Theory, Reality Television, Coping, Anxiety, Stress, Tamil Reality Shows, Media Psychology, Viewer Perception, Emotional Impact, Student Mental Health

Introduction

Reality Television and Cognitive Appraisal in the Tamil Context

Reality television has become a ubiquitous constituent of modern entertainment culture, offering a combination of unscripted drama, competition, and sincere life conditions that often blur the line between entertainment and affective involvement. The increase in screen time and the spread of immersive content have raised questions about the psychological implications of reality programming for viewers. While some individuals experience emotional catharsis and a perceived sense of belonging through these broadcasts, others report increased stress, anxiety, and affective dysregulation. This dichotomy requires a rigorous analysis of the cognitive and emotional functions of viewers processing reality TV content.

Studying such a phenomenon requires a psychological approach that recognizes both inter-individual differences and emotional responses to media. One theoretical perspective that is particularly relevant is Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) ^[1], which posits that affective responses depend on the cognitive appraisals people form about events. In the realm of media use, audiences might judge reality TV as a relaxation or escape mechanism, or conversely, as a source of social comparison, thus spanning a continuum of coping behaviors.

The Current Study The primary objective of this study is to examine how reality television content is assessed by viewers and the relationship between this assessment and affective states such as anxiety, stress, and coping styles. The study intends to determine whether reality television serves as an adaptive coping strategy or an affective stimulus by operationalizing Cognitive Appraisal Theory and further defining these relationships across individual demographics.

Contextualizing Key Tamil Reality Shows

There has been a dramatic change in Tamil reality television, which has become a multidimensional landscape linking expressive narratives, talent displays, and high-stakes competition.

Bigg Boss Tamil Bigg Boss Tamil has emerged as one of the most popular yet controversial shows in this genre, thriving on the concept of confined spaces, emotionally intense tasks, and complex interpersonal dynamics. The program has faced criticism for potentially promoting aggression and for its portrayal of mental health. A notable controversy occurred in an earlier season involving a mental health-themed assignment; this resulted in backlash from psychologists and led host Kamal Haasan to publicly criticize the task as being in "bad taste." Similarly, online communities on Reddit often describe the show as voyeuristic, arguing that it relies on emotional manipulation supporting empirical findings that reality television has the capacity to stimulate aggression and emotional volatility in viewers.

Super Singer In contrast, Super Singer (currently in its tenth season) focuses on artistic talent and mentorship, commanding a massive viewership. Its emotionally involving yet positive format promotes a supportive environment, standing in stark contrast to the confrontational archetypes of other programs. Social media discussions often attribute the show's popularity to the charismatic host, Ma Ka Pa Anand, whose humor and rapport with participants help alleviate the tension of competition, creating a sense of familiarity and comfort for the audience.

Jodi Number One The dance competition Jodi Number One is a pair-based format, but it distinguishes itself by combining performance with emotive storytelling. The show fosters a sympathetic viewer experience by highlighting the personal narratives and relationship dynamics of the couples, often enhanced by real-life guest appearances that deepen the emotional connection.

Cooku with Comali Cooku with Comali is a comedy-centric show that integrates food preparation with humor by pairing professional chefs with comic characters, known as "Comalis." While generally lighthearted, the affective aspect of the program is complex. For instance, in a recent season (Season 5), actress Shaalin Zoya experienced a viral moment of vulnerability during a competition, highlighting the underlying pressure participants face. However, according to culinary professionals and viewers, the show's primary appeal remains its unique integration of humor and camaraderie, which acts as a stress reliever.

Integrative Perspective

In summary, these reality television programs evoke a continuum of emotions and cognitions that depend heavily on the content and tone of the specific show.

- **Stress & Challenge:** Drama-centric shows like Bigg Boss may be appraised as exciting yet stress-inducing, potentially eliciting anxiety or aggressive reactions in participants and viewers alike.
- **Benign & Positive:** Conversely, programs such as Super Singer and Cooku with Comali are more likely to result in favorable affective states such as inspiration, admiration, or amusement.
- **Social Connection:** Shows like Jodi Number One are likely to lead to the development of relatability and

emotional attachment through the portrayal of relationships.

Such diversity in appraisal processes suggests that reality TV can result in different psychological effects ranging from increased stress to emotional satisfaction depending on the specific viewer's interpretation and coping style.

Objective of the Study

The current study aims to research the emotional and psychological consequences of television reality shows consumption with a special emphasis on cognitive appraisal mechanisms used by viewers regarding coping behaviors, anxiety, and stress. By use of systematic analysis of viewer responses, the study attempts to assess the potential of reality show as a coping mechanism of regulating stress and affect, to outline some common patterns of anxiogenic responses that are produced by reality-based programming, and to examine the role played by such programming in perceived level of stress among the viewers. In addition, the study aims to elucidate how longitudinal or emotionally intense exposure to reality TV affects individual mood swings, sleep disorders, and fears about real-life situations.

Theoretical Framework

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) ^[11] conceptualised Cognitive Appraisal Theory which provides a framework by which emotional reactions to stressors including media content like reality television can be explained. According to this theory, people will give a stimulus a two stage appraisal; the primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In the primary appraisal, the person determines whether the stimulus poses a threat to his or her wellbeing. In the secondary appraisal, they measure the extent to which they have the necessary resources or coping mechanisms to deal with the situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) ^[11]. The problem-focused coping along with emotion-focused can be generalised as the coping strategies as outlined by the theory which are meant to alter the source of stress and to regulate reaction to the stressor in terms of emotional response respectively. The perceived control of the situation tends to be the determinant of the chosen coping strategy. As an example, an audience perceiving emotionally intimidating but beyond control content of dramatized reality shows can move to emotion-based coping strategies, including denial or avoidance. A significant body of the literature shows that cognitive appraisals processes are strongly linked to psychological outcomes of anxiety and stress. Negative appraisals - Negative appraisals, where events are perceived as dangerous or uncontrollable by the subject, have been associated with increases of anxiety and depression and negative psychiatric outcomes (Forsythe and Compas, 1987) ^[1]. The goodness-of-fit hypothesis also clarifies such a relationship and argues that psychological distress can be caused by incongruence between the adopted coping strategy and the perceived controllable situation. The use of problem-oriented approaches in situations that are evaluated as out of control can exacerbate anxiety and stress (Forsythe *et al.*, 1987) ^[1]. Positive cognitive reappraisal, meaning rewriting stressful situations in a more positive way, has also been described as a resilience process that mitigates the impact of stress on anxiety (Riepenhausen *et al.*, 2022; Xu *et al.*, 2020) ^[2, 4]. These conclusions indicate that spectators who exercise positive reappraisal during viewing

emotionally charged reality programs might have a reduction in negative consequences and improvement of emotional control. These processes are modulated by demographic and contextual variables as well. Empirical research has revealed that age, gender and media consumption patterns determine the way individuals value and react to stress. As an illustration, women and persons with vulnerable relatives often report an increase in the extent of stressful reactions and anxiety to stressful stimuli (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Compas *et al.*, 1996) ^[5, 6]. Cognitive Appraisal Theory is applied in this research to explain the way in which the audience of reality shows comprehends their experience of media and how in turn, the experience can influence their affection, including the ability of coping, level of anxiety and stress. The research aims to explain the existence of the dual reality TV effect as a possible coping tool and psychological stressor by analyzing these phenomena through perspective of appraisal and coping.

Research Methodology

This was an investigation study that used cross-sectional quantitative research design to study the emotional and psychological consequences of reality TV among student participants who viewed reality television in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, through the perspective of Cognitive Appraisal Theory. The participants were chosen purposely basing on the criterion of frequent watching of Tamil reality shows of the most popular programs, i.e., BIGG Boss Tamil, Jodi Number One, Super Singer, and Cooku with Comali. The participants were a group of 111 college students (61 men and 50 women) involved in the study. Information was gathered using a paper-based questionnaire and an online survey with Google Forms, thus increasing accessibility. The questionnaire was built with closed-ended Likert scale items measuring three major constructs coping, anxiety, and stress based on cognitive and affective reactions of the participants to reality television. The inclusion criteria

required the participants to be active participants who watch the programs chosen and being enrolled in one of the colleges/universities in Coimbatore. The questionnaire was administered independently and informed consent was obtained before the respondents could answer all queries. IBM SPSS Statistics software was used to analyze data; descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data and response frequencies, with chi-square tests and cross-tabulations used to investigate relationships between emotional responses and degrees of coping, anxiety and stress. The methodological approach allowed a subtle interpretation of the reality television as a coping or a psychological stressor, depending on how an individual appraised it. This questionnaire was created with the five-point Likert-scale questions that were directly based on the key variables of Cognitive Appraisal Theory, namely the primary appraisal (perceived threat), secondary appraisal (perceived coping capacity), and the affective reactions of anxiety and stress. The item statements were developed to mirror cognitive-emotional decoding of reality-television material, which touched upon the perceived emotional support, anxiety groups, and stressors. Each of the constructs, coping, anxiety, and stress, was assessed using several items, which reflected subjective assessment of the viewers concerning media experiences, thus, fitting the theoretical dimension outlined by Lazarus and Folkman.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The current question aimed to observe the emotional and psychological consequences of reality television programming on viewers, giving specific focus on the constructs of coping, anxiety and stress. Chi-square tests were performed to determine relationships between the endorsements of reality-show-related items by the respondents and their classification in respect to their levels of coping, anxiety, and stress.

Table 1: Emotional Toll of Reality Television: A Statistical Analysis of Coping, Stress, and Anxiety Responses

Item Statement	Associated Variable	Chi-Square (df)	p-value	Interpretation
Watching reality shows helps me cope with stress and emotion	Coping	21.535	.000	Significant - Strong association between reality shows and coping ability.
Reality shows have a calming effect on my emotions	Coping	44.198	.000	Highly significant - Perceived calming effect strongly relates to coping levels.
Reality shows have a calming effect on my emotions	Anxiety	10.650	.031	Significant - Calming perception linked to lower anxiety.
I find heightened anxiety while watching reality shows	Anxiety	23.537	.000	Highly significant - Viewers reporting anxiety while watching are more likely to show high anxiety levels.
I find heightened anxiety while watching reality shows	Stress	14.953	.005	Significant - Anxiety-inducing content is associated with increased stress levels.
Reality shows often leave me feeling nervous or on edge	Anxiety	25.733	.000	Highly significant - Nervousness while watching shows relates strongly to anxiety.
Watching reality shows triggers anxiety thoughts and feelings	Anxiety	32.877	.000	Highly significant - Strong link to anxiety levels.
Watching reality shows triggers anxiety thoughts and feelings	Stress	22.306	.000	Strongly associated with increased stress.
Reality shows have a calming effect on my anxiety	Coping	31.974	.000	Significant - Strong link between coping levels and perception of emotional regulation.
My mood fluctuates while watching reality shows	Anxiety	30.716	.000	Highly significant - Fluctuating moods are tied to anxiety.
I experience noticeable mood swings during dramatic reality shows	Anxiety	29.448	.000	Mood swings strongly associated with high anxiety.
Watching reality shows increases my tendency to worry about real-life situations	Anxiety	29.813	.000	Strong association between show content and real-life worry.
I often think excessively about events in	Anxiety	34.559	.000	Strong association with overthinking and anxiety.

reality shows				
Reality shows contribute to my overall level of worry and concern	Stress	41.623	.000	Strong link between perceived worry and stress level.
I perceive reality shows as stressful and emotionally taxing	Stress	46.434	.000	Strong association - emotional taxing content increases stress levels.
Reality shows make me feel more stressed about my own life	Stress	64.276	.000	Highly significant - Strong link between viewing and increased personal stress.
Reality shows are associated with sleep disturbances	Stress	18.225	.000	Viewers reporting sleep issues are likely experiencing high stress.
Coping Levels vs Anxiety Levels	Cross-tab	3.047	.081	Not statistically significant - slight trend suggesting coping may reduce anxiety.
Coping Levels vs Stress Levels	Cross-tab	3.469	.063	Marginal - Slight inverse relationship between coping and stress.
Stress Levels × Anxiety Levels	Cross-tab	21.052	.000	Strong relationship - High stress levels are significantly associated with high anxiety.

The current study explored the emotional and psychological effect of reality TV shows on its audiences with a significant focus on such constructs as coping, anxiety, and stress. Chi-square tests were used to determine the relationship between the responses of the participants to the items related to reality shows and the levels of coping, anxiety, and stress that were categorized by the participants. The results revealed significant associations between viewers "coping levels" and their "emotional appraisal" of reality television. Participants who reported higher levels of coping were significantly more likely to agree that watching reality shows helped them manage stress and emotional challenges ($\chi^2(4) = 21.535, p < .001$). Similarly, a significant relationship was found between coping levels and the perception that reality shows have a calming effect on emotions ($\chi^2(4) = 44.198, p < .001$), as well as on anxiety ($\chi^2(4) = 31.974, p < .001$). These findings suggest that for many viewers, reality shows are appraised as emotionally supportive media content that offers temporary relief or distraction from everyday stressors. This supports the cognitive appraisal theory, which proposes that individuals' emotional reactions are shaped by how they evaluate external stimuli. In this case, positive appraisals of reality television appear to contribute to a sense of emotional coping.

In contrast, anxiety-related items demonstrated consistent and highly significant associations with anxiety levels, suggesting that reality television is a notable trigger for emotional dysregulation in many individuals. The statement "I find heightened anxiety while watching reality shows" was strongly associated with high anxiety levels ($\chi^2(4) = 23.537, p < .001$), as was "Watching reality shows triggers anxiety thoughts and feelings" ($\chi^2(4) = 32.877, p < .001$). Viewers who reported mood instability also tended to have higher anxiety. Specifically, items such as "My mood tends to fluctuate while watching reality shows" and "I experience noticeable mood swings" were significantly linked with anxiety levels ($\chi^2 = 30.716$ and $\chi^2 = 29.448$ respectively, both $p < .001$). Furthermore, cognitive engagement with the content, such as overthinking or excessive reflection on portrayed events, was a strong predictor of anxiety, as seen in the significant association between anxiety levels and the item "I often think excessively about events in reality shows" ($\chi^2(4) = 34.559, p < .001$). These findings indicate that viewers who emotionally invest in reality show content or interpret it as personally relevant are more likely to experience heightened anxiety.

Similarly, stress was significantly associated with several items related to emotional burden and negative appraisal.

Participants who agreed that reality shows were emotionally taxing exhibited higher stress levels ($\chi^2(3) = 46.434, p < .001$), as did those who reported that reality shows made them feel more stressed about their own lives ($\chi^2(3) = 64.276, p < .001$). The item "Reality shows contribute to my overall level of worry and concern" also showed a strong association with stress ($\chi^2(2) = 41.623, p < .001$), indicating that the content can induce a sense of comparative dissatisfaction or emotional overwhelm. Sleep disturbance, a physiological consequence often associated with psychological distress, was also significantly related to stress levels. Respondents who reported that watching reality shows interfered with sleep had significantly higher stress ($\chi^2(3) = 18.225, p < .001$). These patterns underscore the role of cognitive and emotional appraisals in shaping the viewer experience, with negative interpretations of show content corresponding to increased psychological strain.

The results of the studies of the relations between the main constructs showed that the levels of coping were not statistically significantly correlated with anxiety ($p = .081$) or stress ($p = .063$); however, the results were close to the significant value, which suggests a potential tendency according to which persons with better-developed coping mechanisms are more likely to show resilience to emotional disturbance. However, the link between stress and anxiety was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 21.052, p < .001$), indicating a strong overlap between these constructs. Participants with high anxiety levels were much more likely to experience high stress, consistent with established psychological models of emotional comorbidity.

The data reflect a dual role of reality television in viewer psychology. For some, reality shows function as a coping tool that helps them manage stress and emotions, especially when they are appraised as emotionally neutral or calming. For others, the same content appears to act as a trigger for emotional dysregulation, heightening anxiety, mood swings, worry, and even sleep disturbances. The empirical findings of the article support the principles of cognitive appraisal theory because it is essential to note that the affective consequences not only depend on the intrinsic qualities of media content but are mediated by the subjective interpretation of its content by the individual in the framework of his/her current situation and affective state.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicate a two-fold emotional influence of reality TV on student participants in Coimbatore with reality TV programs playing dual roles as coping mechanisms and psychologically disturbing factors.

The results are quite consistent with the ideas of Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) ^[11] according to which the interpretation of the stressors determines the emotional reactions of different individuals. Those viewers who rated reality television as emotionally relaxing said they had better coping efficacy, but those who judged reality television as emotionally nauseating or anxiety-producing had a much higher chance of saying they had high levels of stress and anxiety. This dual effect provides evidence to previous studies that have stressed the subjective approach of emotional appraisal. In a telling manner, determined that threat appraisals and negative cognitive interpretations are strong predictors of future anxiety and depression. Likewise, the goodness-of-fit hypothesis developed by Forsythe and Compas (1987) ^[6] suggests that the discrepancy between the perceptions of a person concerning a situation and the adopted coping mechanism lead to the development of psychological symptoms. This dynamic is supported in the present study where stress and anxiety are strongly related, meaning that when students feel that reality-show content becomes overwhelming but they are not supported by adaptive coping mechanisms, the likelihood of experiencing psychological distress rises. In addition, the findings of this study are consistent with the positive cognitive reappraisal research as a protective measure. Riepenhausen *et al.* (2022) ^[2] highlight that individuals who reinterpret stressors in a more favorable light are more resilient to stress and exhibit fewer symptoms of anxiety. Although not explicitly measured, students in this study who found reality television calming may have been engaging in such reappraisal processes, using entertainment as a strategy to downregulate emotional discomfort. Xu *et al.* (2020) ^[4] also demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal in reducing anxiety during stressful isolation periods, underscoring its broader relevance in emotionally challenging contexts.

Gender and media preferences may also influence how reality television is appraised. Ali *et al.* (2021) and Compas *et al.* (1996) ^[5, 6] noted that female participants and individuals with emotionally vulnerable contexts often exhibit heightened stress responses. While this study did not test gender differences in depth, the demographic composition and engagement with emotionally charged Tamil reality content (e.g., Bigg Boss Tamil or Cooku with Comali) suggest that cultural and narrative factors might mediate emotional appraisal and its psychological impact.

Overall, the data suggest that reality television serves a bifunctional role, dependent on the viewer's cognitive processing: as a form of escapist entertainment and emotion-focused coping for some, and as a stressor triggering anxiety and rumination for others. These findings reinforce the importance of psychological interpretation in media research and open pathways for further studies examining coping styles and emotional regulation through entertainment.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of findings beyond the student population in Coimbatore. Future research should adopt probability sampling methods across different age groups and geographic regions to enhance external validity. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias, especially in questions related to mental

health and emotional states. Third, the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot in time and does not allow for causal inferences or temporal relationships between reality TV exposure and psychological outcomes. Longitudinal designs would better assess how prolonged exposure affects emotional well-being. Lastly, although the study draws on Cognitive Appraisal Theory, it did not directly measure appraisal styles or specific coping mechanisms such as problem-focused vs. emotion-focused coping, which may have added depth to the interpretation of emotional outcomes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that reality television plays a complex and ambivalent role in the emotional lives of student viewers. While it serves as a coping tool and source of emotional regulation for some individuals, for others, it acts as a psychological stressor, contributing to increased anxiety, mood swings, and sleep disturbances. Grounded in Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the findings underscore the importance of individual interpretation in determining psychological responses to media content. These results are consistent with prior research emphasizing appraisal as a central mechanism linking stressors to emotional outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Riepenhausen *et al.*, 2022) ^[11, 1, 2]. As media continues to be a major part of daily life, particularly among youth, understanding the emotional impact of entertainment content like reality television is crucial. Future studies should explore more nuanced variables, such as specific coping strategies, emotional regulation techniques, and longitudinal changes in media-related stress, to better inform media literacy programs and mental health interventions.

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