

***Report: Viewer response to
reality television in Australia***

Prepared for the:

**Australian Communications
and Media Authority**

October 2021

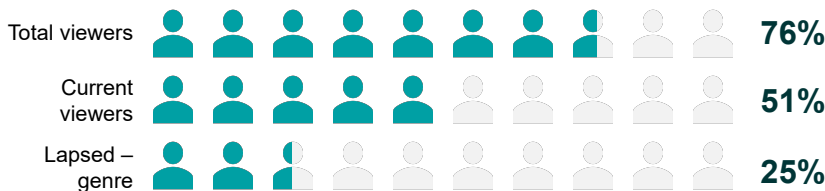
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Report on a page

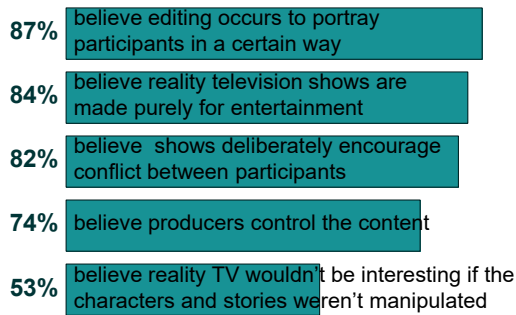
Relationship-based reality television in Australia

A majority of Australians have watched relationship-based reality television programs; and half are still watching



Viewing driven by the drama, insight into the lives of others and social context/ talkability
7 in 10 current viewers watch most or every episode of a program

Australians are alert to the constructed nature of reality television



However, viewers told us that it can be hard to tell what is real and what is not

There is an interest in increased protections but not limiting content

Australians want...

More support for participants

77% want producers to provide support for participants

More information and disclaimers

76% disclaimers that programs include edited or constructed scenes

75% help-seeking information at the end of programs

72% disclaimers about depictions of bullying and unhealthy relationships

Appropriate program time slots

67% think shows like these shouldn't be shown during children's/family viewing times

Freedom to choose

68% believe viewers should be allowed to decide what they want to watch

20% believe the shows shouldn't be shown in Australia

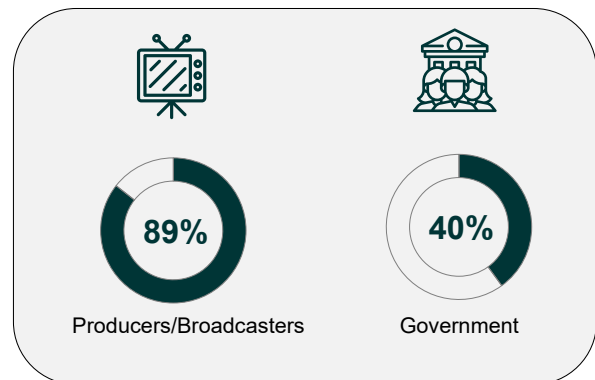
The potential for relationship-based programs to affect participants and viewers is acknowledged



33% of lapsed stopped watching because of content related reasons, such as impacts on participants

"I was like, this is actually dangerous for this relationship to be portrayed as okay." (Lapsed viewer)

Producers and broadcasters are believed to be chiefly responsible for viewer/participant wellbeing



Executive summary

This report details findings from a qualitative and quantitative research study exploring Australians' viewing experiences of, and attitudes to, Australian-made reality television programs aired on commercial free-to-air channels. The methodology comprised 9 in-depth ethnographic interviews with current, lapsed and non-viewers and 10 qualitative group discussions and with current and lapsed viewers of relationship-based programs, as well as a quantitative online survey with a representative sample of n=1,001 Australians aged 18 years. Fieldwork took place in May and June 2021. The study focused on programs where relationships between participants are the central theme ('relationship-based programs') and sought to understand viewer and community attitudes to the potential harmful effects of relationship-based programs.

There is near universal awareness of relationship-based reality programs among Australians

Alongside live sport, the reality television genre is one of the most popular on Australian television and typically attracts high audience rating figures.¹ This study found that three-quarters of Australians (76%) have watched a relationship-based program at some stage, while around half (51%) report watching the last season of a program. Women and younger Australians (aged 18–34 years) are more likely to watch.

Social context and drama/conflict are key drivers for engagement

Current viewers typically watch relationship-based programs with family and friends. Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) watch with others, including 55% with partners, 18% with dependants and 17% with friends. Viewers are drawn to the high drama and conflict as well as the social opportunities that come with these programs. There is a sense of buzz and talkability that can be immensely enjoyable, whether it's in post-show commentaries, the workplace water cooler chat or the dramatic moment that sparks a national conversation.

Viewers are alert to the constructed nature of reality television programs yet can find it difficult to differentiate between what is real and what is not

Just over two-thirds of current viewers (69%) believe they can differentiate between fact and fiction when it comes to relationship-based programs. In fact, trying to do so is part of the appeal, with some viewers engaging in amateur detective work; for example, trying to decipher whether participants' real-life characters are similar to the way they are portrayed in programs.

However, ultimately viewers say that it is difficult to determine what is real and what is not. While most Australians (74%)² believe producers control the action, it's acknowledged that it can be hard to differentiate between what program aspects are driven by producers compared to participants. This lack of clarity regarding what is real means that viewers may unwittingly internalise negative portrayals of participants, and even harmful social norms.

¹www.mediaweek.com.au/most-watched-programs-of-2020/

²From this point in the executive summary, this term refers to the 99% of Australians aware of relationship-based programs in the survey.

Concerns about the treatment and portrayal of participants

The survey found that around 9 in 10 (87%) Australians believe that relationship-based programs are edited to portray participants in a certain way, and that participants are shaped into ‘characters’ with a specific role to play. They acknowledge that negative representations might potentially have significant impacts on participants’ relationships and employment prospects.

Nearly 6 in 10 Australians (58%) have at least one concern about the treatment of participants on relationship-based programs, including that these programs place participants in distressing situations (37%), exploit participants (43%) and can affect participants’ mental health (41%). However, the qualitative research found that the blurry line between the real/unreal elements of relationship-based programs means that viewers can find it hard to determine the extent to which participants have *actually* experienced distress. For example, viewers might question whether perceived harms are a result of heavy-handed editing by producers.

Despite their concerns, Australians can also argue that participants should expect the public scrutiny and reputational damage associated with relationship-based programs. Viewers note that participants must know that there is the potential to be edited as a ‘villain’ and that participants have essentially provided informed consent since these program formats have been on-air for some time. There is even less sympathy for participants perceived to be inauthentic; that is, participants who aren’t taking part in programs for reasons of love, but rather to find fame and commercial success.

Concerns about potential harms to viewers

Australians acknowledge the potential for relationship-based programs to promote harmful norms, with nearly 7 in 10 (68%) expressing at least one concern about this, including that programs promote unhealthy relationships (48%), encourage people to treat each other badly in real life (37%), promote unhealthy body image (43%), portray women in a demeaning way (38%) and reinforce negative gender and racial stereotypes (37%). Over one-third of Australians (37%) are also concerned about the potential of the programs to be distressing for viewers with personal experience of domestic and family violence.

Viewers are most worried about these harms in relation to others, such as younger or more impressionable viewers, although they also report some negative personal impacts. This includes the 17% who argued with family or friends after watching the programs, and others who reported feelings of anger, distress, anxiety or sadness after viewing certain scenes. Two-thirds of parents (65%) do not allow their dependant children under 18 years to watch relationship-based programs due to bad behaviour and poor role modelling.

Stopping watching for content-related reasons

Some viewers switch off when the negative aspects of viewing relationship-based programs outweigh the positives. A third of lapsed viewers (33%) reported switching off a program for content-related reasons. This includes disliking the way participants treated each other (18%), the portrayal and treatment of participants by producers (16%) and the amount of drama/conflict (16%). Lapsed viewers in the qualitative study said that negative, nasty and uncomfortable dramatic content has increased over the years.

There is support for additional protective measures for viewers and participants

In qualitative discussions, current and lapsed viewers expressed interest in additional protections for both audiences and participants. The survey revealed that Australians typically believe it's the responsibility of producers/broadcasters to address potential social harms; and that producers/broadcasters could be required to provide warnings that programs include edited or constructed scenes (76%) and depictions of bullying and unhealthy relationships (72%), as well as information about seeking help after programs have aired (75%). However, any additional viewer information would need to be carefully nuanced to avoid erroneously labelling constructed relationships as unhealthy, and exacerbating potential reputational damage to participants.

About the research

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) commissioned qualitative and quantitative research into Australian-made reality television programs on commercial free-to-air television. The study focused on programs where relationships between participants are the central theme such as Married at First Sight Australia, Big Brother Australia, Farmer wants a Wife, The Bachelor Australia, The Bachelorette Australia, Love Island, Bachelor in Paradise Australia and Wife Swap Australia.

ACMA consistently receives viewer complaints about this genre, and there has also been considerable media attention about the treatment of reality TV participants in Australia and overseas.³ With this study, ACMA sought to better understand viewer and community attitudes to the potential harmful effects of relationship-based programs. The research objectives were to explore:

- drivers of engagement and reasons for disengagement
- whether and how Australians believe the programs to be real and authentic
- relatability and perceived authenticity of reality television programs and participants
- perceived harms to viewers and participants
- viewer and lapsed viewer concerns about relationship-based programs
- impacts on the attitudes and behaviours of viewers
- perceptions of current viewer protections and views on other safeguards.

The methodology comprised 9 in-depth ethnographic interviews with current, lapsed and non-viewers and 10 qualitative group discussions and with current and lapsed viewers of relationship-based programs, as well as a quantitative online survey with a representative sample of n=1,001 Australians aged 18 years.

This methodology is described in more detail in Appendix 1.

Reading the report

Significance testing is applied at a 95% confidence interval to compare the relevant sub-groups (for example, male vs. female, current viewers vs. lapsed) in the quantitative analysis.

Numbers in **red** or with a downward arrow denote results which are significantly lower and numbers in **green** or with an upward arrow denote results which are significantly higher than comparable sub-groups at a 95% confidence interval.

³See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/03/reality-tv-fuels-body-anxiety-in-young-people-survey-love-island>, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-14/mafs-married-first-sight-online-allegations-ethics/100066556>.

Findings in detail

1. Reality television viewing habits

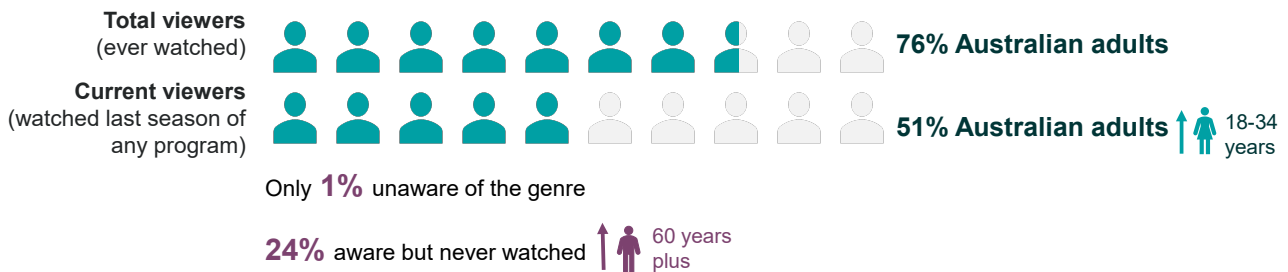
The study found near universal awareness of relationship-based programs amongst Australian adults (99%). Three-quarters (76%) have watched these programs at some point, while half (51%) have watched at least one episode in the last season. Women and younger Australians (aged 18–34 years) are more likely to watch.

Near universal awareness of relationship-based reality television

At June 2021, almost all Australians (99%) were aware of relationship-based programs. The survey found that three-quarters (76%) have watched these programs at some point, while half (51%) have watched at least one episode in the last season.⁴ Depending on the program, between 63% and 79% of current viewers watched most or every episode of the last season, highlighting their high levels of engagement.

A quarter of the Australian population (24%) have not watched any relationship-based programs – they have typically become aware of these through conversations with family and friends, media or program advertising. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Proportion of viewers (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001)

A quarter of Australians (25%) have watched relationship-based programs in the past but did not watch the last season of any program. Abandoning a specific program is common – 60% of surveyed respondents didn't watch the latest season of a relationship-based program they had previously watched. However, most people continued to watch programs within the genre (67% of ever watched). This suggests a 'stickiness' where, if people stop watching a particular relationship-based program, they still try to find enjoyment within the genre. See Figure 2.

⁴ The viewing levels found in the survey are in line with OzTam ratings.

Figure 2: Proportion who have disengaged with a program or the category (%)

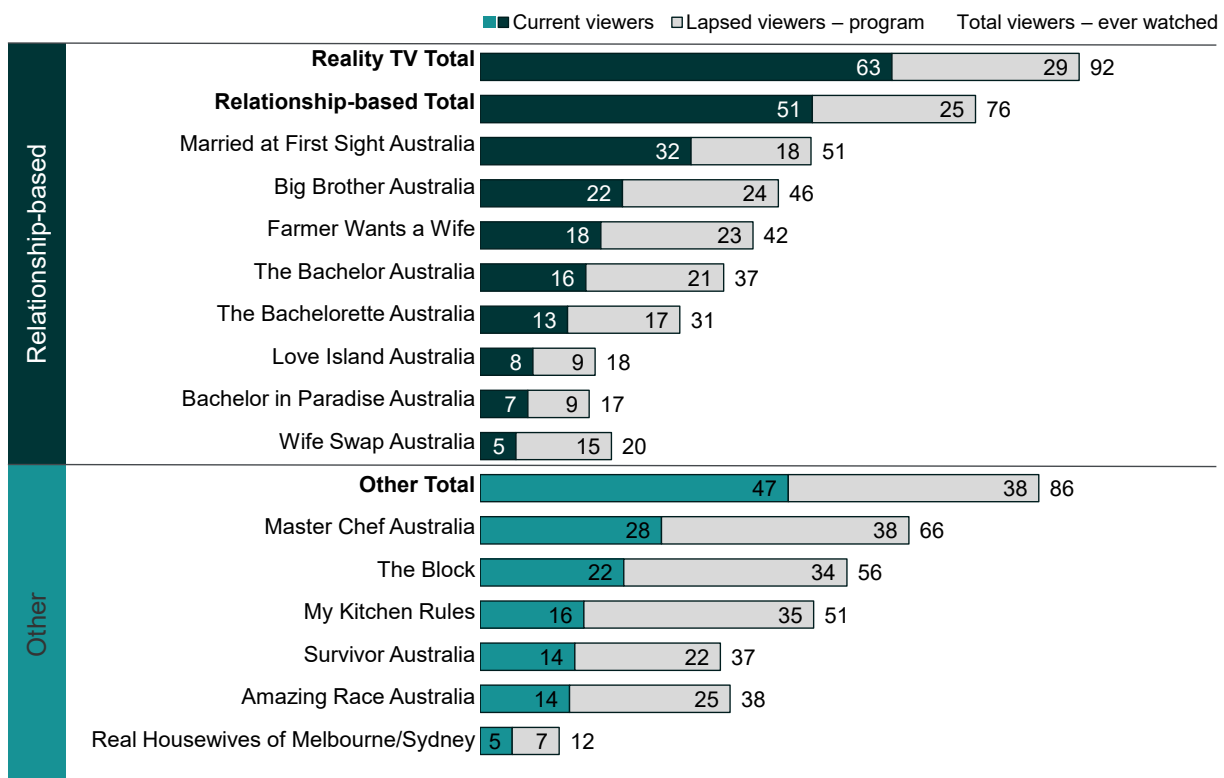


Ever watched relationship-based reality shows, (n=759).

Figure 3 below outlines viewership by program. We note that the following programs were on-air around the time that fieldwork was undertaken:

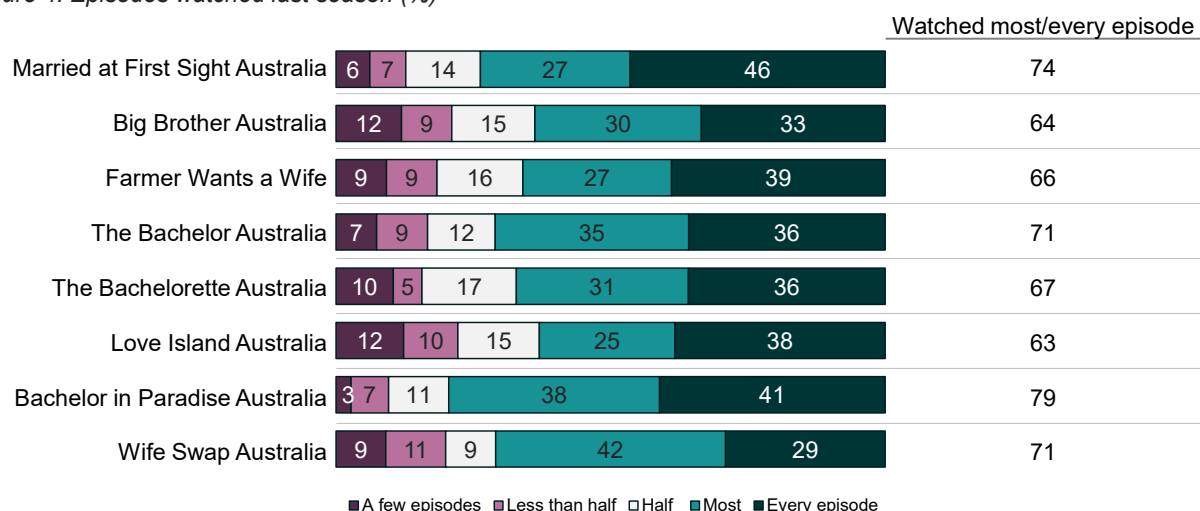
- Before fieldwork: 2021 season of Married at First Sight
- During fieldwork: 2021 season of Big Brother
- After fieldwork: 2021 seasons of Farmer Wants a Wife and The Bachelorette.

Figure 3: Viewership of reality television programs (current, previously watched and ever watched) (%)



Note: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

Figure 4: Episodes watched last season (%)

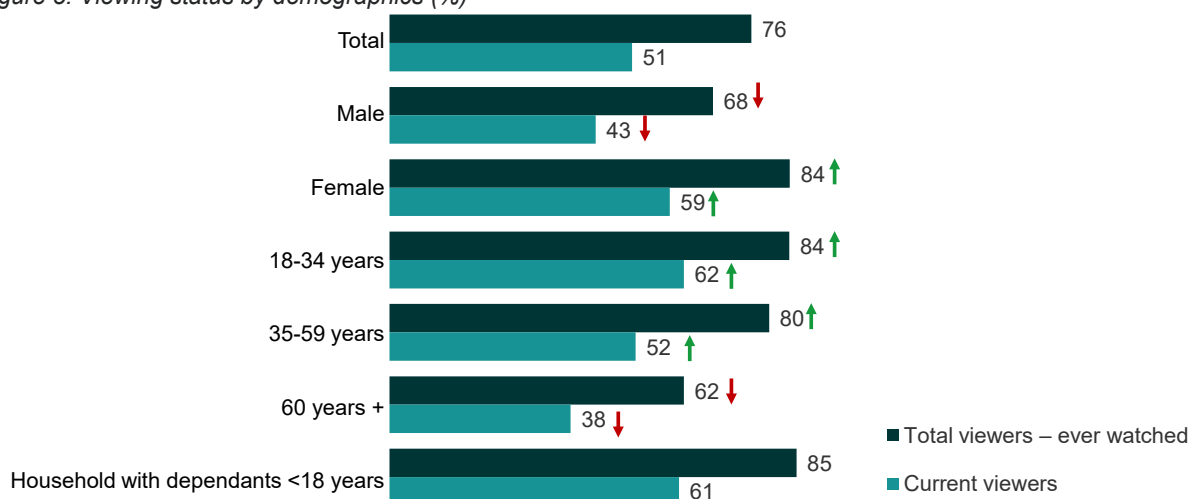


Women and younger Australians are more likely to watch

There are two groups more likely to be watching relationship-based programs: women and younger Australians (aged 18 to 34 years).

- Women are more likely to have watched the most recent seasons of Australian relationship-based programs (84% ever watched and 59% watched the last season), as are people aged 18 to 34 years (84% ever watched and 62% watched the last season).
- Males and people aged 60 years and over are less likely to have ever watched a relationship-based program (68% and 62% respectively). See Figure 5.

Figure 5: Viewing status by demographics (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Male (n=500), Female (n=497), 18-34 years (n=308), 35-59 years (n=411), 60 years + (n=282), HH with dependants (n=272).

Note: ↓ ↑ significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

Watching relationship-based programs is a social experience

Watching relationship-based programs is a social experience, with eight in ten (79%) watching in the company of others at least some of the time. Current viewers typically watch with family and friends, with just over half watching with partners (55%), and almost one-fifth with friends (17%) or dependants under 18 years (18%). Eleven per cent always watch alone, although 39% have watched alone at some point. See Figure 6.

Figure 6: How people watch the programs – alone or with others (%)

	Total	Households with dependants <18 years
Watched in the company of others	79	82
Partner/husband/wife	55	63
Friends	17	15
Other adult family	12	10
Parents	7	3
Dependants aged under 18	6	18
Dependants aged 18 years and older	3	5
Flatmates/housemates	6	1
Neighbours	1	1
On my own at least some of the time	39	36
Always watch alone	11	11

Watching with children

Two-thirds of parents/carers (65%) do not allow children under 18 years to watch relationship-based programs. Overall, just over a quarter of parents/carers (28%) reported that children in their care watched these programs, mostly in the presence of an adult (22%). Some were allowed to watch on their own or with a friend or sibling (10%). The older the child, the more likely a parent/carer is to let them watch relationship-based programs. Teenagers are twice as likely as younger children to be allowed to watch; 58% of children aged 13 to 17 years are allowed to watch compared with 27% of children aged 3 to 12 years. See Figure 7.

Figure 7: Parent/carer permission to watch (%)

	Dependants aged	2 years or under	3-5 years	6-12 years	13-14 years	15-17 years	18 years and older
Allowed to watch Total	35	21	19	30	51	64	70
Watch Total	28	20	19	26	38	45	48
Watch in presence of a parent/adult	22	20	18	22	29	30	36
Watch on their own or with friends/siblings	10	2	4	8	17	27	24
Allowed but don't watch	8	2	0	4	13	19	21
Not allowed*	65	79	81	70	49	36	30

Source: F1. Are your children/dependants allowed to watch reality TV shows about dating or relationships? F2. And do your children/dependants watch reality TV shows about dating or relationships?

Note1 : red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

Note 2: * 'Not allowed' includes the option, No, but they do anyway – 3% of responses. Questions rebased to all parents asked.

2. Drivers of engagement

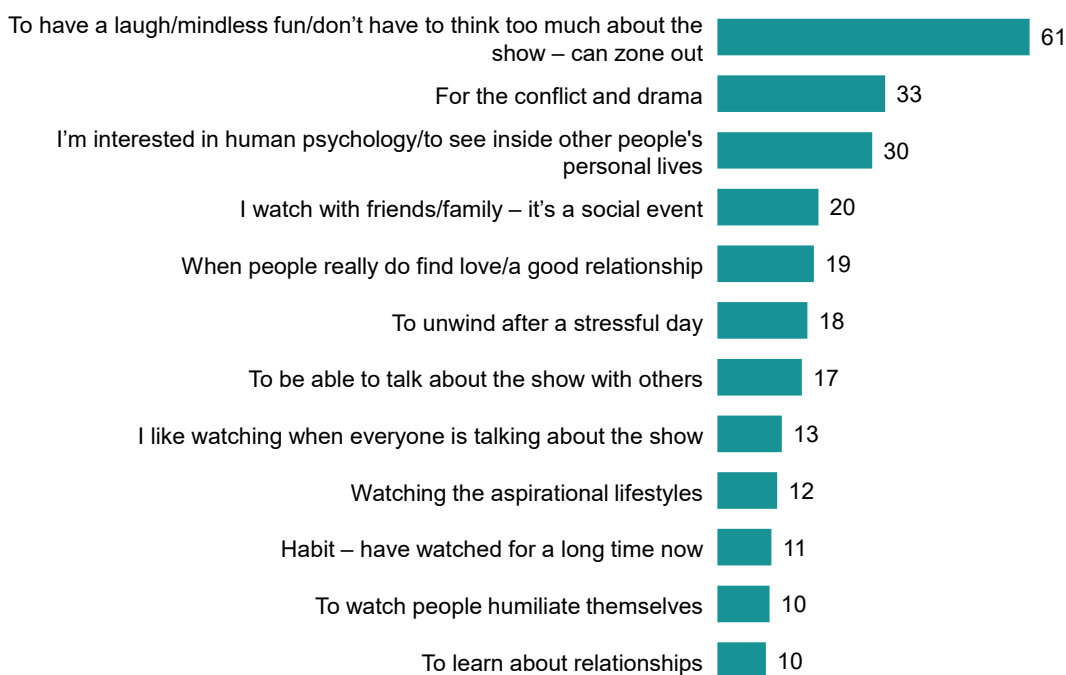
For many viewers, relationship-based programs present a viewing experience over and above simply 'watching a show'. While the genre provides escapism and light entertainment (similar to television programs generally), the viewing experience is arguably more immersive, more social and more emotive. Viewers are drawn to the interpersonal relationships, conflict and heightened drama, and this is often a topic for discussion and debate with family and friends.

The primary driver for viewing is light entertainment

For current viewers, the main reason to watch relationship-based programs is for light entertainment (61%). This is followed by an interest in the conflict/drama (33%). About a third (30%) of viewers report watching relationship-based programs for insights into the lives of others. Qualitative findings suggest that the programs provide an escape, allowing viewers to momentarily leave their everyday lives behind. Like any good drama, a strong interest in the characters and storylines is key to engagement. This interest is perhaps enhanced by the reality television genre, which allows viewers to be a 'fly on the wall' as participants navigate romantic relationships.

For some viewers (19%), watching others find love is a drawcard. See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Reasons for watching relationship-based programs (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001). Based on (n=1,342) responses.

Note Total responses across spotlight programs with up to 2 programs assigned to people who had ever watched a relationship-based reality television.

Conflict and drama are key to engagement, but also polarising

Half of current viewers (53%) are drawn to relationship-based programs *because* of the high drama and conflict. However, others find this off-putting or don't have strong views about this content – one in ten (13%) dislike the drama and conflict, while 34% report that they are ambivalent about it.

Younger viewers (18 to 34 years) are more likely to relish drama (62% love the drama/conflict) while older viewers (60 years and over) are more ambivalent (47% neither love nor hate it). See Figure 9.

Figure 9: Love/hate the drama/conflict on programs (%)

	Male	Female	18-34 years	35-59 years	60+ years	Households with <18 years
Love the drama/conflict (7-10)	49	56	62	55	34	63
Neither (4-6)	39	30	31	30	47	26
Hate the drama/conflict (0-3)	13	14	7	15	20	11

Qualitative findings suggest that viewers who like drama and conflict engage with this content in different ways – some find it instinctively entertaining, while others more knowingly enjoy the way in which set scenes such as dinner parties or eliminations have been engineered to create conflict. Viewers say that over time, tension-filled scenes create a highly pleasurable sense of suspense that keeps them engaged and ready for more. They can also be surprised by how much they enjoy conflict in relationship-based programs when they don't like conflict in real life; emphasising how these programs can sit outside everyday norms.

Viewers talked about seeking out relationship-based programs that depict more positive relationships or programs that focus on a skill or activity as an alternative. This wasn't always successful – lapsed viewers could find that the relative peacefulness of the new programs they trialled wasn't nearly as satisfying or engaging as they hoped it might be.

The social context is critical to viewers' enjoyment

Viewers described watching relationship-based programs 'separately but together' with friends and siblings, messaging each other as the action unfolds, and then debriefing on social media. Others arrange real-life events – such as viewing parties – to bond over their program of choice. Being able to talk about the programs that everyone else talks about can also make catching up around the water cooler at work

If there isn't that drama you wouldn't feel the need to go on. You wouldn't think, 'oh, I want to find out what happened next'. (Current viewer, parent, regional)

I am a sucker for it. It's like watching a car crash and you just can't look away. So that's my go to for reality TV. (Current viewer, parent, regional)

The last season I was thinking, Oh, yeah, I want to watch something else because I'm sick of the bitchiness. And I want to watch some genuine relationships form. But then I actually was like, Oh, it's actually a bit boring. (Lapsed viewer, parent, Melbourne)

an easier proposition. Hot topics of conversation include viewers' views on participants, who they like and dislike, and the strategies that underpin participant behaviour.

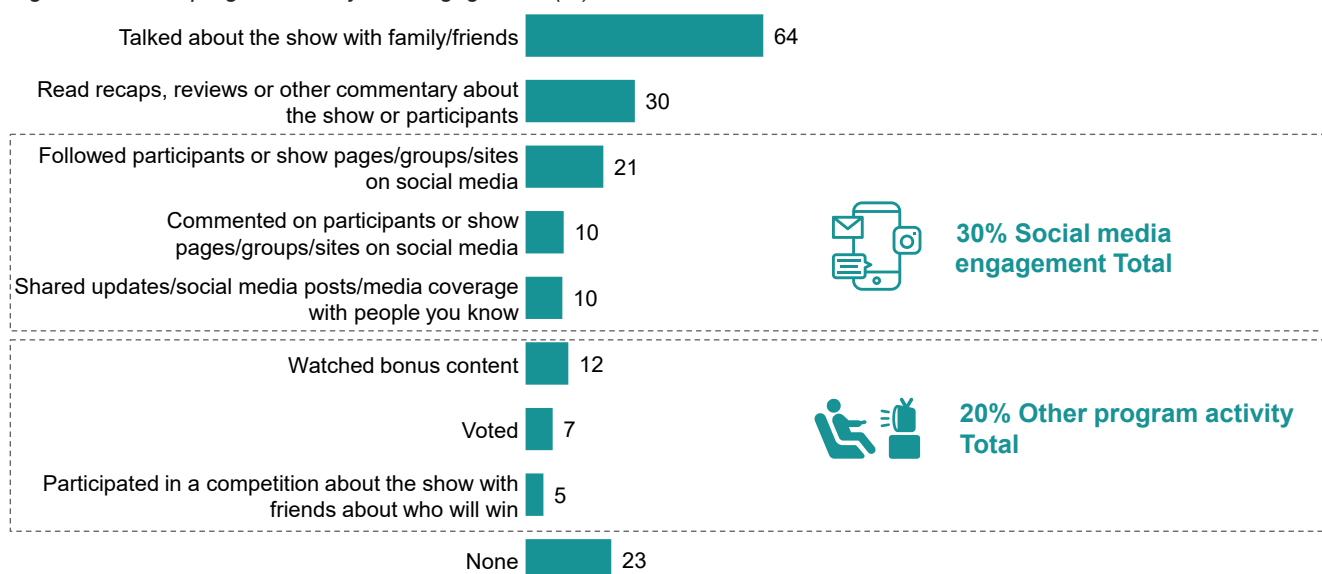
For some parents, watching relationship-based programs with their children provides common ground. They are grateful to have a shared interest and an excuse to spend more time together, especially as children become older. In addition, some see these programs as an ideal way to open up conversations about values – this includes discussing body image, especially with girls and young women, as well as what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships.

And I like to think we're pretty groovy parents. But for a lot of things we're not really in their world. You don't really have conversations and sit down and talk about stuff. So when we're watching those shows I like that we're doing something together. (Current viewer, parent, Perth)

Social media/online are mechanisms for continued engagement

Social media extends viewing pleasure, allowing viewers to engage with program-related content on a different level – almost one-third (30%) of current viewers who specified watching a particular program had engaged with program-related content via social media. Figure 10.

Figure 10: Other program activity and engagement (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Ever watched relationship-based reality shows, (n=759). Source: C2. Thinking about [SPOTLIGHT PROGRAM], have you ever...?

Qualitatively, current viewers reported the following social media activities:

- watching with friends (messaging whilst watching)
- debating/discussing what has happened with family and friends between episodes of the program – which participants are liked or disliked, participation motivations, which couples will last, and so on
- researching a past/upcoming program (checking storylines and cast members)
- researching participants' social media and other online sources to see if their depiction is 'real' (if their motivations, intellect and values are really as portrayed) and if couples are still together
- taking part in a national conversation about a controversial character or incident

- reinforcing their own critical reading of programs – for instance, engaging in commentary on the way in which some relationships reflect domestic violence themes.

3. Reality versus fiction

The ‘reality’ aspect of relationship-based programs is clearly part of their appeal, although not always viewed critically. Confusion around what is and isn’t real is evident, but not a cause for significant concern among viewers. At its heart, the genre is viewed as entertainment rather than ‘documentary’, and viewers engage on an emotional level.

However, this confusion can potentially lead to unfair judgements, as viewers aren’t always critically assessing whether or not the portrayal of participants is accurate or fair.

Discerning what is real and what is not can be difficult

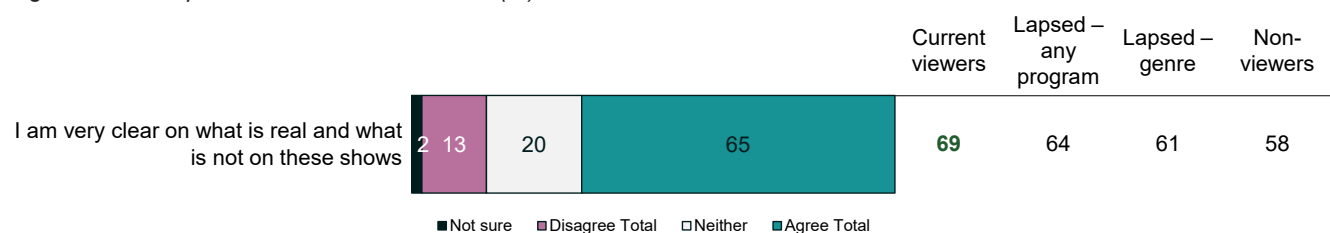
In the survey, just over two-thirds of current viewers (69%) reported they can differentiate between fact and fiction when it comes to relationship-based programs. See Figure 11.

However, in the qualitative study, viewers told us that it can be hard to tell precisely what is real and what is not, and that the interaction between producer intervention and participant behaviour is difficult to unwind. While producers nudge and edit, it’s assumed that participants also have a degree of autonomy over their verbal and physical reactions. Differentiating between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ is believed by viewers to be harder for relationship-based programs than for programs where participants need to have a genuine ‘skill’, such as MasterChef. It is thought to be more difficult to fabricate the ability to cook, and much easier to mimic relationships.

They are edited to portray the drama, with the choice of music, the choice of where they're cutting in and out of sentences. That's where unless you're watching it 100% live [you can't tell if it's real or not]. (Current viewer, parent, Perth)

So the producers have their ways of putting words in your mouth and people are taken out of context, but they also have control over what comes out of their mouths. (Current viewer, parent, Brisbane)

Figure 11: Perceptions of what is real/not real (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers(n=205).

Source: E3. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

Viewers also report that the construct of relationship-based programs discourages reflection – the dramatic music, quick cuts and tense dialogue encourage viewers to lose themselves in the drama. This suggests that even viewers who pride themselves on being aware of how programs are constructed aren’t always watching as critically as they otherwise might. This finding was illustrated in the qualitative ethnographic diaries – viewers

You are watching the show without a filter, this makes you stop and think. (Current viewer, female, 25-39 years, regional)

who had diarised and reflected on their watching behaviour noted that they were surprised by how much more they noticed about the constructed aspects of the programs.

Viewers are highly attuned to the role of producers in constructing characters and storylines

Three-quarters of Australians⁵ (74%) believe that producers control the action on relationship-based programs. See Figure 12.

Figure 12: How programs are controlled and edited (%)

	Current viewers	Lapsed – any program	Lapsed – genre	Non-viewers
Participants control the action (7-10)	3	3	2	2
Neither (4-6)	26	23	22	19
Producers control the action (0-3)	71	74	76	79

Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers (n=205).

E4. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people do you feel that...?

Note: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

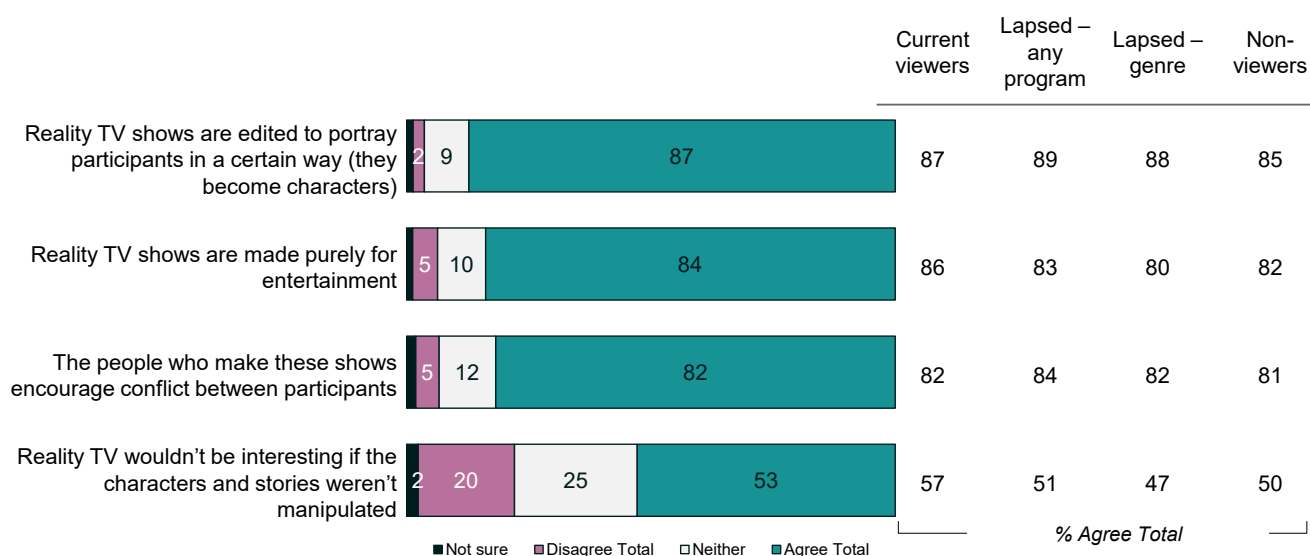
Around 9 in 10 (87%) Australians believe that relationship-based programs are edited to portray participants in a certain way. In the qualitative study, viewers described how participants are shaped into ‘characters’ with a specific role to play. Typical constructs noted by viewers were the ‘villain’, the ‘Aussie bloke’ and the ‘couple everyone loves’. However, whilst viewers are alert to the constructed nature of the programs, they don’t always pause to think about whether ‘characters’ are fair or based on a heavily edited version of participants.

The show's producers obviously have a big influence. You can almost hear them saying, I really want you to focus on this aspect and just really pushing the couples. (Current viewer, parent, Perth)

The majority of viewers (82%) believe that the programs encourage conflict between participants. In the qualitative discussions, viewers said this begins in the casting process, for example, with producers casting couples who are unlikely to be compatible. It also involves producers creating high-pressure situations so that participants will respond more emotionally or behave in ways that they might not have if they had more time or space to consider their reactions. Viewers also believe that producers brief participants on what to talk about and how to respond to others. They point to examples where participants appear to be responding in an oddly staged fashion as evidence of this. See Figure 13.

⁵From this point in the report body, this term refers to the 99% of Australians aware of relationship-based programs in the survey.

Figure 13: Perceptions about real vs. constructed (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers (n=205).

Source: E3. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding. Data <2% is not displayed on chart.

'Detective work' is part of the fun of watching

For some current viewers, part of the fun of watching is trying to understand whether participants' personalities and actions are genuine. There is an element of 'detective work' in this.

This is a highly entertaining topic of debate and discussion amongst family, friends and colleagues. Viewers can undertake substantial research on Reddit and Instagram to determine participants' motivations, and whether their on-screen personality and behaviour is reflected in real life. Cryptic social media posts and comments by former cast members are carefully dissected and analysed for clues.

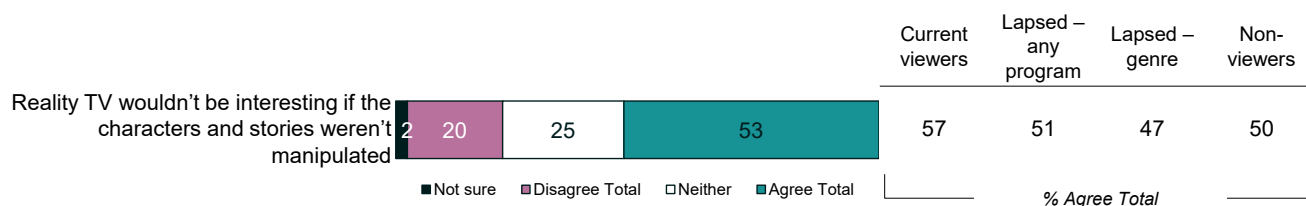
Current viewers have little interest in reducing manipulation

In the quantitative study, 57% of current viewers agreed that relationship-based programs wouldn't be interesting if the characters and stories weren't manipulated. This was consistent with the qualitative research, where current viewers had very little interest in programs becoming more 'real'. Viewers argue that programs would be more tedious and less enjoyable if they weren't edited to maximise coverage of the most interesting and engaging things participants do. They worry that introducing too much 'reality' would mean that they would lose the sense of escapism and outrageousness that has attracted them to the genre in the first place. See Figure 14.

But she's playing the quiet one and being friendly to everyone and being a bit ditz. It's like a murder mystery, and you don't know who's gonna be crossing the finish line. (Current viewer, female, 25-29 years, regional)

Like, on the show, they're portrayed as something. And I just want to know, are they really that dumb? (Current viewer, female, 25-29 years, Sydney)

Figure 14: Manipulation makes programs interesting (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers (n=205).

Source: E3. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note : Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

Perceptions of authenticity also shape the audience's views of participants

Viewers can become heavily involved in the fate of particular participants, whether it's the villain whom everyone loves to hate, the sweet couple who are obviously in love, or the intriguing couple whose fate can't be predicted. 'Barracking' for favourites, predicting who will last the distance or 'win', and trying to get a sense of what intentions and strategies lie behind the surface are all part of the fun.

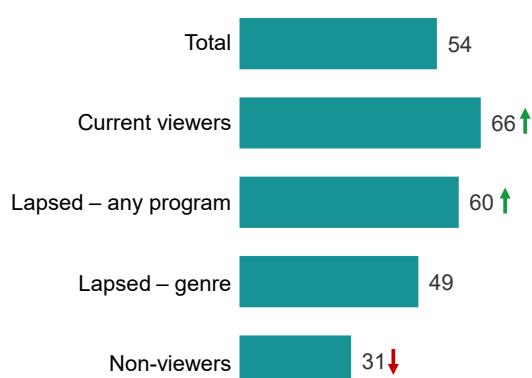
Viewers are also more emotionally attached to participants who they believe to have authentic motivations. They make a clear distinction between participants who have 'genuine' intentions to find love, and participants whose main goal is to seek fame or promote a business. Two-thirds of current viewers 'feel more' for participants they believe to be genuinely looking for love (66%). See Figure 15.

I think there are some genuine girls that want love and have tried every scenario to find love. And they thought, well what have I got to lose? (Current viewer, female, 25-39, Albury)

Some people have really good intentions. I feel that it is getting worse over time with a lot of people who are just going on for fame. I feel bad for people who go on for love. (Current viewer, female, 25-39, Brisbane)

Figure 15: Empathy for participants genuinely looking for love (% agree/strongly agree)

I feel more for people who go on the shows to genuinely find love
% Agree and Strongly Agree



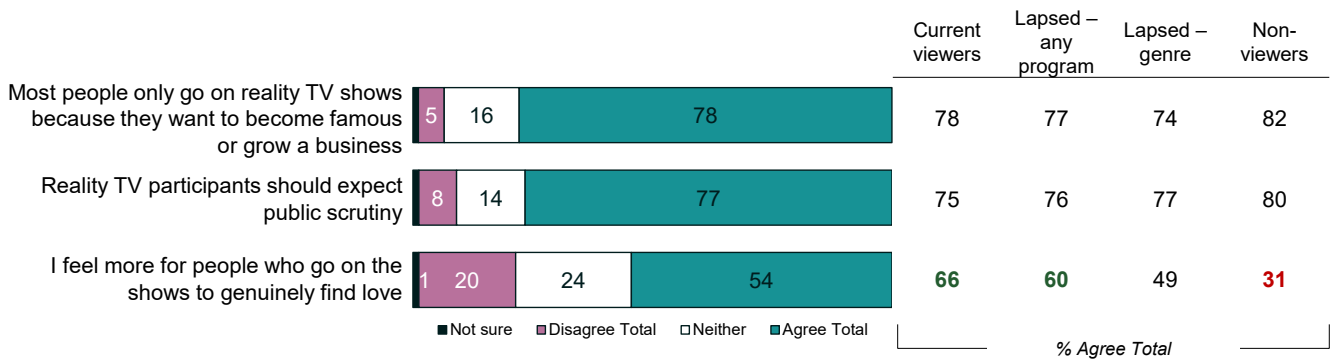
Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers (n=205).

Source: E5. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Showing proportion that agree or strongly agree that 'I feel more for people who go on the shows to genuinely find love'

Note: ↓ ↑ significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

However, in the quantitative study, more than three-quarters of Australians (78%) agreed that ‘most people only go on reality television programs because they want to become famous or grow a business’. See Figure 16.

Figure 16: Motivations for appearing on relationship-based reality television (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows, (n=964), Current viewers (n=509), Lapsed – any program (n=598), Lapsed – genre (n=250), Non-viewers (n=205).

Source: E5. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note1 : Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding. Note 1: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding. Note1 : Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

Note 2: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

In the qualitative discussions, viewers also told us that feeling that they have something in common with participants also increases relatability. This includes participants with a relatable backstory, or participants whose experience on the program has parallels with their own life story such as being cheated on, lied to or bullied. It also includes those who are viewed as quirky and likeable outsiders.

4. Concerns/perceptions of harm

Australians acknowledge the potential for relationship-based programs to negatively affect participants and viewers. Their concerns are for the wellbeing of participants as well as the programs’ potential to promote unhealthy social norms to more impressionable viewers.

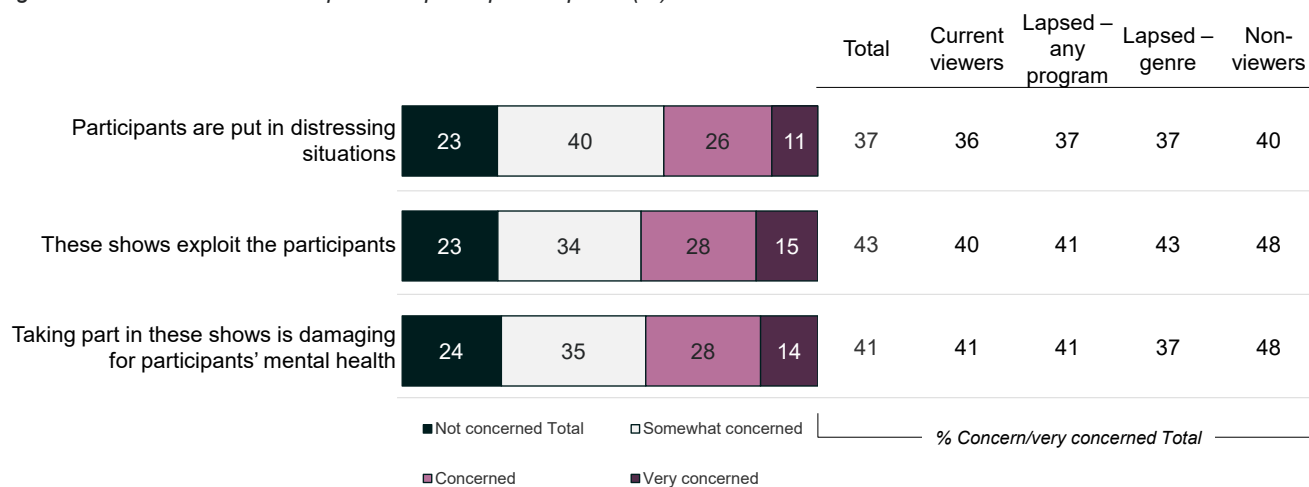
Viewers can rationalise harms to participants as acceptable, based on the belief that participants’ apparent distress might not actually be real, and that producers are protecting participants’ emotional wellbeing. Having this this, there also is an underlying sense that really acknowledging any participant impacts would reduce viewers’ ability to escape into the programs they enjoy.

Concerns about, and perceptions of harm to, participants

Concerns about the treatment and portrayal of participants

Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) Australians have at least one concern about the treatment of participants. This includes with respect to the programs placing participants in distressing situations (37%), exploiting participants (43%) and affecting participants’ mental health (41%). Women are more likely to be concerned about participants’ mental health, and viewers over 60 years of age are more likely to be concerned that the programs exploit participants. See Figure 17.

Figure 17: Concerns about the potential participant impacts (%)



A third (33%) of lapsed viewers have stopped watching for content-related reasons. This includes disliking the way participants treat each other (18% of lapsed viewers – genre), the portrayal and treatment of participants by producers (16% of lapsed viewers – genre) and the amount of drama/conflict (16% of lapsed viewers – genre). In the qualitative study, lapsed viewers said that negative dramatic content, and the nastiness or uncomfortable nature of the programs has increased over the years. See Figure 18.

Figure 18: Content-related reasons for watching less/stopping watching (%)

		Lapsed – still in genre	Lapsed – left genre
Didn't like the way that participants treated each other	54	57	49
Didn't like the way that participants were portrayed or treated by the producers	48	50	45
Didn't really like the amount of drama/conflict	47	47	47
Wanted more positive content	46	49	42
Show became repetitive and boring	45	47	44
Couldn't relate to the characters/storylines anymore	21	14	31
Never watched them regularly – just saw an episode or two	12	7	21
Didn't like a particular show	6	3	10
Other	6	3	10
None of these	2	3	1

Base: 2021 Online sample, (n=1,001). Base: 2021 Online sample, n=1,001. Stopped watching for content related reasons (=198), Lapsed-still in genre (n=120), Lapsed – left genre (n=78).

Source: E2. You mentioned watching less or stopping watching some reality TV shows about dating or relationships, why is that?

Note: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

Reputational damage to participants is believed to depend on their portrayal in programs

The majority of Australians believe that relationship-based program participants should expect public scrutiny (77%). This includes being seen at your worst by millions of viewers – whether it be arguing with others, being unreasonable, cheating, getting very drunk, or manipulating other people. See Figure 19.

Australians acknowledge that participants might incur damage to their reputation because of the way they are portrayed. The extent of this is believed to depend on whether participants are portrayed positively or negatively – viewers reason that a positive portrayal would result in little harm, but a negative portrayal could have significant impacts on participants' current and future relationships or employment prospects. However, viewers can also argue that participants must know that there is the potential to be edited as a 'villain' before they take part in the program – and that participation is ultimately their choice.

Viewer sympathy is influenced by participant motivations for taking part

Four in ten (39%) Australians believe that participants 'deserve whatever happens to them' – however, their level of sympathy changes depending on participants' perceived motivations. Sixty-four per cent say that inauthentic participants driven by fame or money 'deserve what happens to them'. This lack of sympathy appears to be largely driven by a belief in informed choice – overall, only half of Australians (50%) say that participants 'don't know what they are getting themselves into'. Interestingly, lack of sympathy is more noticeable amongst people who haven't watched the programs. One-

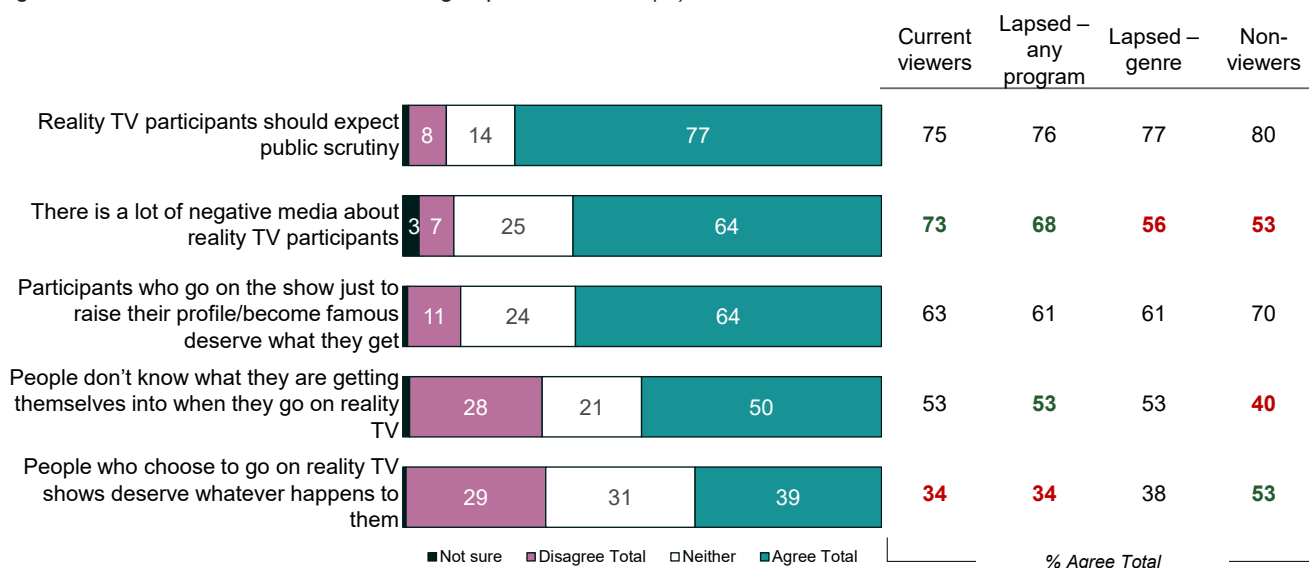
In some of the shows, it is a line that I think is crossed. But in saying that, it still creates great television. You know, you've got that moral dilemma. Do we put these people in a certain situation that hang on if that was my daughter, or sister or mum, geez, I'd be pissed? (Current viewer, male, 25–29 years, Melbourne)

third (34%) of current viewers say that participants deserve whatever happens to them compared with just over a half (53%) of those who have never watched. This suggests that the broader public’s views may be shaped by sensationalist or negative media reporting, and appears to be an illustration of the potential for reputational damage to participants. See Figure 19.

I do enjoy that drama. But I do have a bit of a cognitive dissonance. I'm not saying it's pornography or whatever, but it's kind of like you shouldn't be getting this enjoyment. (Current viewer, parent, Melbourne)

In the qualitative study, very few current viewers had focused on the tension between participant distress and viewer enjoyment until they were prompted to in the group discussions. In this context, some acknowledged what one described as the ‘cognitive dissonance’ between concerns about participants and their enjoyment of the relationship-based programs, and that they might be trading off their own enjoyment for some unfairness to, or poor treatment of, participants. (In contrast, lapsed viewers were highly alert to the issue, and some had stopped watching for this reason.)

Figure 19: Informed consent and deserving of poor treatment (%)



Source: E5. Thinking about these reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note 1: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

Note2 : Data less than 2% not reported in the chart.

The qualitative research also found a number of ways in which viewers rationalise the apparent poor treatment of participants – and hence their own viewing enjoyment. Viewer concern for participants is offset by their doubts as to whether the emotional distress and negative behaviours shown are in fact constructed – and hence not real. Contributing to this uncertainty is the heavy-handed use of music, questions about whether timeframes shown reflect what actually happened, and the extent to which participants have been briefed to respond in particular ways and their characters edited.

In addition, viewers believe that producers take care of participants. There is an assumption that participants are carefully ‘screened’ as part of the casting process to assess psychological stability and resilience. Viewers also hope that producers keep track of participants’ wellbeing during and after

filming, including monitoring for distress during the broadcast of programs and post-production support for participants. Some viewers were aware that relationship-based program participants have faced challenges after the programs have screened, although the extent to which this is true for all was debated.

Concerns/perceptions of harm – adult viewers

Concerns about the potential for relationship-based programs to promote harmful social norms

Two thirds of Australians (68%) have at least one concern about the potential negative effects of relationship-based programs on viewers. This includes being concerned that programs promote unhealthy relationships or encourage people to treat each other badly in real life (53%), promote unhealthy body image (43%), portray women in a demeaning way (38%), don't show diverse participants (29%) and reinforce gender and racial stereotypes (37%). In addition, just over one-third (37%) believe the programs to be distressing for people with experience of domestic and family violence. In the qualitative study, people with lived experience were highly alert to the portrayal of domestic and family violence, including what they interpreted as coercive control relationships, and the way in which women are treated as objects. This can be highly upsetting and, for some, a key reason to stop watching relationship-based programs. See Figure 20.

People who have never watched relationship-based programs are more likely to feel concerned about the abovementioned harms. This difference perhaps reflects non-viewers' exposure to negative media coverage rather than the programs themselves, as well as differing preferences and standards for viewing. See Figure 20.

In the qualitative research, viewers could see the potential for depictions of unhealthy relationships, bullying and gender stereotyping to normalise or even encourage poor behaviour amongst the more impressionable. However, they were as likely to argue that relationship-based programs reflect, rather than drive, social norms, particularly with respect to gender and race. They pointed to programs that they felt reflected the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements (mainly in recent programming from the United States). Some also saw a parallel between the rise of internet/app-based dating and the arranged relationships depicted in the programs. A number argued that having an Aboriginal, bisexual Bachelorette in the (then) forthcoming season is another example of where programs may reflect progressive societal change.

Overall, this study suggests there is potential for these programs to *reinforce* existing harmful norms around power and control in relationships and gender roles in society (or at the least, fail to disrupt these), rather than *create* harmful norms. To illustrate, viewer engagement with social media/online channels appears to reinforce existing views and dispositions rather than disrupt them. For example, viewers who are alert to the issue of domestic violence appear to interpret unhealthy relationships through this lens and are more drawn to online commentary about this. However, viewers who haven't

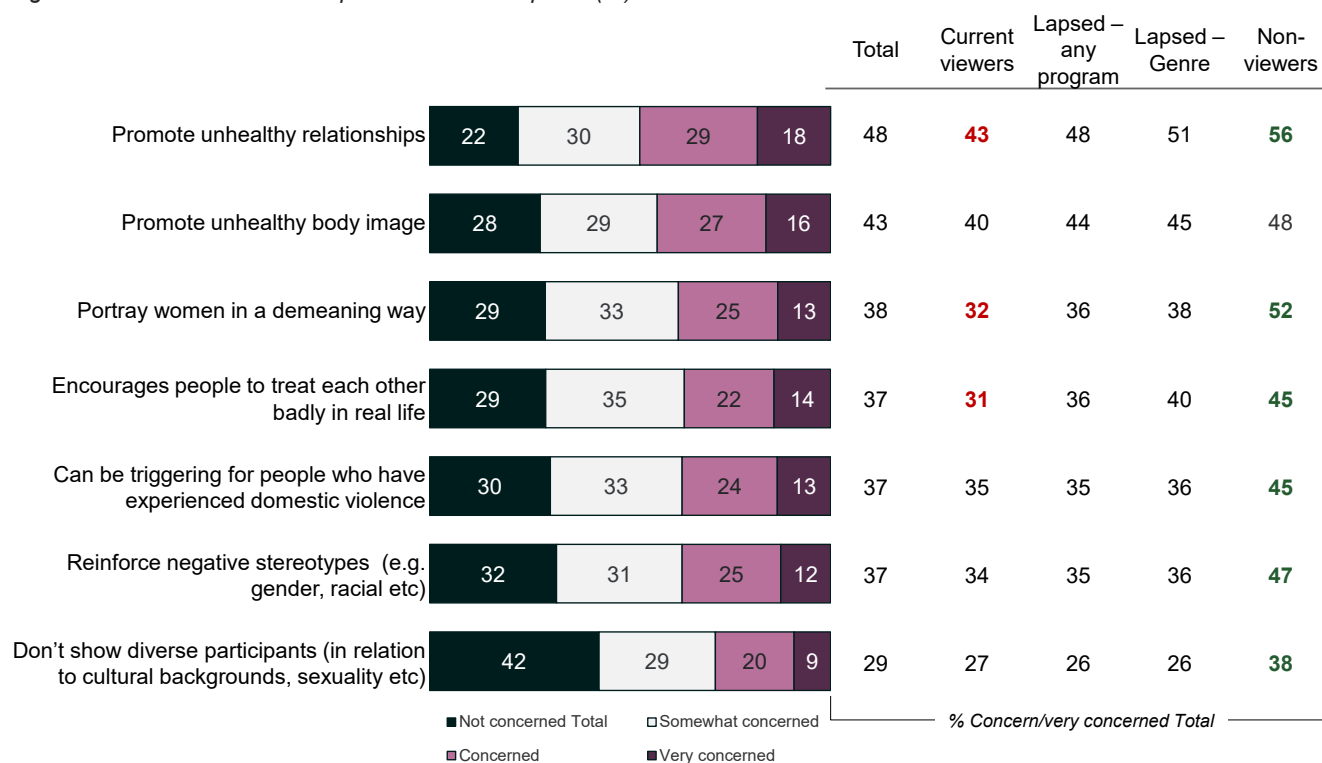
The last season got beyond that where I was like, no, this is actually dangerous for this person to be on television and for this relationship to be portrayed as okay. (Lapsed viewer, parent, Melbourne)

I think it especially for young people, it could be really detrimental long term for these people growing up and going and moving into relationships and thinking certain behaviours are normal, unacceptable and not abusive. (Lapsed viewer, parent, Melbourne)

It's quite a good way of looking at the society. (Current viewer, 25-39 years, female, Brisbane)

thought much about domestic violence didn't interpret participant relationships in this way and hadn't picked up on critical media commentary on the issue.

Figure 20: Concerns about the potential social impacts (%)



Note 2: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

Viewers also report personal impacts

Viewers reported experiencing negative emotions or impacts on their relationships as a result of watching relationship-based programs. Most were to do with concerns about participants, with 25% of viewers having felt upset or angry about the way participants are treated. Viewers further reported that relationship-based programs have had negative personal impacts, including 17% who reported arguing or disagreeing with family and friends. See Figure 21.

In the qualitative study, however, current viewers typically rejected the idea that they personally might experience serious or lasting harm as a result of watching relationship-based programs. For example, they could argue that their family is stable and functional, and that watching relationship-based programs isn't harmful enough to counteract this. In addition, they pointed to times where watching 'toxic' relationships had solidified their views of what constitutes a negative relationship, reinforced their views on what constitutes a healthy relationship, or provided 'teachable moments' when watching with children and teenagers. They believe that any negative impacts will be experienced by

I wouldn't say that they have a big impact on our relationships. Just because something happens on a TV show doesn't mean that it has an influence on us. (Current viewer, parent, Perth)

We like to think we're a stable family. So we don't really take in that negative stuff. If you have a good healthy functioning home life you don't get influenced by what's on the show. (Current viewer – parent, mixed gender, Melbourne)

other, more impressionable viewers than themselves – this included people with less experience of relationships and young people. In contrast, some lapsed viewers reported having left because of concerns about the personal impacts of programs.

Figure 21: Negative impacts after watching programs (%)

		Lapsed – any program
Felt upset or angry about the way participants were treated on the show	25	27
Worried about how this might reinforce or encourage poor behaviour in relationships	24	26
Feared for a contestant's welfare/wellbeing/safety	21	21
Argued or disagreed with friends/family about what you saw	17	17
Felt anxiety/sadness anxiousness about a negative scene	15	16
Felt you should not watch the show any more	15	18
Felt uncomfortable or distressed	10	11
Questioned your own relationships	9	9
Experienced negative impacts on own intimate relationships	4	4
Worried about your children developing unrealistic ideas about relationships	1	1
None of these	40	37

Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001), Current viewers (watched the last season) (n=509), Lapsed – any show (n=348).

Source: D5. After watching these shows, have you...?

Note: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

This analysis suggests that whilst current viewers have concerns about harmful impacts of relationships-based programs on audiences, these can also be fleeting. As mentioned, the dramatic elements of the programs generally discourage viewers from watching in a way that is analytical or reflective. Valuing relationship-based programs as a form of escapism, viewers don't appear to be looking for the *negative* impacts which might disrupt what they find interesting and enjoyable. In the qualitative research viewers could be reluctant to acknowledge possible harms, even when the potential was highlighted. Unless prompted, it appears likely that many viewers will continue to watch relationship-based programs without worrying about potential harms.

Concerns/perceptions of harm – children

Parents/carers are also concerned about the poor role modelling that may appear in relationship-based programs. Around two-thirds (65%) do not permit their dependants under 18 years to watch relationship-based programs – as mentioned, parent/carer permission to watch these programs increases as their children move into their mid-late teens.

Among parent/carers, half (49%) have concerns about their dependants watching these programs. This includes programs promoting unhealthy relationships (61%), and poor body image (49%) and, to a

lesser extent, concerns about reinforcing negative stereotypes (35%) and demeaning portrayals of women (33%). Parents in the qualitative sample tended to rationalise concerns about letting their children watch, for example, saying that speaking with their children about the issues involved and educating about healthy relationships are protective factors that outweigh the risk of young people watching. See Figure 22.

Figure 22: Parent/carer concerns about children (%)

		Dependants watched and have concerns	Dependants not allowed to watch
These shows promote unhealthy relationships	61	71	59
These shows promote unhealthy body image	49	47	50
Watching these shows encourages people to treat each other badly in real life	44	47	43
These shows exploit the participants	38	47	37
These shows reinforce negative stereotypes	35	47	34
These shows portray women in a demeaning way	33	39	32
Participants are put in distressing situations	32	45	29
Taking part in these shows is damaging for participants' mental health	30	42	27
These shows don't show diverse participants (in relation to cultural backgrounds, sexuality etc)	22	21	23
These shows can be triggering for people who have experienced domestic violence	19	21	19
Other	12	0	14
None of these	8	3	9

Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001), Aware of relationship-based reality shows and have child below age 18, Household with dependants < 18 years (n=203), HH with dependants < 18 years (n=203), Dependants watched and have concerns (n=38), Dependants not allowed to watch (n=173).
 Source: F4. What concerns do you have about children watching reality TV about dating or relationship?

5. Viewer and participant protections

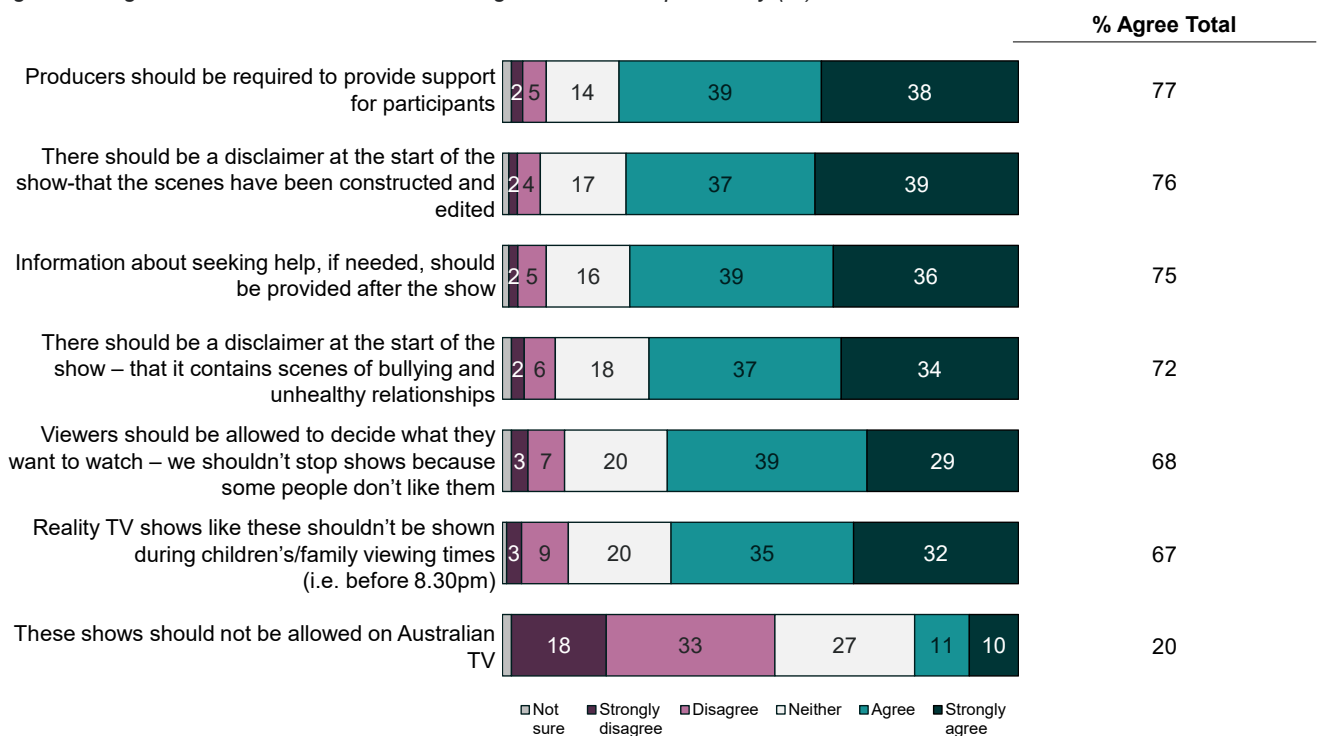
There is an interest in producers/broadcasters implementing greater protections to ensure participant wellbeing; and warnings or help-seeking information to protect viewers.

Additional protective measures for viewers and participants

Australians agree that producers should be required to provide support for participants (77%) and that information for viewers about seeking help should be provided after programs have aired (75%). They also support disclaimers at the beginning of programs that flag edited or constructed scenes (76%), and disclaimers for depictions of bullying and unhealthy relationships (72%).

However, there is less support for measures that place restrictions on broadcast content. Only one in five Australians agree or strongly agree that these programs should not be allowed on television. Almost seven in ten (68%) agree or strongly agree that viewers should be allowed to decide what they want to watch. See Figure 23.

Figure 23: Agreement with statements about regulation and responsibility (%)



Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001), Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows (n=964).

Source: H3. Thinking about reality TV shows about dating or relationships between people...to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Note 1: Some of the sum total percentages may be greater than the sum of the individual percentages reported due to rounding.

Note 2: Data <2% is not displayed on chart.

Interest in more warnings

Just over a half Australians (55%) say that warnings don't influence what they view, and only 6% report

using information about warnings for themselves. Use of warnings increases for households with children – about one quarter (26%) of households with dependant children say that viewer warnings inform their viewing decisions. See Figure 24.

		Households with dependants <18 years
Yes/Depends Total	42	56
Yes, for myself personally	6	5
Yes, but more for my children/younger people in my household	11	26
Depends on the type of warning	26	25
No, they don't impact my viewing decisions	55	41
Not sure	2	3

Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001), Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows (n=964), Households with dependants <18 years (n=268). Source: H1. Do viewer warnings (program classifications or consumer advice) influence your decisions to watch a program?

Despite their lack of personal interest in following warnings, just under half of Australians (46%) believe there could be more viewer warnings for relationship-based programs. People who have never watched the genre are more likely to think there could be more warnings, as are women. In contrast:

- almost one-third (31%) feel that existing warnings are at the right level, with current viewers (35%) more inclined to say this, reflecting their support for the programs
- only a handful feel there are too many warnings (5%), with men more likely to say this
- a relatively high proportion (17%) are unsure, suggesting a lack of awareness and knowledge on the topic. See Figure 25.

Figure 25: Adequacy of viewer warnings (%)

		Current viewers	Lapsed – any program	Lapsed – genre	Non-viewers	Households with dependants <18 years
Too many/Right level of warnings	36	40	38	36	28	38
Yes, if anything there are too many warnings	5	5	5	5	6	5
Yes, they are at the right level	31	35	32	31	21	33
Needs to be more/could be more	46	47	46	44	47	49
Yes, they are ok but there could be more	24	27	27	24	18	27
No, there needs to be more viewer warnings and advice	22	20	20	20	29	22
Not sure	17	13	16	20	25	13

Source: H2. Do you think that the current viewer warnings (program classifications or consumer advice) for reality TV shows about dating and relationships, are adequate for protecting audiences?

Note: red/green significantly lower/higher to comparable sub-groups at the 95% confidence level.

In the qualitative study, current and lapsed viewers worried that warnings that label participants' relationships as family and domestic violence might misrepresent participants. As mentioned above,

while viewers agree that the portrayal of relationships can mimic domestic violence, they are unsure whether this is real or has been manufactured by producers. They argue that it would be unfair to imply that participants' behaviour is unhealthy or potentially illegal, if this has more to do with editing and a lack of contextual information than what participants actually do.

Some felt that a reminder at the beginning of programs about their essentially constructed nature would help people watch more critically. However, this was also typically rejected by current viewers. As mentioned, whilst viewers accept that not all elements of the programs are real, they are reluctant to support interventions which might disrupt their emotional involvement and enjoyment of the programs. Lapsed viewers were more in favour of this type of warning.

Help-seeking information at the end of programs

There is interest in including help-seeking information at the end of programs. In the qualitative study, viewers were positive about the way in which this information helps to ensure that people triggered by content have avenues to seek support. This information could include details for 1800 Respect, Lifeline, and Beyond Blue.

An appetite for contextual commentary on unhealthy relationships

In the qualitative discussions, viewers showed an interest in adding commentary to depictions of unhealthy relationships on relationship-based programs. Viewers imagined that contextual commentary would involve participants or program experts 'calling out' poor behaviour. For example, if one participant commits a particularly nasty act, other participants might say 'that's not on!'

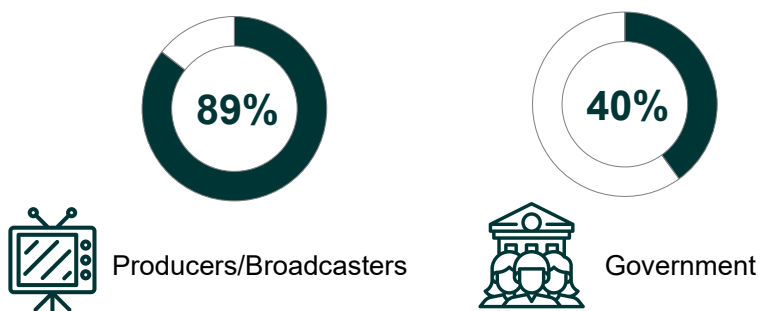
Viewers can believe that the benefit of this would be to disrupt any harmful norm setting that might occur and encourage people to watch the programs more critically. As such, it could be seen as a protective measure with respect to potential social harms of relationship-based programs, for example, reducing the extent to which programs set harmful norms relating to relationships, body image and gender roles.

Producers/broadcasters believed to be responsible for mitigating harms

In the qualitative discussions it became evident that producers and broadcasters are viewed as being responsible for 'making' program content and hence deciding what is ultimately broadcast. It makes sense, then, that Australians believe that producers and broadcasters are responsible for managing the appropriateness of what is shown on these programs (89%).

Only two-fifths of Australians (40%) believe that government has a role in managing appropriateness of relationship-based program content. See Figure 26.

Figure 26: Perceived role of managing what is shown (% agree/strongly agree)



Base: 2021 Online sample (n=1,001), Watched or aware of relationship-based reality shows (n=964).
Source: H4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following have a role in managing the appropriateness of what is shown on reality TV programs? Showing % agree/strongly agree.

Conclusion

Most Australians have watched relationship-based programs at some stage. The programs not only provide light entertainment; they can become a large part of viewers' lives, involving regular nightly viewing, follow-up social media engagement, social time with family and friends, and subsequent conversations with wider social networks. The dramatic content and unique opportunity to delve into the lives of real people are also key drawcards.

The uncertainty around what is and isn't real adds to the intrigue of the genre, yet viewers say they can have difficulties in discerning the difference between what is constructed and what is real. The risk for participants is that actions and behaviours marketed as 'real' may be heavily edited and lacking in sufficient context, resulting in reputational damage and unwarranted criticism. The dynamics of online abuse mean that this may lead to real-world impacts for participants.

Despite their concerns about participant wellbeing, viewers aren't always watching with a view to negative impacts – again, the blurry line of what's real means they aren't always sure that participant distress is real. They also assume that producers are providing participants with appropriate supports, mitigating any impacts. However, there can also be limited sympathy for participants – Australians can argue that participants exercise informed consent in choosing to take part in relationship-based programs, and hence should expect the treatment they receive.

Almost three-quarters of Australians express one or more concerns about the social impacts of relationship-based programs – for example, that the programs promote unhealthy relationships or body image. Whilst most viewers believe that they are not personally at risk, there are more concerns for the impressionable, including children; and also for people with experience of domestic and family violence. Having said this, viewers do report experiencing personal harms, mostly to do with distress or anger over the treatment of participants, but also with respect to their own relationships.

In response to concerns and experience of distress, viewers can and do turn off and move to other programs, and parents prevent or supervise children's viewing of these programs. However, there is a call for producers/broadcasters to encourage viewers to watch critically, and to support viewers who may be distressed by program content, including through warnings at the start of programs and help-seeking information at the end of programs. However, warnings would need to be carefully managed to avoid erroneously labelling constructed relationships as unhealthy, risking exacerbating potential reputational damage to participants.

Appendix 1. Methodology

The methodology comprised 9 in-depth ethnographic interviews with current, lapsed and non-viewers and 10 qualitative group discussions and with current and lapsed viewers of relationship-based programs, as well as a quantitative online survey with a representative sample of n=1,001 Australians aged 18 years.

Qualitative research

The qualitative study involved a combination of ethnographic in-depth interviews and small group discussions undertaken from May to June 2021.

The qualitative group discussions were based on semi-structured interview guides. These commenced with reasons for viewing (and lapsed viewing), explored perceptions of reality, and then discussed harms. To prompt in-the-moment reactions, participants were shown clips excerpted from a number of programs, including My Kitchen Rules, Love Island and Married at First Sight. Whilst conversations were participant-led, moderators encouraged participants to explore tensions in relation to enjoyment and harms.

In the ethnographic interviews, participants were instructed to watch episodes of either the (then) current Big Brother program, Married at First Sight, and in some instances, episodes of another comparison scripted drama of their choice. Participants recorded their initial impressions in an app-based diary, and then discussed these with researchers at the close of their viewing week.

The following sample frame was achieved:

Table 1: Qualitative activity and sample profile

Method	Viewing behaviour	Gender	Life stage	Location
Ethnographic 1	Current viewer reality television (Big Brother)	F	18–24 years	Mandurah
Ethnographic 2	Current viewer reality television (Big Brother)	F	18–24 years	Perth
Ethnographic 3	Current viewer reality television (Big Brother)	F	25–39 years	Melbourne
Ethnographic 4	Current viewer reality television (Big Brother)	F+M	25–39 years	Melbourne
Ethnographic 5	Current viewer reality television (Big Brother)	M+F	25–39 years	Albury
Ethnographic 6	Lapsed and non-viewers (Married at First Sight, fictional self-selected drama)	Mix	Mix	Brisbane
Ethnographic 7	Lapsed and non-viewers (Married at First Sight, fictional self-selected drama)	Mix	Mix	Albury
Ethnographic 8	Lapsed and non-viewers (Married at First Sight, fictional self-selected drama)	Mix	Mix	Melbourne
Ethnographic 9	Lapsed and non-viewers (Married at First Sight, fictional self-selected drama)	Mix	Mix	Perth

Method	Viewing behaviour	Gender	Life stage	Location
Group discussion 1	Current viewer reality television	F	18–24 years	Regional VIC
Group discussion 2	Current viewer reality television	F	25–39 years	Melbourne
Group discussion 3	Current /lapsed viewer reality television	M	18–39 years	Melbourne
Group discussion 4	Lapsed viewer reality television	F	25–39 years	Brisbane
Group discussion 5	Lapsed viewer reality television	F	25–39 years	Bendigo
Group discussion 6	Current viewer reality television - Watch with children	Mix	Mix	Melbourne
Group discussion 7	Current viewer reality television - Watch with children	Mix	Mix	Perth
Group discussion 8	Current viewer reality television - Watch with children	Mix	Mix	Regional, nationally
Group discussion 9	Lapsed viewer reality television – watch with children	Mix	Mix	Regional, nationally
Group discussion 10	Lapsed viewer reality television – watch with children	Mix	Mix	Sydney

Quantitative research

The quantitative research involved an online survey with a representative sample of n=1,001 Australians aged 18 years and over, with quotas by age, gender and location to ensure the representativeness of the sample. Survey respondents were drawn from research panels.

Table 2: Quantitative survey sample profile

	Sample %	Sample size
Total	100	n=1,001
Male	50	n=500
Female	50	n=497
Non-binary	0	n=4
18–34 years	31	n=308
35–59 years	41	n=411
60+ years	28	n=282
Households with children under 18 years	27	n=272
Current viewers of relationship-based programs (watched the last season of at least one of the programs)	51	n=509
Lapsed genre: watched previously but not any program of the last season of any relationship-based program	25	n=250
Lapsed program: stopped watching at least one program	60	n=598
Never watched a program (Australians aware of, and have engaged with these programs through news/social media or other social networks, but not watched an actual episode.)	24	n=242

The survey ran from 11 to 16 June 2021. On average, it took 14 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire took a modular approach, with different questions asked depending on participants' level of engagement with relationship-based programs:

- All were screened to determine their engagement with relationship-based programs (ever watched, if watched last season). For non-viewers, the survey assessed awareness, exposure and other types of engagement (having a discussion about).
- Those who had watched relationship-based programs in the last season were administered a set of spotlight questions for up to two programs (reasons for watching, relatability). Programs were allocated based on recency of watching, and to ensure that a range of programs were addressed.
- Viewers who watched the last season of a relationship-based program were asked questions about who they watched with, benefits and impacts of watching these programs.
- Lapsed viewers who previously watched a relationship-based program but didn't watch the last season were also asked questions about the reasons they stopped watching the program and program impacts.
- Anyone aware of the programs was asked perceptions about the programs, concerns and questions relating to regulation.

The survey instrument was tested using cognitive interviews to improve the questionnaire (for example, reducing ambiguity and ensuring that concepts were addressed comprehensively). Before the full survey launch, the survey was soft launched to test for accurate data collection and approximate survey length.

Data analysis and interpretation

- As the sample collected reflected a national representative profile for age, gender and location, the data has not been weighted. All base sizes are unweighted.
- The report presents data as percentages based on the valid responses to the questions posed. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. As a result, there may be discrepancies between sums of the component items in a table or chart and the total.
- For stacked bar charts, numeric labels for categories that are less than 3% of the total proportion have been removed from the chart for clarity.
- Percentage results throughout the report may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
- Some questions have been filtered depending on the respondent's previous responses (for example, a question asked only of people who stopped watching a program). This is noted in descriptive language. Care needs to be taken when interpreting the results so that the data is read in the correct context.
- Some of the questions provided multiple response options, so total responses may sum to more than 100%.
- Significance testing is applied at a 95% confidence interval to compare the relevant sub-groups (e.g. male/female, current viewers / lapsed – genre) in the quantitative analysis.
- Numbers in red or with a downward arrow, denote results which are significantly lower and numbers in green or with an upward arrow denote results which are significantly higher than comparable sub-groups at a 95% confidence interval.

Limitations of the research

Qualitative findings are based on a small group of research participants recruited to reflect different viewing behaviours. The findings from the qualitative research provide depth and understanding to the issues discussed but, due to the small numbers, are not statistically representative.

Quantitative survey data:

- For the online survey, panel members were not selected via probability-based sampling methods. While quotas were used to replicate a representative sample in terms of demographics, this assumes that a stratified random sample of panel members provides a good approximation of an equivalent sample of the general population.
- As a sample rather than the entire population was surveyed, the data is subject to sampling error. The table below provides the maximum sampling error associated with the total sample and different sub-groups surveyed. As an example, there is a 95% probability that the percentage results will be within 3.1 percentage points of the results that would have been obtained if the whole population in Australia aged 18 years and above was surveyed. A higher degree of sampling error applies to questions answered by fewer respondents and for specific target audience groups.

Table 3: Sample precision table

	Sample %	Sample size	Precision
Total	100	n=1,001	3.10%
Male	50	n=500	4.38%
Female	50	n=497	4.40%
Non-binary	0	n=4	49.00%
18–34 years	31	n=308	5.58%
35–59 years	41	n=411	4.83%
60+ years	28	n=282	5.84%
Households with children under 18 years	27	n=272	5.94%
Current viewers of relationship-based programs (watched the last season of at least one of the programs)	51	n=509	4.34%
Lapsed genre: watched previously but not any program of the last season of any relationship-based program	25	n=250	6.20%
Lapsed program: stopped watching at least one program	60	n=598	4.01%
Never watched a program (Australians aware of, and have engaged with these programs through news/social media or other social networks, but not watched an actual episode.)	24	n=242	6.30%