

This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Bashed at first sight : the experiences and coping strategies of reality-TV stars confronted with celebrity bashing

Reference:

Ouvrein Gaëlle, Hallam Lara, De Backer Charlotte, Vandebosch Heidi.- Bashed at first sight : the experiences and coping strategies of reality-TV stars confronted with celebrity bashing
Celebrity studies - ISSN 1939-2400 - (2019), p. 1-18
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1637269>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1629480151162165141>

Bashed at First Sight

The Experiences and Coping Strategies of Reality-TV Stars confronted with Celebrity

Bashing

Abstract

Reality-TV stars are oftentimes confronted with harsh and insulting comments, a phenomenon known as online celebrity bashing. Existing research on celebrity bashing focused especially on bystanders and perpetrators of this phenomenon and not on the victims. This study aimed to enrich the knowledge on celebrity bashing by interviewing reality-TV stars about their experience and coping with this practice. A total of 13 interviews ($N = 13$) were conducted among the contestants and experts (participants' guides through the experiment) across three seasons of a popular Flemish reality-TV program. The results indicated that all participants had been confronted with bashing comments from the audience during and after broadcasting, with some of them facing quite intense experiences. The participants pointed to the responsibility of the production team, journalists and society in general, for stimulating such bashing comments. Online celebrity bashing generated negative and uncomfortable feelings. Nearly all participants avoided responding to the comments, but mostly opted for cognitive coping strategies, such as relativizing the situation. The results of this study are relevant for prevention and intervention strategies aimed to reduce celebrity bashing practices.

Keywords: celebrity bashing, reality-TV, celetoid, coping strategies, cyberbullying

Bashed at First Sight

The Experiences and Coping Strategies of Reality-TV stars confronted with Celebrity

Bashing

Introduction

Celebrities regularly become the target of various forms of online aggression, a phenomenon known as celebrity bashing (Johansson 2008). Most studies on celebrity bashing have focused on the side of the perpetrators (journalists and audience members) and bystanders, investigating underlying factors that might explain involvement in this type of aggression (e.g., Johansson, 2006, Ouvrein, Vandebosch and De Backer 2017, Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Research on the side of the celebrity-victim is limited to one study which analysed testimonials of big international pop and Hollywood stars about their bashing experience as quoted in online celebrity news articles (Ouvrein, Vandebosch and De Backer 2019).

To the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated first-hand if and how celebrities respond to celebrity bashing. This study wants to shed some light on the online bashing experiences and coping strategies of one particular group of celebrities, namely reality-TV stars. Studying this group is especially relevant because content analyses indicated that both journalists and audience members regularly make fun of reality stars on online news sites or even directly insult them via social media (Deerey 2015, Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). In addition, these celebrities often experience a ‘shot of fame’ (i.e., becoming very famous in a very short period of time) (Rojek 2001), meaning that they are not gradually being used to it, and have no professional team of managers to take care of negative online comments (Wilcox 2010). Discovering more knowledge on the experience with bashing among reality-TV stars, will also offer relevant insights for the production team and

social media developers and the necessary steps they need to take to prevent celebrity bashing.

This study starts with an overview of the literature on the critical treatment of reality-TV and its participants and how this should be interpreted within the context of celebrity bashing. This will be followed by the description and results of our interview-study and their implications in terms for potential prevention initiatives.

Reality-TV

Reality-TV developed as a separate and popular TV-genre during the 1980s (e.g., Ferris, Smith, Greenberg and Smith 2007). It was introduced to handle the problematic economic situation in Hollywood, as it is considerably faster and cheaper to produce compared to movies and soaps (Baltruschat 2009). Throughout the years, the concept and definition of reality-TV changed constantly (Giles 2018). Nowadays, the term covers “gameshows and related series involving both public contestants and celebrities in which they are continuously filmed, either in their natural habitat or in a specially-designed environment” (Giles 2018, p. 67). Regardless of the exact format, reality-TV has always been very attractive to the audience (Ferris *et al.* 2007, Giles 2018). Audience members indicate to particularly enjoy watching ordinary people doing ordinary stuff, as this gives them a feeling of having access to what is normally hidden (Deery 2015) and it decreases the distance towards the TV characters (Hill 2002). Two types of closeness have been associated with reality-TV. Firstly, the decreased distance towards media characters as they are ‘just’ ordinary people, creates emotional closeness and stronger involvement (Kavka and West 2004, Tincknell and Raghuram 2004), which in turn allows increased and more in-depth identification with the program and the participants (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010). Second, the format of reality-TV generates a sense of temporal closeness, formed through the immediacy and liveness of this genre (Giles 2018, Kavka and West 2004). Immediacy describes the impression of being at

the scene and experiencing the events together with the participants (Kavka and West 2004, Sears and Godderis 2011). Liveness is created by the limited time span between the recording and broadcasting of the program (Bourdon 2000, Kavka and West 2004). In some cases, 'maximum liveness' (Bourdon 2000, p. 534-535) will be established by live finals of the show, whereby everyone is watching at the moment the events are taking place, at the same time as everyone else is watching (Bourdon 2000, p. 534-535). In this way, imagined communities are created with people watching the show together at the same time (Kavka and West 2004).

The involvement of the audience has reached even higher levels with the introduction of Big Brother in 1999, as this program was the first to incorporate an audience's voting mechanism during the program (Holmes 2004, Tincknell and Raghuram 2004). Soon, other programs such as Eden, The Salon, Pop Idol and Fame Academy, followed this example (Holmes 2004). Moreover, the programs' own websites and forums added some extra tools for interactivity by, for instance broadcasting live videos via web-cams, allowing direct involvement even when the program was not on air (i.e., Big Brother; Biressi and Nunn 2005) or spreading comments of the participants of the program (i.e., The Salon; Holmes, 2004). This audience involvement is important, not just because it seems to underwrite the idea of the 'reality' (Biressi and Nunn 2005), but also because it allows audience members to contribute to the construction of the reality-TV program (Hill 2015). According to Holmes (2004), interactivity offers a channel that enables a transfer of power and authority to the viewer, as the online comments of the audience will steer others' meanings and interpretations of the program. Reality-TV should then be seen as a co-creation between the producer, the participants and the audience (Hill 2015). This development has become even stronger due to the latest technological evolution giving the audience new opportunities to talk about the program, not only with the people in their immediate surroundings, but with everyone

involved in the imagined community (Nabi, Biely, Morgan and Stitt 2003). Nowadays, social media mostly function as the discussion board for sharing opinions on reality-TV programs. Audience research on Twitter indicate that reality-TV programs regularly pop up in the list of top trending topics (Deller 2011). Some programs are even able to attract more Twitter followers than viewers (e.g., *The Only Way is Essex*; Hill 2015).

Apart from the positive reactions of the audience, reality-TV and *Big Brother* in particular, have been the subject of critical discussions. Analysing the construction of text in *Big Brother*, Tincknell and Raghuram (2004) distinguished three ways in which *Big Brother* (and similar reality-TV programs) promoted the development of different and contesting opinions about the program. Firstly, these programs themselves have different websites and forums on which people can discuss the events and characters. Although this positively promotes the interactivity among the audience, it also stimulates the sharing of negative opinions. Since its introduction as a genre, there have been accusations that reality-TV triggers voyeurism, *schadenfreude* and mockery among the audience (Deerey 2015). Second, these programs are also largely discussed in independent media channels, such as the tabloid press and blogs (Biressi and Nunn 2005), who push the well-knownness of the participants even more (Giles 2018). In that way, the program can become a TV event, meaning that it becomes part of the popular discourse of everyday life (Biressi and Nunn, 2005). The excessive media coverage as a result of this, strongly promotes interaction and involvement with fans, by inviting them to provide feedback on articles. Thirdly, participants of the program are invited for interviews in which they receive the opportunity to tell their own perspective on the events. These perceptions oftentimes differ from the TV-representations and might open discussions as well (Teurlings 2001).

One of the reoccurring discussion points concerns the construction of celebrities in reality-TV, a process known as ‘celebrification’ (Rojek 2001). This term can be defined as the

process of the construction of a celebrity as a negotiation between the media, the audience and the celebrity him/herself (Rojek 2001). The celebrity image that results from this process is an interplay between three types of performances, namely (i) the professional performance of the celebrity in the public world ('the roles'), (ii) the official private performance that is presented in the public world ('the image') and (iii) the performance of the 'real' celebrity in the offline world ('the personality') (Holmes 2005). By constructing celebrities in that way, reality-TV creates an impression that fame is achievable for everyone (Rojek 2001). According to Turner (2006), reality-TV has changed the concept of celebrity. By making ordinary people celebrities, these programs feed the idea that talent, training and history have become irrelevant, even though these elements used to be considered as the essential criteria for becoming famous (Gamson 1994, Turner 2006). This was also reflected in a testimonial of Richie Wilcox (one of the contestants of the first edition of *Canadian Idol*) (2010). Wilcox (2010) described how the production and expert team mostly determine the characteristics of one's TV image and guide them through the transformation process from ordinary to extraordinary participant, a strategy that made it possible to turn everyone into a celebrity (p. 36). Interviews with participants of the British dating reality-show *Streetmate* learned that participants did not always agree with how the production team wanted to present them on TV (Teurlings 2001). While some participants showed resistance, by, for instance, stop answering questions or escaping to places without camera's, this is never shown on TV (Patterson 2015, Teurlings 2001). Some scholars expressed concerns on how this might lead to an exploitation of participants in reality-TV programs, because their voices are not brought in an untouched and ordinary way, but are still largely controlled by production choices and strategies (Gamson 1994, Patterson 2015). Grindstaff (2009) uses the term 'self-service television' (p. 45) to describe how the production team offers contestants the materials and prompts they need to construct a celebrity persona. This idea of reality-TV as 'celebrity-

making machines' (Wilcox 2010, p. 36) soon became the subject of criticism in the tabloid literature. Reality-TV became associated with time wasting, low grade and rubbish (Hill 2015). Whereas tabloids first criticized reality-TV as a genre that distorts the quality of the public broadcasting service (Deerey 2015), the British press increasingly started to judge individual reality-TV stars on their authenticity (Tincknell and Raghuram 2004) and narcissistic motives for participating in the program (Couldry 2000).

Reality-TV stars as the target of bashing

Participants of reality-TV shows can be found at the bottom of the social celebrity hierarchy, referred to as Z-listers (Franck and Nuesch 2007) or attributed celebrities according to Rojek's classification (2001). Attributed celebrities' fame is unrelated to skills or talents and should be distinguished from ascribed (i.e., fame based on royal or class-based lineage) and achieved (i.e., fame as a result of one's individual achievements) celebrities. One subcategory within the attributed celebrities are the celestoids, which typically experience a period of fame that develops and fades very quickly as a result of a process of media construction, which is the case with reality-TV stars (Rojek 2001). Tabloids increasingly wanted to 'prove' that these celebrities are fabricated, by publishing 'revealing' pictures of, for instance, the celebrity without make-up (Gamson 1994). Johansson (2008) introduced the concept celebrity bashing to refer to this kind of mocking with celebrities by journalists (i.e., media celebrity bashing).

Since the development of social media, the audience started experimenting with celebrity bashing as well (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014), leading us to define online celebrity bashing as "all kinds of online attacking and abuse of celebrities by journalists and the audience" (Ouvrein, Pabian, Machimbarrena, Erreygers, De Backer and Vandebosch 2018, p. 4). Research on audience's celebrity bashing comments on news sites indicated that 'fabricated' celebrities, regularly appear to be the target of negative judgements and insulting

comments about their real motives and the authenticity of their TV representation (Corner 2002, Giles 2018). The audience expects participants of reality shows to be ‘really’ themselves and uses self-reflexive viewing strategies in order to catch the moments of authenticity (Hills 2002). One study on adolescents’ opinions toward contestants of several British reality-TV shows indicated that young people seem to reject participants who try too hard to construct themselves as ordinary (Allen and Mendick 2013). These feelings of rejection toward ‘shallow’ stars can also be observed on the websites and blogs associated with reality-TV programs. These channels then oftentimes become a playground for heated discussions and insulting, demeaning and humiliating comments about the participants (Deerey 2015, Tincknell and Raghuram 2004) and reminding them of their Z-list status (Palmer 2005). According to Williamson (2010), scorn toward celebrity constructs is mostly oriented at a particular kind of female celebrity, who became famous through a reality show or a pop-star with drug and alcohol problems (Williamson 2010). The strong interest in the troubled lives of female celebrities is sometimes explained by the fact that it proves that the work-life balance for women is still impossible (Holmes and Negra 2011).

A couple of studies associated this audience bashing with cyberbullying, as it seems to meet with at least two of the three criteria of this behaviour (Ouvrein *et al.*, 2018, Smith *et al.*, 2008). Firstly, the bashing is regularly oriented at this same group of celebrities (cfr. repetition criterion). Gies (2011) adds to this that the audience might be less forgiving toward these types of celebrities as there is no compensation for their failures or bad personalities, which makes these celebrities submissive to the audience (cfr. Power balance criterion). On the third criterion, that is the harmful intention, existing research is less clear. As appeared from several studies, people simply enjoy criticizing celebrities (Peng, Wang, Mo and Chen 2015), as sharing negative gossip about celebrities increases the feelings of the community and make them feel better about their own lives and problems (cfr. Schadenfreude)

(Johansson 2006). Indeed, investigating people's neural activity while gossiping about different targets, the study of Peng and colleagues (2015) found that negative gossip about celebrities generated fun and amusement (Peng *et al.* 2015). These general feelings of acceptance and amusement associated with celebrity bashing seem to suppress empathic feelings toward the celebrity-victims (Ouvrein, De Backer and Vandebosch 2018). Research has shown that adolescents are convinced that celebrities do not experience negative consequences of celebrity bashing, because they are unable to read all comments written about them, and even if they do, they will not be hurt by it, as receiving hate is considered a normal part of a 'famous' life (Ouvrein *et al.* 2017). The question that arises here is whether celebrities actually experience bashing practices like this.

The experience of celebrity bashing

Research on negative outcomes of cyberbullying (e.g., Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder and Lattanner 2014, Smith *et al.* 2008), a behaviour that has been related to online celebrity bashing, pointed to a diverse range of potential short- and long-term consequences of this experience. The meta-analysis of Kowalski and colleagues (2014) on the involvement in cyberbullying among adolescents, brought these consequences together in three groups: consequences on the psychological (e.g., anxiety and depression) and physical health (e.g., alcohol and drug use), social functioning (e.g., decreased self-esteem and self-worth) and behaviour (e.g., low concentration at school). Similar consequences were observed in an analysis of celebrity testimonials of international celebrities' experiences with cyberbullying (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). Drawing on a framing perspective, the latter study analysed testimonials of celebrity-victims confronted with bashing practices, as covered in popular teen magazines. The results indicated that several celebrities talked about their struggles with negative feelings as a result of regular bashing and the uncontrollable character of the

situation. Rojek (2001) also suggested more serious consequences, such as alcohol and drug addictions, but did not investigate this further.

Whereas big international stars are confronted with bashing on a daily basis and over a long period of time, reality-TV stars rather experience just a shot of bashing during their short-lived fame (Rojek 2001). This might make the experience very intense for the victim, who is not yet used to being publicly discussed. The first part of this study will shed some light on the feelings and thoughts celebrity bashing generates among reality-TV stars, how this has an impact on their lives and who they hold responsible for this practice. These questions are brought together into our first research question:

RQ1: How do reality-TV stars experience online celebrity bashing?

Coping with celebrity bashing

According to coping theory (Roth and Cohen 1986) the victim's perception and experience of the situation will determine his/her coping mechanisms. Cyberbullying research distinguishes several types of coping strategies (e.g., emotion-focused strategies vs problem-focused strategies), with different levels of success (e.g., Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner 2002, Lodge and Frydenberg 2007). Emotion-focused strategies aim to decrease the negative feelings associated with the experience, by for instance self-blaming (Lodge and Frydenberg 2007) and are mostly used when the victim believes the situation cannot be changed (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Problem-focused strategies describe strategies for actually dealing with the problem, such as blocking the perpetrator (e.g., Price and Dalglish 2010). The latter technical solution is perceived and experienced as quite helpful among peers confronted with cyberbullying (Price and Dalglish 2010). Blocking people or deleting accounts seems a lot less achievable for public figures such as celebrities, as they need these platforms for maintaining their network with fans (Marwick and boyd 2011). Therefore, different coping strategies might be more effective in the context of celebrity bashing among reality-TV stars.

The framing analysis of celebrity testimonials about bashing gave a first idea of coping strategies used by (international) celebrities. The study distinguished coping strategies on the behavioural, cognitive and social level. The most dominant coping frame was found on the behavioural level and described the ‘biting back’ strategy, representing celebrities fighting back against the bully by making sassy comments (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). This strategy might be dangerous for reality-TV stars though, as it might backfire, because the audience is less forgiving for these celebrities (Gies 2011). Installing technical solutions was also mentioned quite often among international stars, with some celebrities admitting that they (temporarily) deleted their social media accounts. Deleting social media accounts might be difficult for reality-TV stars, as they often use these platforms to try to keep up their celebrity status (Giles 2018). On a cognitive level, celebrities strongly stressed the importance of a positive stand towards the bashing experience, for instance by believing in positive consequences associated with the ways the experience was handled. Ciara Bravo (American actress) for instance, referred to how strong friendships might be developed during that period. Finally, on a social level, celebrities indicated to have looked for social support, particularly nearby (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). Feeling unable to handle it themselves, some celebrities referred to external help (e.g., managers, attorneys) they consulted for dealing with the negative commenting (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). This, however, might be more difficult for reality-TV stars, who are actually still ordinary people after the broadcasting. In that way, they are responsible for finding and testing their own way to deal with the bashing.

The second part of this study wants to increase our knowledge on the coping strategies used by reality-TV stars confronted with celebrity bashing.

RQ2: Which coping strategies do reality-TV stars use when being confronted with online celebrity bashing?

Method

Procedure and data collection

We decided to focus on one specific Flemish reality program in which ordinary people are being matched based on scientific criteria. During the program, the participants have to marry and live together for at least five weeks. This program became a huge success in Flanders, with more than one million viewers (Showbizsite 2018). Moreover, due to the ongoing discussions in tabloid press, blogs, and social media, the participants were pushed towards a celebrity status and had to deal with an overwhelming amount of positive as well as negative comments from the online community. Because these participants became the target of fans' praise, yet also of celebrity bashing, they became of interest for the current study.

We made contact with the show's producers and asked to distribute a call for participants amongst the previous contestants and the experts who were the couples' psychological guidance with whom they regularly had evaluations. A total of 11 contestants (6 males, 5 females) from the first (3 respondents), second (5 respondents) and third season (3 respondents) responded and were interviewed. In addition, two experts (1 male, 1 female) were also able to take part in the study to offer an additional behind the scenes point of view.

Given our goal to expand and further explore the limited research on the experience of reality-TV stars with celebrity bashing, theoretical sampling was chosen (Eisenhardt 1989). Moreover, the objective was to find cases that were relevant to the proposed research questions, namely reality-TV stars, rather than making statements which can be generalized across populations.

Data were collected using qualitative in-depth interviews during the summer of 2018. We used semi-structured interviews which allowed to deviate from the questions to ask more in-depth questions and explore other fields of interest. Participants answered questions such as "Why did you want to participate in this program?" or "Were you prepared for a bashing

experience?”. This research adopts a descriptive approach, because participants were asked to remember and discuss their own past experiences. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was recorded with an audiotape. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed ad-verbatim by the two interviewers. The first interviewer open coded the interviews. Afterwards, the initial codes were clustered under broader categories such as ‘advice’, ‘journalists’, and ‘bullying’. This resulted in a final codebook with 21 categories under which a total of 130 codes were classified by axial coding. Next, a second reviewer coded the transcripts based on the provided categories. Kappa agreement scores were calculated between the two raters and disagreements were discussed. The intercoder reliability pointed to an almost perfect agreement ($k = .84, p < .001$).

Results

The experience with celebrity bashing

The first research question focused on the experience of online celebrity bashing among participants of the reality program.

Experience with celebrity bashing

When being asked about their experience with celebrity bashing, participants automatically started talking about comments they received from the audience (i.e., audience celebrity bashing). All participants had been confronted with different types of online bashing comments by the audience. The most common categories of comments were comments about the physical appearance and about personality traits. Despite this general experience, huge differences were observed in the seriousness and amount of bashing between the participants.

For some participants, comments were restricted to some criticism about their physical appearance or some personality characteristics, whereas others had to restrict their online and offline activities because of the excessive amount of insulting comments. One couple was even confronted with identity robbery and had to ask for help from the police. Most of the bashing occurred on social media, with Twitter on top of the list.

“There was one person who was wondering whether there was something wrong with my ears. He was just bashing on my appearance. Everything you could say about that, he said it, but especially about my ears.” (participant, male)

“At a certain moment, it was like an explosion, in a negative way. Personal messages, mails, via messenger, other social media, personal messages came from everywhere.” (participant, female)

The impact of celebrity bashing

The general experience is that receiving bashing comments by the audience does something with a human being. Comments about the personality of the participant were considered as more hurtful than comments about their physical appearance. Comments about their physical appearance mostly generated frustration, especially among female participants. At the same time though, individual elements seem to determine the exact impact on participants. Whereas some participants were easily able to put these comments into perspective, others indicated to be bothered about what other people think and were more easily touched by the comments. Even though most of these participants also received positive comments, they indicated to be mostly focused on the negative ones. In some cases, the participants really experienced stress and bad feelings as a result of the comments. Several participants kept asking themselves who would do such things and why, looking for reasons to explain the behaviour, which might give them a better feeling.

“That (the comments) gave me a lot of stress and I just wanted it to be over, that the broadcasting was over. Especially on Twitter, people say such mean things and I don’t get why, why do you start bashing people you don’t even know, or they see one episode and they immediately start tweeting and judging about that. Why not thinking about the context?” (participant, female)

“I thought that the worst thing that could happen was that the person you will be matched with would not like you and then after 5 weeks it is over. But that is not true, the worst thing that can happen it being killed online over and over again.”
(participant, male)

Receiving online comments appeared to not only influence the emotional and mental state of participants, but it also had an influence on participants’ offline behaviour. A couple of male and female participants explained that they were scared to go outside because of people’s reactions.

“When was the last episode? One month ago? Something like that. It is only from this week on that I’m able to go outside in a normal way again. You know that people will recognize you, but that is ok now.” (participant, female)

“I did not expect it to be like this, especially not when people are shouting at you, I did not expect that, they don’t respect you. It is like you are some kind of walking storyboard, I don’t know, like you don’t have eyes and ears.” (participant, male)

Reconsidering the impact on their lives, the most given advice for future participants was that they should be emotionally stable and strong prior to participation. A couple of the participants who did not think this through before participating indicated that they would not do it again.

“When people ask me whether they should participate or not, I always say the same thing: “Think whether you are strong enough to do this, both emotionally as on the relationship level.” (participant, male)

“I would not do it again, for me personally, it was too intense and too stressful and my whole life was up-side-down, I had no time for no-one, my emotions, physically and mentally, everything was a mess, I felt like I was smothering myself.” (participant, female)

Preparation for the experience

The impact and confrontation with celebrity bashing might depend on one’s preparation for it. Preparation and guidance of the production team was mostly focused on the practical preparation regarding the audience and potential media celebrity bashing, with for instance discussing social media settings and teaching them how to handle tricky questions of journalists. Whereas those participants who had the least confrontation with celebrity bashing

described this supervision as sufficient, the most targeted participants were rather disappointed in it.

“We had to install our Facebook in a way that people could only add you as a friend if you had at least one friend in common. So, we all did that, but at a certain moment I had more than 1500 messages for friendships of which 1000 had at least one friend in common.” (participant, male)

“A couple of weeks before broadcasting, they give you a media training. (...) Afterwards, it appeared that they just take a look at the planning for the next weeks together with you. It is not like they are offering you a specific way or some tools or psychological material that help you to prepare for it.” (participant, male)

Mental preparation does not seem to be included in the preparation offered by the production team. Nevertheless, most participants agreed that one can never really be mentally prepared for the experience. Even participants who were well aware of the fact that negative comments will be a part of the involvement in a reality-TV program, underestimated the impact.

“You cannot really prepare for that, or I don’t know how to prepare for that, or they didn’t explain how to prepare for that. I don’t really know whether it is possible.” (participant, male)

Responsibilities

Participants ascribed the responsibility for online bashing practices by the audience to three groups: The production team, journalists, and society in general.

To start with the role of the production team. Several participants indicated that the production team is partly responsible for the bashing, because they have the most powerful position in constructing the participants’ image and thus in how they will be perceived among the audience. Their own input was rather limited.

“They say you have a voice in the program. You have that voice, but not in the content. You have a voice at the first level, for instance when your hair is not looking good. Or when you had a moment that was a bit embarrassing, then you can ask them to leave it out, and they will leave it out. But if you say, I don’t like being portrayed like that, they will not listen.” (participant, male)

“They are quite clear about that: You have a voice, but they decide what will come on TV, if you don’t want it to be on TV, then don’t say it. They also say, if you two will

have a fight or the negative things in your relationship, you using a curse word, that will be on TV. So you know what you can do and say and what not.” (participant, male)

Almost all participants could think of a least one aired scene they were not really happy with. This unhappiness mostly dealt with the scene selection and the time line editing. Several participants had asked for changes after seeing the beta-version of the episode because they were afraid for misinterpretations, but received an argued answer that this could not be adapted. One participant called it becoming “a play toy of the production”. Although the interviewees seem to understand that the production team has to bring a story that sells and that they cannot change too much about the plot of that story, they did not understand why some ordinary stuff could not be changed.

“I think we asked one time to change something. It was about a moment, a time plan. (...). There were recordings that were made later but that were put earlier in the episode (...). They cut and paste a bit with the days. That is the power of the production, they can make whatever they want.” (participant, male)

“We had a feeling that they thought it was very important to create the impression that they were worried about us, but that they were actually not really worried about us.” (participant, male)

According to the participants, the production team tries to construct stereotypical characters and does not want to deviate from those images. These stereotypical constructs do not always or not completely match with their actual persona. For most participants, there was not a complete contradiction with how they really are. According to one expert, reality-TV just doubles or triples your most prominent characteristics.

“We felt like they needed different storylines, that is how we saw it. There was the ‘boring story’, the ‘success story’, the ‘up and down story’ etc., This was correct in some way, but in other ways, it was not.” (participant, male)

“Everything went very well between us, but I had a feeling that they were trying to look for some negative things and I didn’t like that because there was nothing negative to find and then they try to find something that might make people think that there is something going on.” (participant, female)

“You have to realize that they always need one bogeyman. So even when you have nine people who seemed very nice and one who was a little less nice, then that

person will become the bogeyman and that one will be very bad and the rest will be quite good.” (participant, male)

The second group that was held responsible for the bashing comments were journalists. Almost all participants had at least one bad experience with a journalist. The media bashing examples that were discussed were less explicit compared with audience comments and mostly dealt with journalists stretching the truth of the events or not using participants’ feedback after reading the preview of the article. According to the participants, this behaviour is driven by the strong need for sensation and the high pressure on journalists. The experts added to this, that in that way, media celebrity bashing can lay a basis for audience bashing, because their stretched truth opens up discussions among the audience.

“There was one time, I had told a journalist about a fight that we had. And then I read the preview of the article and it said “crisis among (names of the couple)”. I contacted them and asked them not to call it a crisis (...). They said that I didn’t have to worry about it, they would adapt it. The next day the magazine was out and on the front page it said “Crisis among (names of the couple).” (participant, female)

“There are several newspapers that just post tweets on their website as it is news. In that way, it has an even bigger reach. (...). For me, this is crossing a line because the newspaper is doing like the opinion of one person on Twitter is so important that the whole Flanders should know it.” (expert)

Thirdly, some responsibility was found in society in general. Several participants and the experts in particular referred to developments in society as the basis for celebrity bashing. Some of them used the term ‘dehumanization’ to describe how people seem to lose their moral senses online. They referred to the fact that people seem to think that celebrities are no human beings, but actors in a soap who have no feelings, so it is okay to bash them.

“It is like those celebrities are no human being anymore, it is a celebrity. You have the people and you have the celebrities, that is so ridiculous. Every famous person you talk with says the same, they have the same feelings.” (participant, male)

“You can discuss about that, indeed, you can say that when you come on TV, you should be able to deal with the comments. But then I think, when your child is being bullied because it is black, should it then change its colour? I don’t see the logic behind that.” (participant, female)

Coping with celebrity bashing

The second research question of this study focused on how participants of the reality-TV program dealt with the experiences of celebrity bashing and which coping strategies they had used.

Coping strategies

Different coping strategies were discussed by the participants. On the behavioural level, participants differed in their intentions to read the comments about themselves. Whereas some participants invested a lot of time in reading every comment about them, others did their best to avoid reading the comments about themselves. However, this was not always easy, because even if they did not read the comments themselves, they oftentimes heard the most popular comments from their friends and family.

“I wanted to follow everything, I just wanted to know what people were writing. Also, when there appeared articles about us on news sites and the reactions to those articles, I read everything. Also on Twitter, even during the episode I searched for the hashtag (name of the program).” (participant, female)

“I made a query in GoPress “(name of the program)” and then for three months I looked up that query every day to read everything that was written about me, because for me it was very important to know.” (participant, male)

Some participants even developed their own system for reading the comments.

“I always read five comments. If I then saw that there were 200 more comments, I knew that these 200 would be the same. When you read five or six comments, you know that there are two good comments, three bad comments or the other way around, so the rest will be the same.” (participant, male).

After reading the comments, the most common strategy was not reacting to it.

Participants believed that reacting to the comments would only make it worse, with people then reacting to your comments again. Nevertheless, several of them recognized that it is not always easy to stay quiet when reading such things about yourself.

“That comment hit me. I was on my pink cloud, so the first thing I thought was, how do I have to say it, my defensive me, “You stupid calf, Look at yourself”, something

like that. That is the first thing you think, but that is normal, I guess." (participant, female)

On the cognitive level, relativizing was the most often mentioned coping strategy.

Most participants relativizing the comments explained that those bashers do not know them in real life and should not judge them. Moreover, they pointed to the fact that the context of the aired events is so limited, that it does not allow to say something valuable about the personality of the participants. Remarkably, men seemed to be better able at relativizing their bashing experiences than women. Although they both used the same strategies for relativizing ("Those people don't know you, we know what happened" etc.), women needed to invest more time in this cognitive coping compared to men.

"They don't know who you really are and they only see such a small piece of the whole picture, so who are they to judge? I try to reassure myself in this way." (participant, female)

"We know that they have so many hours of recording during those five weeks and so what you see on TV are only small moments, so you know what is behind it." (participant, female)

Lastly, social support was also considered to be very important. Participants regularly referred to their social network helping them through the experience. This network consisted of friends and family, as well as their new partner. This was also highly promoted by the experts involved in the program. Having a good social network to rely on appeared to be one of the criteria that are checked during the pre-selections of the candidates.

"There is not a general formula on how to deal with bashing, but it is really important to talk about it, not only with us, but also with the people in their immediate surroundings, the people that are really important for them. This can help to give it a place." (expert)

Prevention and interventions for celebrity bashing

Apart from coping on the individual level, participants also reflected on initiatives to prevent online celebrity bashing. Whereas some participants were convinced that there is not

much that can be done to prevent celebrity bashing, others reflected on some kinds of interventions. Although several of them considered deleting interactive sections on news sites as an option because it has no added value for the news, doubts rose on the achievability of it and the problems this might cause for freedom of speech.

“Just give people a forum without bothering other people. It is like (popular local newspaper) where people who want to read the reactions can do that, but people who don’t care, don’t read them. The people who can write something are happy that they can vent, let them do this. Freedom of speech!” (participant, female)

At the same time, social media was considered as an uncontrollable environment.

Some participants thought about ways of moderating these kinds of platforms, but always concluded that this was impossible.

“I don’t think that is possible for social media. Where would you draw the line? That is very difficult. I don’t think so. You should just stay away from social media if it is bothering you that much.” (participant, male)

Finally, the experts involved in the program referred to awareness-increasing campaigns among both the audiences and the journalists, as the best option for prevention.

“I don’t think that more rules are needed, but I do believe that there is a need for more awareness about what the impact could be of what people are writing. People don’t realize that.” (expert)

“I should say that the media should be a bit more integer. I think that nowadays, we live in a culture of gathering likes on Facebook, as many as possible. So, what do you need? A provoking title? And the content is not important anymore. So, I think that the journalistic training should do something about ethics” (expert)

Discussion

Although celebrities are the key figures in cases of online celebrity bashing, existing research on this phenomenon predominantly concentrated on the other actors involved, the audience performing the behaviour, and adolescent bystanders being confronted with it while lurking through celebrity news (e.g., Ouvrein *et al.* 2018, Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Learning more about the impact on the celebrity-victim is a necessary step to

understand the full picture of celebrity bashing. By conducting interviews with participants of a Flemish reality-TV program, this study aimed to explore the feelings, thoughts and coping strategies of reality-TV stars confronted with bashing practices.

Focusing on the experience and feelings when being confronted with online celebrity bashing, the results for our first research question indicated that celebrity bashing happened among all participants, both male and female. We talked with both men and women who became the target of a wave of comments. Based on these interviews, no differences were observed in the regularity with which men versus women were confronted with celebrity bashing. This is in contrast with existing research of Williamson (2010) who found that especially (vulnerable) women become the victim of online celebrity aggression.

Regardless of the amount of comments, the confrontation with celebrity bashing generates negative and uncomfortable feelings amongst the participants. These results follow the findings in the testimonials of international stars confronted with bashing (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). Although some participants referred to some behavioural outcomes as well, such as staying inside, most of the negative consequences were concentrated on the emotional level. In that way, our results differ from existing research on intense behavioural outcomes associated with cyberbullying (e.g., Kowalski *et al.*, 2014) and from the suggestions made by Rojek (2001), who expected alcohol- and drug addictions to be associated with the celebrity bashing experience. This, however, may have to do with the different time frame, with reality-TV stars experiencing this practice for only a really short period, until their fame has passed (Rojek 2001).

Although several participants were aware of the bashing potential and tried to prepare themselves, they still underestimated the real impact of it. Despite preparation efforts, the general conclusion was that one can never be completely mentally prepared for this experience. This finding reflects the idea of the uncontrollable character of celebrity bashing,

as was also described in the celebrity testimonials in the study of Ouvrein and colleagues (2019). Moreover, analysing the experience with celebrity bashing as described by the participants of our study, it seems that celebrity bashing meets all the criteria that are generally associated with cyberbullying (Smith *et al.* 2008). Firstly, the behaviour is experienced as hurtful by the celebrity-victim (cfr. intention to hurt criterion). Second, the behaviour occurs repeatedly. Participants in our study referred to the large amount of negative comments, especially compared with the amount of positive comments (cfr. repetition criterion). This, in combination with the fact that even celebrities feel powerless in front of the dominant media, with the production team only giving them a very limited voice, with journalists not listening to their feedback, and the massive online audience placing 1,000's of reactions, creates a situation in which the celebrity-victim has difficulty defending him or herself (cfr. power imbalance criterion). Nevertheless, some authors added some extra criteria for cyberbullying, which seem to point to differences between cyberbullying and celebrity bashing. Greene (2000) for instance, states that cyberbullying mostly happens within a familiar context, such as between peers who know each other in real life. Celebrity bashing clearly differs from cyberbullying on this point, as the perceived distance between the perpetrator and the celebrity-victim is quite high and this has an influence on the experience with this type of aggression among bystanders. Previous research indicated that celebrity bashing is perceived as more acceptable and even entertaining compared with cyberbullying among peers (Peng *et al.* 2015, Whittaker & Kowalski 2014). Due to this higher perceived distance, audience members seem to show less empathy and are less able to correctly estimate the potential impact of the behaviour (Ouvrein *et al.* 2017; Ouvrein *et al.* 2018). These attitudes might more easily convince people to start experimenting with online celebrity bashing.

The second part of the study concentrated on how these reality-TV stars were dealing with celebrity bashing and which coping strategies they used. The best behavioural response according to the interviewees, is not reacting. This is in contrast with big international stars' advice to bite back by making another sassy comment (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). Participants refused to react because they were aware of their fragile position among the audience and small chances for their forgiveness (Gies 2011). Participants thus mostly described cognitive, and in particular, emotion-focused coping strategies (Lodge and Frydenberg 2007), which is also in line with existing knowledge on these strategies, as these strategies are mostly adopted when one thinks it is impossible to change the situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The most common cognitive coping strategies were relativizing and looking for an explanation. Moreover, participants highly valued social support which also follows the findings of the testimonial study among big international stars (Ouvrein *et al.* 2019). Individual coping strategies appeared to be the most important way of coping, as participants did not find a good way to handle the problem with prevention strategies on a society level.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, we only interviewed participants of one specific reality program. Although this program is very popular in Flanders and generates many online discussions, the results cannot be generalized to all reality-TV stars. The program we focused on differs from reality-TV competition games in which the competitiveness among the audience might generate different types of bashing. Moreover, the program offers more insights in participants' private lives compared with other types of reality-TV programs, which allows more in-depth and personal commenting with more intense consequences. Future research should include different types of reality-TV programs and compare participants' experiences. Moreover, future research might aim to include more participants who are individually involved in the program, allowing a more in-depth comparison of the experience and coping strategies between male and female participants.

Based on our results, some suggestions can be made about potential differences, but the fact that the program is organized around a couple (man and woman) who sometimes experience the bashing as a couple instead of as individuals, makes it difficult to make real conclusions about this. Moreover, it might be interesting for future research to complementary analyse the media coverage of these bashing practices and whether this is inspired by a gendered perspective. Secondly, although we tried to create a comfortable environment, social desirability toward the production team might have influenced participants' stories. As was clear from our results, participants perceive the production team as a very powerful actor in how they are perceived among the audience. Thus, it is possible that participants were holding back in what they were willing to tell us about the production team.

Nevertheless, the results of this study help to deliver a better understanding of the impact of online celebrity bashing for the celebrity-victims. Our results illustrate that celebrities experience negative consequences as a result of bashing. These results are relevant for practitioners looking for effective prevention and intervention initiatives in order to reduce celebrity bashing. Reality-TV stars describing how they feel as a result of bashing might help to create more awareness about the impact of this type of aggression. Moreover, information on the coping strategies used by reality-TV stars might be useful for practitioners trying to guide celebrities through this experience, such as the experts involved in the program. Lastly, our results provide valuable information for the production team of reality-TV programs as it offers them insights in how the participants experience the interaction with the production team and on which points the relationship with them can be improved.

References

- Allen, K. and Mendick, H., 2012. Keeping it Real?: Social Class, Young People and Authenticity in Reality TV. *Sociology*, 47 (3), 460-476.
- Baltruschat, D., 2009. Reality TV formats: The Case of Canadian Idol. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 34 (1), 41–59.
- Biressi, A. and H. Nunn., 2005. (eds) *Reality TV: Realism and revelation*. London: Wallflower.
- Bourdon, J., 2000. Live television is still alive. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22 (5), 531-556.
- Corner, J., 2002. Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions, *Television and New Media*, 3 (3), 255–69.
- Couldry, N., 2000. *The place of media power: Pilgrims and witnesses in the media age*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Deery, J., 2015. *Reality TV*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Deller, R., 2011. ‘Twittering On: Audience Research and Participation Using Twitter.’ *Participations*, 8 (1).
- Eisenhardt, K. M., 1989. Building theories from case study research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 532–550.
- Ferris, A. L., Smith, S.W., Greenberg, B. S. and Smith, S. L., 2007. The content of reality dating shows and viewer perceptions of dating. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 490–510.
- Franck, E. and Nuesch, S., 2007. Avoiding “Star Wars”-celebrity creation as media strategy, *Kyklos*, 60 (2), 211–230.
- Gamson, J., 1994. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gies, L., 2011. Stars behaving badly. *Feminist media studies*, 11 (3), 347–361.

- Giles, D. C., 2018. *Twenty-First Century Celebrity: Fame In Digital Culture*, pp. 207 – 235.
- Greene, M.B., 2000. Bullying and harassment in schools. In: R.S. Moser and C.E. Franz (eds.) *Shocking violence: Youth perpetrators and victims – A multidisciplinary perspective* (pp. 72-101). Springfield, IL: Charles. C. Thomas.
- Grindstaff, L., 2009. Just be yourself – only more so: Ordinary celebrity in the era of selfservice television. In V. Mayer, M. J. Banks and J. Thornton Caldwell (eds.), *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries* (pp. 44–57). New York, NY & London, UK: Routledge.
- Hill, A., 2002. Big Brother: The Real Audience, *Television and New Media* 3 (3), 323–340.
- Hill, A., 2015. *Reality TV. Key ideas in media and communication studies*. London: Routledge.
- Hills, M., 2002. *Fan cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Holmes, S., 2004. But this time you choose. Approaching the 'interactive' audience in reality TV. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7 (2), 213-231.
- Holmes, S., 2005. “Off-guard, Unkempt, Unready”? Deconstructing Contemporary Celebrity in Heat Magazine. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 19 (1), 21–38.
- Holmes, S. and Negra, D., 2011. *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*. New York: Continuum.
- Johansson, S., 2008. Gossip, sport and pretty girls. What does “trivial” journalism mean to tabloid newspaper readers? *Journalism Practice*, 2 (3), 402–413.
- Johansson, S., 2006., Sometimes you wanna hate celebrities. In: S. Holmes and S. Redmond (eds.) *Framing celebrity: new directions in celebrity culture*. Oxon: Routledge, 343–358.

- Kavka, M. and West, A., 2004. Temporalities of the real: Conceptualising time in reality TV. In S. Holmes and D. Jermyn (Eds), *Understanding reality television* (pp. 136-153). London: Routledge.
- Kochenderfer-Ladd, B. and Skinner, K., 2002. Children's coping strategies: Moderators of the effects of peer victimization? *Developmental Psychology*, 38 (2), 267–278,
- Kowalski, R.M., Giumetti, G.W., Schroeder, A.N. and Lattanner, M.R., 2014. Bullying in the digital age: a critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140, 1073-1137.
- Lazarus, R. S. and Folkman, S., 1984. Coping and adaptation. In W. D. Gentry (Ed.), *The handbook of behavioral medicine* (pp. 282-325). New York: Guilford.
- Lodge, J. and Frydenberg, E., 2007. Cyber-bullying in Australian Schools: Profiles of Adolescent Coping and Insights for School Practitioners. *Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 24, 45–48.
- Marwick, A. and boyd, D., 2011. To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence*, 17 (2), 139-158.
- Nabi, R. L., Biely, E. N., Morgan, S. J., and Stitt, C. R., 2003. Reality-based television programming and the psychology of its appeal. *Media Psychology*, 5, 303-330.
- Ouvrein, G., De Backer, C.J.S. and Vandebosch, H., 2018. Online celebrity aggression: A combination of low empathy and high moral disengagement? The relationship between empathy and moral disengagement and adolescents' online celebrity aggression. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 89, 61-69.
- Ouvrein, G., Pabian, S., Machimbarrena, J.M., Erreygers, S., De Backer, C.J.S. and Vandebosch, H., 2018. Setting a bad example. Peer, parental and celebrity norms predicting celebrity bashing. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 1-25.

- Ouvrein, G., Vandebosch, H. and De Backer, C.J.S., 2017. Celebrity critiquing: hot or not? Teen girls' attitudes on and responses to the practice of negative celebrity critiquing, *Celebrity Studies*, 8 (3), 461-476.
- Ouvrein, G., Vandebosch, H. and De Backer, C. J. S., 2019. A framing analysis of online celebrity cyberbullying citations in news articles. In H. Vandebosch and L. Green (Eds.), *Narratives in research and interventions on cyberbullying among young people*.
- Palmer, G., 2005. The undead: Life on the D-list. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 2 (2), 37–53.
- Patterson, N., 2015. Sabotaging Reality: Exploring Canadian Women's Participation on Neoliberal Reality TV, *Canadian Journal of Communication* 40 (2), 281–95.
- Peng, X., Li, Y., Wang, P., Mo, L. and Chen, Q., 2015. The ugly truth: Negative gossip about celebrities and positive gossip about self entertain people in different ways. *Social Neuroscience*, 10 (3), 37–41.
- Price, M. and Dalglish, J., 2010. Cyberbullying. Experiences, impacts and coping strategies as described by Australian young people. *Youth Studies Australia*, 29 (2), 51–59.
- Rojek, C., 2001. *Celebrity*. London, England: Reaktion Books.
- Roth, S. and Cohen, L. J., 1986. Approach, avoidance, and coping with stress. *American Psychologist*, 41, 813-819.
- Sears, C. A. and Godderis, R., 2011. Roar Like a Tiger on TV? Constructions of Women and Childbirth in Reality TV. *Feminist Media Studies* 11 (2), 181-195.
- Showbizsite., 2018. Kijkcijfers van maandag 19 februari. Retrieved from <https://www.showbizsite.be/nieuws/kijkcijfers-maandag-19-februari-2018-1609429>.
- Smith, P.K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S., and Tippett, N., 2008. Cyberbullying: its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, 49 (4), 376–385.

- Tal-Or, N. and Cohen, J., 2010. Understanding audience involvement: conceptualizing and manipulating identification and transportation. *Poetics*, 38 (4), 402-418.
- Teurlings, J., 2001. Producing the Ordinary: Institutions, Discourses and Practices in Love Game Shows, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 15 (2), 249–63.
- Tincknell, E. and Raghuram, P., 2004. Big Brother: Reconfiguring the ‘active’ audience of cultural studies. In S. Holmes and D. Jermyn (Eds), *Understanding reality television* (pp. 252-269). London: Routledge.
- Turner, G., 2006. The mass production of celebrity: ‘Celetoids’, reality TV and the ‘demotic turn’. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9 (2). 153-165.
- Van den Bulck, H. and Claessens, N., 2014. Of local and global fame: A comparative analysis of news items and audience reactions on celebrity news websites People, Heat, and HLN. *Journalism*, 15 (2), 218–236.
- Whittaker, E. and Kowalski, R. M., 2014. Cyberbullying via social media. *Journal of School Violence*, 14 (1), 11–29.
- Wilcox, R. 2010. My life as a celetoid: Reflections on Canadian Idol. *Canadian Theatre Review*, 141, 33-37.
- Williamson, M., 2010. Female celebrities and the media: the gendered denigration of the “ordinary” celebrity, *Celebrity Studies*, 1 (1), 118–120.