

Top 10 Consumer Trends For 2012: Reality Culture And Consumers

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Scripted reality or celebrities living the dream - consumers are gripped, sharing views and being moved to change their purchasing behaviour.

This piece is the sixth in a weekly series of consumer comments exploring each of the trends Euromonitor International identified in the recent Top 10 Consumer Trends for 2012 article.

'Reality culture' has changed the paradigm of who we see as an opinion leader. Around the world "ordinary" people appearing in reality programming are claiming the spotlight of the 'talented' famous and consumer attention as well as lifestyle aspirations. Euromonitor International's Annual Study 2011 found that respondents rank celebrities slightly more highly than political or community leaders in terms of whom they most look up to. Acknowledging their grip on the population, US President Obama recently shared his sentiment on reality TV by saying: "I don't want my daughters watching 'The Kardashians' either."

The global allure of reality programming

Part of the reason for the public's love for reality programming is that it often constitutes a new take on the rags to riches story. It is more interesting (and closer to the audience) to see what happens to ordinary people. Andy Warhol predicted this with his idea of 15 minutes of fame and in 2012, millions of people are busy narrating their lives with the rise of broadband and mobile phone services, and social networks. Twitter best understands the concept of reality culture, inviting its users to "write what you are doing" at any one time.

Reality programmes enjoy the highest ratings in most world regions. In Latin America, the last decade has seen all kinds of reality shows from survival shows to image change shows, with dedicated reality TV channels such as True TV. From singing contests to talent quests to cooking competitions, consumers in the Asia-Pacific region are being bombarded with reality TV programmes almost every night of the week. Young Indian audiences are so enamoured with reality television that they will not watch the dramas so dear to their parents.

"What appeals to the youth is essentially reality programming," said Nikhil Gandhi of UTV Bindass, a channel for Indian youth. "It is difficult for them to watch a show that is fictionalised."

In the USA, reality is more than a TV genre; it has become a way of life for many people. From reading obsessively about its stars on magazines and blogs, to giving nicknames to friends just like they do on "Jersey Shore", reality culture is transforming US consumers who are inspired to make their lives almost public. 15-year-old high school student Jessica Baker from Ohio said gleefully, "My life is on display on Facebook just like Kim's [Kardashian] on TV."

With reality shows consistently the winner in TV ratings, it is becoming more important for advertising messages to be embedded in the shows themselves while consumers are gripped. Reality in life is already being incorporated by brands using members of the public in their marketing. IKEA's new online kitchen brochure shows the IKEA kitchens of eight real Spanish families to bring the products to life and connect with consumers.

Source: Euromonitor International from national statistics/International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

Note: Data for 2012 is a forecast

The influence of celebrities and reality programming on consumer purchasing aspirations and behaviour

The range of lifestyle areas these contemporary entertainment 'icons' span is broad: celebrity chefs to models; weight loss to dating to recovery. Clearly there is enormous potential for influencing consumer buying habits. Most consumers can't afford handbags from Victoria Beckham's current collection but they CAN shop at hugely successful fashion websites like ASOS (As Seen On Screen) which flourish through the recession by selling styles that copy key celebrity looks. Apps enabling consumers to 'correct' photographs, rising plastic surgery stats, cosmetic dentistry and Botox-style treatments are also evidence of consumers buying into this lifestyle.

According to Luke Jenkinson of Sponsorship Magazine, "People remember things emotionally and they buy on emotions. So if they're enjoying that experience on TV and they're relating to it "which a lot of people do" they then feel like they can replicate what they see at home."

Product placement in reality TV shows is only set to increase. Many industry watchers predict that social media postings and discussions on reality TV shows may be the new tracker for consumer trends and buying habits.

Reality TV expert Emma Ashton, and social insights specialist Julie Houston, conducted Australia's first study last July examining the viewing habits and attitudes of reality TV fans and how these affect purchasing dynamics. The Reality TV Insights Survey found that 94% of viewers have been influenced by what they have seen on a reality show. The study found that 60% of viewers have bought a product, 68% have tried a dish while 20% have travelled to a destination and 40% have bought a book. In New Zealand, baking trays, cake tins and high-end food processors are flying off the shelves in a phenomenon dubbed the "MasterChef effect."

How does the influence of reality shows and celebrity culture extend beyond purchasing aspirations in the lives of consumers?

Today, reality shows extend further via cyberspace. Reality show fan sites are in abundance and fans are usually fervent followers and very influential. Thanks to them, TV channels have managed to reclaim the importance of live TV watching, and reinvent themselves as a complement to the smartphone, the tablet, the computer etc. which play an integral part in today's TV viewing experience. As part of this, always-connected social network consumers share their opinions, endorsing their favourite shows, brands and celebrities by clicking the "Like" button.

TV networks have realised that product placement techniques can also be used for social issues, making them more marketable to their target audience. For instance, quitting smoking became a topic of conversation between two fishermen throughout a season of ESPN's "Bass Masters."

Aware of the ambassadorial potential of reality TV, a statement from Prime Minister Tsvangirai commended the "True Zimbabwean spirit of humility, courage, dignity and peace" of latest co-winner of "Big Brother Africa" in 2011, Wendall Parson. The fact that Wendall is of white origin was noted. Writing about Big Brother in Africa, the blog Africanarguments.org says: "the 6th season of Big Brother Africa highlights the country's complex racial and political environment."

Talking to media news channel Mzansi Magic, Nirvana Singh of South African reality series "Culture Shock", in which people from diverse backgrounds swap places, said: "We all know that the Rainbow Nation is as multicultural as it gets and there are times, like during the recent Rugby World Cup, when you feel a real coming together of all citizens. But the reality is that many people find it hard to accept the traditions and practices of a culture that's different to theirs and Culture Shock aims to put that in the spotlight, through a highly entertaining reality television that may just bring us all closer together."

Head judge of South Africa's "LG Life Tastes Good Championship", a cookery show, believes reality programmes have a positive effect on consumer lifestyles: "I certainly think it has inspired people. We are talking about healthier options."

Scripted reality and the 'real'

In 2012, there is public debate because reality shows are heavily scripted just as there is concern that the real is tampered with when ad photos are extensively airbrushed. However huge population segments seem to be taking reality shows at face value. According to a 2011 survey of 1,144 girls aged 11 to 17 around the USA by the Girl Scouts Research Institute, eight out of ten who regularly watch "real-life" shows like "Jersey Shore" described them as "real" and unscripted. Last summer, fans of Japanese pop group AKB48 were shocked to learn that the newest addition to the group, Aimi Eguchi, was a digital fake.

Look out for the seventh in the series of Top Consumer Trends for 2012: Smartphone Universe

About Euromonitor International's Annual Study, Global Youth Survey and Quick Pulse Surveys
Euromonitor International's Annual Study surveyed 16,000 consumers of all ages (15-65+) in eight mature and developing markets in July and August 2011, questioning respondents on the following themes: health and wellness, food and drink, technology, shopping and leisure, personal traits and values.

Euromonitor International's Global Youth Survey reached out to young consumers living in 15 countries with the largest and fastest-growing youth populations. Fielded August-September 2011, the survey questioned 16-24 year olds on the following themes: financial expenditure, food and drink, technology, leisure activities, personal traits and values.

In Quick Pulse surveys, Passport Survey reaches out to Euromonitor's network of in-country analysts and in-house researchers around the world in order to find out more about current consumer attitudes and habits on a wide variety of topics, from economic outlook to daily activities.

Note: Euromonitor surveys are online surveys; all respondents are drawn from the online population in any given country, not its population as a whole. This means that in emerging markets, respondents tend to be more educated, affluent and urban.

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