Understanding the Malaysian Localisation of Global Format TV: An Audience Analysis of Akademi Fantasia

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen

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ABSTRACT

*Akademi Fantasia (AF)*, a reality television format show, first aired in Malaysia in 2003 and reached its ninth season in 2011. Originally adapted from a Mexican program, *AF* has been acclaimed as a cultural phenomenon in the country, attracting unprecedented audiences, generating new trends in viewing and participation practices, and garnering overwhelming public interest, including political comment.

The process of global format adaptation, however, is always potentially difficult in the Malaysian context due to the potential clash of imported cultural norms with local values. Despite attracting some significant criticisms from government leaders in its early seasons, *AF* has remained a firm audience favourite. How do audiences derive pleasure from *AF*? How do they negotiate the question of its perceived local and/or global characteristics and values? How do audiences engage with the show?

To answer these questions the thesis first maps the socio-cultural, industrial and aesthetic contexts within which *AF* is situated. This involves highlighting the broader social context of a modernising Malaysian economy, its refiguring within the broader shifts of globalisation, and the transnational cultural flows that have become a key aspect of media economies worldwide. It also necessitates an examination of the rise of the genre of the reality show worldwide and its usage by local producers as an adaptable format applicable within the cultural imagination of contemporary Malays. Finally, the textual content of *AF* is considered, highlighting its hybridisation of different genres (ranging from game show to soap opera) and their narrative conventions, as well as its central theme of the transformation of ordinary people into celebrities.
Having established this background, the second part of the thesis provides an analysis of ethnographic audience research gathered through thirteen focus group discussions with Malay audiences, totalling sixty-three participants. Interpretation of the ensuing qualitative data has resulted in three key findings:

i) Viewers’ responses suggest that they derive pleasure from the complexity of the juxtaposition of multiple spectator positions as well as the complex melodramatic mechanisms that structure the narrative’s hybrid blend of genre conventions.

ii) Audiences do not perceive hybrid global-local shows such as *AF* as a significant threat to Malaysian cultural identity, but they nevertheless voiced the need for such shows to negotiate their local context and display suitable cultural values.

iii) The show’s audience is itself diverse in its constitution and type of engagement with the program. While scholarly categorisations such as ‘fan’ and ‘followers’ (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995) are useful for understanding some differences among audiences, the line is often murky. The role of ‘interactive’ or participatory technologies - such as the show’s voting system, as well as its transmedia production - has further blurred the fan/follower distinction.
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my loving parents,
mummy (Nik Rohiyah Nik Abdullah), daddy (Shamshudeen Abdullah)
my husband (Zamzuri Jaafar),
and my six year-old daughter (Alisya Safiyah Zamzuri),

with love and thanks!
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ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM  Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
AF    Akademi Fantasia
AF1   Akademi Fantasia Season 1
AF2   Akademi Fantasia Season 2
AF3   Akademi Fantasia Season 3
AF4   Akademi Fantasia Season 4
AF5   Akademi Fantasia Season 5
AF6   Akademi Fantasia Season 6
AF7   Akademi Fantasia Season 7
AF8   Akademi Fantasia Season 8
AF9   Akademi Fantasia Season 9
ASTRO Astro All Asia Network Plc
BB    Big Brother
BBC   British Broadcasting
KLIA  Kuala Lumpur International Airport
LRT   Light Railway Transit
MAS   Malaysian Airlines System
MCMC  Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission
MSC   Multimedia Super Corridor
n.d.  No date of publication
n. pag No pagination
NCP   New Cultural Policy
NDP   National Development Policy
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<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTV7</td>
<td>Net Television Channel 7</td>
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<td>OIAM</td>
<td>One in a Million</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PKPIM</td>
<td>National Association of Malaysian Islamic Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>R&amp;B</td>
<td>Rhythm and Blues</td>
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<tr>
<td>RM</td>
<td>Ringgit Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTM</td>
<td>Radio Television Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTM1</td>
<td>Radio Television Malaysia Channel 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTM2</td>
<td>Radio Television Malaysia Channel 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>Short Message Service</td>
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<td>TV3</td>
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<td>United Malay National Organisation</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The presence of reality television programs on Malaysian screens has increased exponentially since 2003. Today, in 2011, the country’s TV channels are flooded with reality-based programs either based on original concepts or adapted from global formats. Exemplary among these reality programs is Akademi Fantasia (commonly abbreviated as AF and translated into English as Fantasy Academy), arguably the first reality TV show to attain widespread national popular recognition in Malaysia.1 Aired through the satellite network All Asia Networks Plc (ASTRO) on its Ria channel, AF has been the dominant show of its type in the local television landscape since 2003. It has attracted a strong degree of public interest, achieved consistently high audience ratings, and continues in its ninth season in 2011. This thesis seeks to examine some of the reasons for that popularity, focusing in particular on audience interpretation of the program and the cultural debate it engendered.

AF is a licensed adapted version of La Academia (a popular Mexican reality show)2, and was produced in Bahasa Melayu. Format-wise the show is an innovative blend of the ‘Idol’-type reality talent contest, where ordinary people participate in a singing competition, with a Big Brother observational show – for the duration of the competition, the contestants are housed together in a Big Brother style environ where cameras track their everyday life and training routines.3 Viewers are asked to choose and vote for their favourite contestant at the end of the weekly singing contest. It is

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1 Malaysian precursor for reality talent show type, Popstars, which aired in 2000 on NTV7 channel, could be considered as the first locally produced reality show, but it was not able to generate much interest and was discontinued after the first season.
2 “La Academia is one of the most-watched reality series on TV Azteca, the second largest broadcaster in Mexico” (Samat, 2003a)
3 The contestants are housed together for the duration of the competition and their daily activities, personal interactions and practice sessions are filmed and broadcast on a daily program called Diari AF (see chapter three).
pertinent to note here that while global format shows like *American Idol* have been screened in Malaysia, *Big Brother* has not because of elements that were perceived and deemed to be culturally unsuitable. Therefore, before the introduction of *AF*, Malaysian viewers were not familiar with either *American Idol* or any other reality show except *Survivor* which had aired from 2000. In broad terms, *AF* can be regarded as a pioneer of the reality television phenomenon in Malaysia, attracting an unprecedented level of audience interest and remaining in the public eye as a cultural phenomenon while successfully weathering competition from newer entrants in a crowded market.

The novelty of *AF*, from its concept as a competition turning ordinary people into celebrities to its format as a reality show enabling viewers to participate through voting, has been enthusiastically embraced by audiences. *AF*’s success in Malaysia has been acclaimed as a breakthrough in the local television landscape, encouraging the proliferation of many other similar programs in its emergence, even if no other locally produced programs have been able to quite match its success.

*AF*’s popularity is not only a matter of high viewer ratings or audience participation; it has also become a pervasive cultural phenomenon, arising as a common topic of conversation between people and as a persistent subject of speculation in local newspapers. Although *AF* is aired on a subscription-based satellite channel which does not have as wide an audience base as free-to-air channels, it remains more popular than the other reality talent contests (e.g. *Mentor, Audition, & One in a Million*) aired on free-to-air channels. In fact, the popularity of *AF* has been credited as a vital factor in the increase of subscriptions to Astro channels, which dramatically increased the network’s household penetration across Malaysia (*Malay Mail*, 1
January 2007, p. 8). Consequently, given the rejuvenation of audience interest in locally produced programs, the emergence of a plethora of local reality productions and an increase in subscriptions to local satellite networks since its launched, one newspaper reported that AF was “probably the best thing to happen to local TV these last many years” (Jaafar, 2005).

AF’s popularity, however, has also attracted some controversy, particularly as reality television shows based on Western and foreign productions have come under serious attack from certain quarters of the Malaysian government and civil society for being potentially detrimental to the country’s moral values. Given its status as a Muslim-majority nation with Islam as the state religion, the government, religious leaders, journalists and viewers themselves have often expressed concerns over the role of popular culture in influencing the nation’s population. There have been frequent allegations that reality TV programs strongly promote Western cultural values, and that the themes of celebrity, glamour and competitiveness foregrounded in these programs will have a detrimental effect on the moral fabric of the nation. The issue has been discussed with much gravity and even the highest echelons of the government have expressed concern over the popularity of these shows. The then Deputy Prime Minister (now Prime Minister), Datuk Seri Najib Razak, was quoted as saying that shows like AF “which borrow extensively from Western culture could threaten Eastern values and lead to moral decadence” (New Straits Times, 3 August 2005, p. 6).

While newspapers have provided extensive coverage of the shows in a commercial and promotional sense, they have also reported widely on these controversial public issues. Most infamously, an incident of close physical contact between male and
female contestants on the AF stage created a furore in Malaysia and was reported widely in most local as well as a few international newspapers (Agence France Presse, 15 September 2005, n. pag; TODAY (Singapore), 5 September 2005, n. pag). Datuk Seri Najib Razak, issued an incensed statement about this incident saying “[n]o hugging please, we are Muslims ... This is about religion. It is forbidden in the religion”. Zawawi and Ibrahim (n.d.) have noted that these scenes of physical contact and even harsh comments from the judges have been deemed as being “against the Islamic principles, beliefs and traditional practices” (also see Zawawi and Ibrahim, n.d., p. 37). In tracing the long-term success of AF in Malaysia, we can see a consistent tension between the show’s widespread popularity and the concomitant anxiety about its cultural impact. This tension, as the thesis will later examine, is an important factor in how audiences themselves interpret and experience pleasure in their viewing of AF.

At the same time as noting the importance of this tension, it is necessary to also highlight those moments in which AF has been perceived as playing an affirmative role in (re)producing national identity, or Malay identity at least, since AF is targeted specifically at a Malay audience. For instance, it was only from the third season of its transmission in 2005 that AF truly became a national cultural phenomenon, as evidenced by unprecedented levels of audience support and the frequency of its appearance as a topic in public discussions. This surge in AF’s popularity has been attributed to Mawi, an individual contestant in season 3. Mawi’s persona as a humble, religious, conservative Malay kampung (village) man, diligent in his adherence to Islamic norms and well-versed in Quranic recitation, garnered overwhelming support from all quarters of the Malay populace. He was the winner of that season, although it was often noted that he was not as musically talented as some of the other
competitors. Championed as an authentic Malay man, audience support for Mawi burgeoned into something like a nationwide campaign, a ‘feel-good’ story about the potential for an underprivileged Malay person to make his way in the competitive world of popular stardom while somehow remaining true to his cultural roots. In their enthusiastic support for Mawi, the viewers’ perceptions of the show seemed to shift from the strong criticism it had endured publicly in the first two seasons, to being seen in a new and positive light. Overall, then, the show has played a range of roles in relation to the debates about Malaysian identity and globalisation and these warrant further analysis.

Specifically, this research analyses how a global format that must negotiate potentially contentious cultural issues has been adapted by local industries and accepted widely by local audiences. The initial aim of this research was to explain the popularity of AF in Malaysia by examining the audience’s engagement with the textual elements of the program. However, later I realised that it would be inadequate to account for the rise of AF by only examining its merits as a format. Instead, this thesis argues that it is necessary to also elaborate and analyse the broader political-economic context surrounding its rise in order to gain a holistic understanding of the specific cultural phenomenon that is AF. Perhaps most crucially, the larger cultural, social and economical context needs to be taken into account as a background for the analysis of the audience’s variegated forms of engagement with the program. This is important because I believe that the rise of a reality program like AF in contemporary Malaysia can shed light on the dynamics of and changes in audience preference, interpretation and engagement with transnational popular cultural forms.
As a local adaptation of a global format, \( AF \) has gained widespread audience support due to its purported local features but at the core it is still a cultural artefact of a globalised corporatised media economy, thus raising questions about what is actually national, local or global about this text. This reality talent contest reformulates a long-standing tradition of singing competition programs on local television to meet the contemporary, and arguably globally expanded, cultural imagination of contemporary Malays. As a locally produced adaptation of a transnational format, \( AF \) is at one level an articulation of Malaysian global modernity while still being rooted in the local cultural locale, a sense of being part of modern Malaysia/Asia, as well as adhering to Islamic principles and Malay norms. At the same time it has been a site of ‘experimentation’ for producers in terms of its transmedia dimensions.

\( AF \)’s popularity amongst Malay viewers needs to be examined in order to provide an understanding of how these specific audiences engage with the global genre of reality TV. The research seeks in particular to understand the audience enjoyment, interpretation and engagement with the program, together with the context from which \( AF \) has emerged. From this background, this tangle of interconnected issues can be organised into three primary research questions that form the lines of enquiry framing this examination of the program:

1. What do audiences identify as the key textual pleasures of \( AF \)?
2. How do audiences understand \( AF \) as a locally adapted transnational format, and its relationship to the cultural identities of its predominantly Malay audiences?
3. How do \( AF \) audiences negotiate the viewing positions constructed for them by the show’s producers, particularly in regard to its transmedia nature, ‘live’ performances and voting system?
Situating the research: Theoretical touchstones

This study is broadly situated within the field of television and cultural studies. The three key areas of relevance within this field, which will operate as theoretical touchstones for this study, include reality TV studies, audience studies, and work concerning media globalisation and transnational consumption (particularly with an Asian focus). As the following outline attests, there are a number of relevant and appropriate points at which these areas of scholarly inquiry intersect and provide useful frameworks for investigating my research questions.

i. Reality TV

Reality TV has been labelled a hybrid genre that draws on earlier television genres like soap operas, game shows and documentaries (e.g. Kilborn, 1994; Nichols, 1994). Due to the innovativeness and diversity of reality TV, the genre defies a single definitive definition, but one pervasive feature that can be used to explain reality TV is its thematic content of unscripted ‘real’ life events. In the last decade, reality TV has consolidated into a genre in its own right, and perhaps become the most dominant form of programming on television, taking precedence in some instances over perennial TV favourites like scripted dramas and sitcoms. As scholars sketching the historical roots of the genre have argued (Clissold, 2004; Gillan, 2004; Jermyn, 2004), the formation of ‘reality TV’ can be understood as the product of overlapping genres with ‘realistic’ content, a rejuvenation of sorts of older forms. This development of reality TV can also be traced to the growth in the transnational television production and globalising media economies of the 1990s. As adaptable formats that could be franchised across the globe, reality TV flourished in “the global TV formatting business [which] grew rapidly in the 1990s as companies with bases in Western
Europe built vertically integrated transnational television companies with huge inventories of game shows and reality TV formats” (McMurria, 2004, p. 183).

While the structure of reality TV programs shares similarities with observational documentary programs (e.g. Kilborn, 1994), the melodramatic style of soap operas is the predominant narrative style in which reality programs are framed. Indeed, what distinguishes the present-day form of reality TV from earlier documentary forms like candid camera or police shows is this sensationalistic melodramatic narrative component and its quest for “maximum dramatic effect” (Kilborn, 1994, p. 431).

Besides employing a melodramatic narrative, reality TV and, in particular, the reality talent contest, revolves around the theme of presenting ordinary people performing in spectacular settings and subsequently attaining popular followings. Relatedly, there is a growing body of literature pertaining to the construction of celebrity through reality talent contests, especially from the ‘Idol’ format and reality game show (e.g. Coutas, 2006; Holmes, 2004a, 2004b; Turner, 2006), as well as a large number of studies that explored the notion of fame, celebrity, and reality TV (e.g. Biressi & Nunn, 2010; Cashmore 2006; Collins, 2008; Turner, 2006). The ‘Idol’ format is built on this promise of turning an ordinary person into a celebrity and reality TV has extended a ‘success myth’ that fame can now be achieved by anybody (Andrejevic, 2004; Sternheimer, 2011).

At the same time, the complementary fascination of reality TV representing ‘ordinary’ people, often in banal everyday circumstances, is also seen by scholars as a key pleasure of the genre. Holmes (2004b), for example, finds that the ‘authentic articulation of the self’ is a central theme in reality TV programs, where actors in the
program seek to present the most authentic picture of themselves as persons, and audiences develop their preference on the basis of the ‘person’ they see and whether they judge that ‘person’ to be presenting a genuine image (p. 159).

But the focus on voyeuristic elements in the genre has also raised concerns across the world. Hence, it has often been negatively valued and viewed as pandering to the ‘lowest common denominator’ (Hight, 2004, p. 245), an exemplar of ‘trash TV’ (cf. Dovey, 2000). Critics have frequently panned reality TV for the ‘dumbing down’ of media forms, and, by extension, that of the mass media” (p. 245). The audience of reality TV have often been perceived as having a lower education background and “lacking in judgement and/or taste” (Hight, 2001, p. 390). In my research for AF, I found that although AF was perceived as a program targeted at rural audiences, especially at the beginning of the program, viewers from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds now follow the program.

ii. Audience studies

This study partially locates itself within the qualitative television audience research tradition that emerged in the wake of the notion of ‘active audience’ generated by Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding paradigm. That paradigm paved the way for recognising audiences as “active producers of meaning from within their own cultural context”, a central argument of much cultural studies scholarship (Barker, 2003, p. 325). This means that the relation of a viewer to a media text must be examined in

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4 The notion of ‘active audience’ was developed in cultural studies as a counter-perspective to rectify the ‘effects’ paradigm proposed by mass communication studies which proposed a ‘hypodermic needle theory’ or ‘magic bullet theory’ where the media was perceived as a powerful source disseminating messages that were then absorbed by the audience. However, the ‘two-step flow model of communication’ advanced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) has challenged the ‘effect’ theory as it “challenged the notion of mass media as dominant over the audience and emphasised the role interpersonal relations play in communication” and emphasised a process of negotiation for a balanced consideration of the relationships between the power of media and audience (Gorton, 2009, p. 16).
the form of engagement between the viewer and the text instead of a one-dimensional flow of meaning from the text to the passive viewer. Subsequently, audience studies have become an important strand of research in the multi-dimensional field of television and popular culture studies (cf. Lewis, 2002, p. 260).

A central question in audience research concerns how audiences actually derive enjoyment and what motivates them to continue watching. As Ien Ang (1985) asks, “What … are the determining factors of this enjoyment, this pleasure?” (p. 9). Ang (1985) argues that “pleasure must be conceived of as not so much the automatic result of some ‘satisfaction of needs’, but rather as the effect of a certain productivity of a cultural artefact” (pp. 9-10). Instead of thinking of pleasure as being produced from the ability of the content to satisfy some pre-existent needs in the viewer (as proposed by ‘uses and gratification’ scholars), such an approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of the term. Ang (1985) suggests that pleasure is not simply aroused when some pre-existent needs are satisfied but it is instead a productive mechanism that simultaneously creates and satisfies those needs. And as such a productive activity, pleasure also operates as a mechanism for continual construction of modes of engagement and interaction between viewer and content.

This conception of audience engagement as a continual and fluid form of pleasure is also useful to examine how varying contexts of different viewers enable them to react to the same program in different ways. While the uses and gratification approach posits de-contextualised psychological desires as the reason for watching, it is not able to explain the connections of the act of watching a program with the ‘socio-cultural context’ of its viewers. Varying social contexts have an impact on the

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5 “Uses and gratifications theory appears to offer little guidance beyond the general cognitive assessment of enjoyment” (Nabi et al., 2003, p. 326).
viewer’s perception of a program, as Ang (1985) notes, “[t]hese conditions of consumption are of course not the same for all social categories and groups” (p. 21). Morley (1992) also argues that understanding texts “is not simply a question of the different psychologies of individuals” as proposed by the use and gratification approach, “but is also a question of differences between individuals involved in different sub-cultures, with different socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 74).

Likewise, the more recent rise of interactive forms of television like reality TV have also presented new problems for inquiries into the ‘audience–text–culture’ engagement (Lewis, 2002, p. 260). The extension of TV programs onto multiple platforms, and the creation of new means for the expression of viewer interaction like the voting system, have led to a different level of engagement among different viewer groups. Indeed, the notion of the interactive audience produced by reality TV through its invitations to audiences to vote for their favourite contestant plays a significant role in the resulting ‘narrative’ structure. In addition, “the audience is encouraged to be ‘active’ not simply by voting for (and thus evaluating) the contestants, but in relating their screen image … which circulates around them” (Holmes, 2004a, p. 126).

Another central question in audience studies which has been introduced with the advent of reality TV can be related to audience interpretation of reality TV that purportedly presents unscripted real life events. There is debate around the interpretative capacities of the audience to discern whether the audience is ‘media-savvy’ and able to make judgement of what is ‘real’ and ‘fake’ in reality TV. Corner (2004), for example, poses a question: do such programs dupe the audience through the promise of the ‘real’? (p. 293). Similarly, Holmes and Jermyn (2004) note that
there is a long history of anxiety that the audience of reality TV “might be unable to engage with ‘hybrid’ or otherwise complex form” (p. 10). This debate surrounding the various interpretations of viewers relates to the blurring lines between real and fictional as well as the innovations involved in the hybrid genre of reality TV.

iii. The globalisation of media and transnational television consumption

The diversity and complexity of interpretative processes of media texts attains an added significance in scenarios of transnational flows of cultural texts across national borders. As Tomlinson (1991) says, “a text does not become culturally significant until it is read” (p. 42); consequently, audience research has also extended to an examination of viewer attitudes and readings of media texts in different cultural contexts. Consequently, ethnography-oriented audience research has often been seen as the richest means of deciphering the relation of media texts in different cultural contexts. Rather than a de-contextualised content analysis of the program, a better idea of the program can be gathered by unravelling the meanings that audiences in different contexts read into it. As Liebes and Katz (1990) argue, “one cannot be satisfied with abstract generalizations derived from content analysis” but must undertake audience research to determine how audiences actually make meaning while watching television programs (p. 4). It can even be argued that a text attains meaning only at the moment of reading by a viewer, it does not pre-exist in the text to be determined by an abstract content analysis. Fiske’s (1987) view on this is that “a program becomes a text at the moment of reading, that is, when its interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings/pleasures that it is capable of provoking” (p. 10).
This notion of fluidity of meaning and the centrality of the interpretative process of an active audience is particularly important in considering questions of transnational media consumption since the meaning of the text and the pleasure it delivers to viewers can shift significantly across different cultural locations. The proliferation of cross-border media flows in the last few decades has raised questions for audience research about how viewers in diverse locations make meaning of different texts, local and imported. Particularly with reference to the Asian context, a framework of ‘identification and distancing’ has been developed by scholars like Chua (2007) to understand the process of transnational media consumption. According to this theory, viewers adopt alternating moments of identification and distancing with an imported program by distancing themselves from unpalatable elements of ‘foreignness’ and adopting a position of identification with acceptable or desirable elements (Chua 2007; Chua, 2008). In this manner the viewer brings “[their] own context to bear on the text and, in the process, the intended meaning may be appropriated, modified, and resisted” (Chua, 2008, p. 74), and they accept elements that can be identified and recognised since “popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition” (Ang, 1985, p. 20). Relatedly, it has been widely argued that well-produced local or regional programs possessing affinities with local culture are often favoured by audiences in place of U.S. programs (e.g. Chan & Ma, 1996; Chua, 2007; Iwabuchi, 2002; Lee, 1998; Moran, 1998; Silj, 1992).

In examining the issue of transnational cultural flows and media economies, the larger political-economic context of globalisation must also be acknowledged. The specific industrial context of a globalising media economy with the rise of the transnational media companies and format market is a product of recent decades of economic globalisation. Within the institutional contexts of economic and industrial expansion,
transnational media consumption is also still a matter of the textual practices through which media products are adapted by local producers and local audiences engage with them. Therefore, the transnational cultural flow and consumption of media texts like *AF* is both a matter of the economic and institutional imperatives of globalisation at work in creating transnational media industries, as well as the cultural and creative ideologies that go into composing texts that travel across borders. As Bignell (2004) summarises, “globalisation theory brings together approaches to television which concern economic, institutional, textual and reception practices” (p. 67).

The development of transnational media industries has also led to an upsurge in research in the area of reception studies. This scholarly focus on transnational consumption has partly grown due to a recognition that media economies have expanded in a range of countries where production now not only caters to national audiences but takes into consideration viewers outside its borders. Notable examples of this growing body of research include Indian *Bollywood* cinema, Brazilian telenovelas, Japanese anime and Korean soap operas. This new research has created a fresh perspective that has supplanted the older cultural imperialism thesis in which scholars argued that the domination of the United States (U.S.) media over the rest of the world was a threat to the integrity of national cultures. The cultural imperialism argument (cf. Schiller, 1992) of a blanket homogenisation of the world via American popular culture has been in a sense superseded by the new research on transnational consumption that is partially concerned with the nuances in the negotiation and accommodation of U.S.-centric popular culture in different locations around the world (Cunningham & Jacka, 1996; Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham, 1996).
In addition, the rise of transnational media economies has also led to complex negotiations between nationally-based TV broadcasters and their global counterparts in broadcasting and content production. Despite recent changes in television’s industrial organisation - for example, the emergence of cross-border satellite broadcasting - Moran (1998) has argued that television broadcasting within the national level continues to provide “the constituent elements of the international television sector” (p. 7). Likewise, the institutional framework of television broadcasting across the world is still operated along national lines and mandated by government regulations which “attest[s] to the fact that television still remains tied to local and national culture” (Waisbord, 2004, p. 359). In many countries, protectionist strategies such as quota regulation have also been set up to encourage local industry and cultural values. Consequently, local producers have adopted three main strategies to boost local production, using “locally originated concepts and projects, program ideas that serve co-production arrangements and those based on format adaptations” (Moran, 1998, p. 9).

In particular, the regime of format adaptation to which AF belongs has become a significant means of media production in this age of multinational media conglomerates and the rise of reality TV as a genre. Format adaptation has become a favoured means for local channels to produce programs that have a populist appeal, based on a franchised formula tested elsewhere and commercially viable. From a production point of view, format adaptation is also favoured by production locations facing a lack of creative and technical expertise as they can work with a given formula. The contradictory outcome of globalising media economies is that it has not annihilated local production companies but reinvigorated them in some ways. While local media economies are subsumed within the global format market, they have also
been rejuvenated by the opportunities to adapt them to their local contexts. Asian TV networks do not depend as much on imported U.S. programs as they did in the earlier decades, since locals with creative technical expertise are producing their own programs and others have resorted to widespread use of format-adaptation (cf. Keane and Moran, 2005).

But, to what extent do these localisation strategies enable local cultural values to be portrayed in an adapted format? Iwabuchi (2002) has coined the useful term ‘strategic hybridism’ to analyse the process by which generic types of media texts, either soap operas or reality formats, are produced on the same basic guidelines but integrate local cultural elements and actors. On the one hand, the audience experiences an instance of global television culture through the adapted format; on the other, they also experience privileged ‘local’ elements (e.g. local language, local songs, local people involved as host, judges and contestants, etc.). As Iwabuchi (2002) notes:

[The popular cultural forms are] inescapably ‘global’ and ‘Asian’ at the same time, lucidly representing the intertwined composition of global homogenization and heterogenization, and thus they well articulate the juxtaposed sameness and difference among contemporaneous indigenized modernities in East and Southeast Asia. (p. 16)

Therefore, the notion of cultural domination by the U.S. is no longer appropriate to explain the contemporary global cultural circumstances since “‘American dreams’ have been indigenized in some modernized non-Western countries” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 152). Within this context, the indigenisation of cultural forms also can be viewed as an incorporation of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995). Michael Billig’s (1995) notion of banal nationalism is useful to evoke explanation about national, local or global in
AF. By using the form of banal nationalism, this research gives understanding on how
the national is being portrayed in a textual cultural form like AF (as discussed in
chapter 5).

Along with catering to the desire for national identity, the localisation of global
formats can be interpreted as local expressions of modernity. This interrelation of
global and local culture also provides local audiences a site for articulating, imagining
and participating as contemporaneous subjects in a global modernity. Appadurai
(1990) has privileged media as the dominant channel for modernisation (pp. 298-299).
In particular, Iwabuchi (2004) notes of the role of the television format business in
ushering this sense of modernity:

[It] has given audiences a pleasure in sharing the common frameworks
and the irreducibly different appearances that manifest in local
consumption. Put differently, what is being promoted is not simply
'global localization' that aims to adopt the common to the difference but
also 'local globalization' that makes audiences feel 'glocal', that is, a
sense of participation in a global society through the reciprocated
enjoyable recognition of local (in most cases, synonymous to 'national')
specificities articulated through the shared formats. (p. 34)

As a popular cultural form, AF reveals some of the processes by which Malaysia is
accommodating the challenges and opportunities of globalisation and simultaneously
articulating its own version of modernity. The ongoing cultural imagination of
Malaysian modernity involves a complex process of reconciliation and negotiation
between a contemporaneous global modernity and the desire to retain a sense of the
ongoing existence of a local traditional culture.
Previous studies of AF and the significance of this research

AF has been acknowledged as a significant cultural phenomenon in contemporary Malaysia and there have been a number of previous studies on the program. However, these studies have taken particular theoretical perspectives or employed specific methodologies that cannot adequately answer the research questions which I have posed in this introduction. They do of course provide a useful starting point for considering how a more audience-focussed reception study might build on existing knowledge.

One of the earliest scholarly descriptions of the program is Hassan Basri’s (2004) autoethnographic account of AF. Using a personal narrative, she compares her own experiences of AF with those of friends. Her narrative highlights the banal everyday practices through which AF’s influence on viewers’ life can be traced – people setting their ringtones to the AF theme song, scheduling their daily routine to suit AF, or using AF as a topic for conversation. While her research presents the influence of AF in everyday life in an engaging narrative account, her research, however, tends to remain at the level of general description and lacks analytical depth.

Mohamed and Syed Mukhiar (2007) investigate the popularity of the AF program within a socio-psychological context, using Reiss and Wiltz’s sensitivity theory of 16 basic desires to explain the relationship between reasons for watching AF and the basic desires for viewing preferences. Using this framework, their research assumes a positivistic approach which takes the validity of basic desires at face value; however, there is no explanation of how the viewers negotiate and interpret these mechanisms of ‘basic desires’.
Another quantitatively oriented study by Moy and Garma (2006) investigates the reasons for watching reality TV in Malaysia. They found that ‘suspense’ was the most important factor for audiences in motivating them to watch the programs. Other lesser factors include ‘personal identity and social interaction’, ‘engaging or entertaining’, ‘romance or attractiveness of contestants’ and ‘sensation-seeking’ (p. 78). Their findings show that the Malaysian audience did not interactively involve themselves with the show; for example, they did not vote for the contestants and they did not attend any functions regarding reality TV programs, but they enjoyed watching and discussing reality TV programs. Interestingly, the results of my study (see final chapter), revealed a different account on this interactive audience engagement. While Moy and Garma’s study did not focus on a particular reality television program, they found that Malaysian Idol and Akademi Fantasia serve as sub-samples of their respondents’ favourite reality shows. Regarding the level of audience engagement with the reality shows, they revealed that AF fans are more involved in the SMS voting system, compared to Malaysian Idol supporters. This study, however, leaves unanswered questions about the larger context which has given rise to reality TV and its relation to issues of cultural identity in an adapted format.

In contrast, Maliki’s (2008) study conducts a detailed textual analysis of the first five seasons of AF in order to examine the debates about cultural identity raised by the program. She finds that AF contestants in the earlier seasons (AF1—AF5) were engaging in certain activities which were considered as culturally inappropriate by local viewers. Maliki emphasises that although AF sought to reconcile a global format with the local context through a practice of hybridism, the program was still publicly perceived as practising foreign values which were opposed to Malay cultural values and identity. Although useful, the understanding of cultural identity in AF in this
study is somewhat limited as it only explores the content of the public debates surrounding AF and the measures taken by the production. Her research does not consider how audiences themselves voice their opposition to such practices or negotiate issues of cultural identity in the show.

In Lim’s (2008) study on the reinvention of nationalism through Malaysian Idol, she argues that the reality television format “has visibly influenced the ‘identity’ of both audiences and broadcast stations” (p. 71). According to Lim (2008), the relationship of globalisation and nationalism articulated by this format, together with the typical reality TV strategy of blurring the boundaries between entertainment and ordinary life, work together to concurrently construct a desirable ‘national identity’ (p. 71). Her research found that audience members find a sense of national pride in Malaysian Idol despite the disjuncture of contestants performing international, non-Malay styles such as R&B (Rhythm and Blues).

Finally, in terms of research specifically addressing AF, Zawawi and Ibrahim (n.d.) have conducted a broader study about the place of reality TV within a broader political context of cultural debates stirred up by reality programs such as Mencari Cinta and Akademi Fantasia between the years 2003 and 2005 (p. 37). They describe how reality TV programs have come under serious attack and are labelled as a threat to Asian values and moral decadence because they have been adapted from the Western format. Among the insights they provide is a recognition that these debates over reality TV were dominated by “Islamic religious values and traditional social values of the Malay culture” (p. 40) which have replaced the emphasis on “the core attributes of Asian values: shared values, collectivism and consensus” (p. 40) prevalent in the 1990s thus recognising a key shift in dominant national discourses.
While those research studies discussed above concentrate on reality TV per se, either on AF or other reality programs, there are also studies which do not take AF or reality TV as a central focus, but research the features that were pioneered within the genre, such as the SMS voting system. Research by Abdul Wahab (2006b), for example, has examined the changing technological forms in the broadcasting industry, including the SMS voting system in Malaysia. She maps out and discusses AF’s successful use of the SMS voting system which then spread to other reality talent shows. She concludes that through the interactive viewing experience offered by many reality TV shows, the audiences can no longer be regarded as passive viewers, though as Abdul Wahab (2006b) argues, “the function of active participation on television in Malaysia is only confined to entertainment programs” (p. 12).

Turning now to the broader context of reality TV scholarship, it should be noted that while numerous studies have focused on reality game shows such as Survivor (e.g. Foster, 2004; Roth, 2003; Wright, 2006) and Big Brother (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Aslama, 2009; Barron, 2010; Bignell, 2005; Biltereyst, 2004; Hill, 2002; Holmes, 2004a; Mathijs, 2002; Roscoe, 2001), contemporary western-focused scholarship has expanded recently to take in the ever-growing proliferation of reality shows (see, for example, Lewis’s (2009) edited collection on the phenomenon of the makeover show). However, there are a relatively limited number of studies on the subgenre of the reality talent contests. Furthermore, the studies on the former are predominantly dealing with European (Pop Idol) (Holmes, 2004a, 2004b), American (American Idol) (Cowell, 2003), and Australian (Australian Idol) (Roscoe, 2001) cultural contexts. Those studies that do research on reality talent contests within an Asian context have tended to concentrate on the format, from production and industrial perspectives; for example, the study of Supergirl by Keane, Fung, and Moran (2007) and Jian and Liu
There are a few studies on reality TV within an Islamic cultural context, such as Kraidy (2010) who examines Superstar (an Arabic version of Pop Idol and American Idol), although this is not from an audience perspective. Another exemplary study focusing on a reality talent format is provided by Coutas (2006), who discusses Indonesia’s participation within the globalised media landscape with its local version of American Idol called Indonesian Idol. She discusses how Indonesian Idol creates a platform for active participation by the audience through its voting system and proliferation of new fan-based activities.

While there is quite a significant amount of existing research on reality TV more broadly, I argue that this body of work remains relatively inadequate in terms of the knowledge it provides about audiences in non-Western cultural contexts. Additional work in this area is valuable in further accounting for the process by which globally circulating forms of popular culture become indigenised. AF, as an exemplar of format adaptation, will provide an understanding of reality TV within a non-Western context in an Islamic country like Malaysia with a majority Malay population. As an adapted Mexican format, this crossover of AF, especially between two countries that have quite different cultural backgrounds, should be examined in order to get a better grasp of the work of transformation that takes place at the intersection of global media economies and local audiences.

Additionally, an examination of audience engagement with AF will provide a fresh perspective on a number of more generalist themes pertinent to television studies as a whole. These themes include the articulation of celebrity within reality TV and related issues about the constitution of ‘authenticity’ of ‘ordinary people’. Although Holmes’ (2004b) study offers a valuable understanding of how contestants on reality TV
programs such as *Popstars* and *Pop Idol* transition into and perform new celebritised identities, it still leaves questions for other researchers about how viewers interpret and respond to this new kind of celebrity construction. And does viewer identification with ‘ordinary people’ in reality talent contests differ across countries and cultures?

Another theme central to the thesis is the differentiation of the audience itself and varying degrees and types of engagement with the program. The initial investigation of this theme began with the notion of audience participation via an SMS-based voting system but quickly moved on beyond that focus. Specifically, my study became interested in some of the distinctions between those different types of engagement, between ‘fans’ and ‘followers’, and what terms members of the audience itself used to describe their relationship to the program. While this was related to the question of the program’s dispersal across multiple media platforms it also raised broader questions about the negotiation process between producers who imagine and construct audiences in particular ways, to actual audience members’ understanding of their relationship to the program and the production of identities.

**Research method**

In the ethnographic research for this study I utilised two methods: focus group discussions and participant observation. The decision to use focus group discussions over personal interviews was taken because focus groups offer a social setting that is quite similar to the actual setting in which people watch television in groups. As Hall (2006) asserts, “media consumption is intrinsically a social activity” and even for viewers who watch programs alone, their interpretation of television programs could not develop without social interaction (p. 207). Similarly, Feasey (2008) also argues
that “[a]udiences do not tend to formulate their ideas and opinions about media content in isolation but, rather, routinely come to conclusions about particular texts after conversing with friends, family and like-minded acquaintances”. Therefore, the focus group discussion was set in a collective environment with the respondents sitting and discussing the program together.

In addition, it was felt that the interrogative manner of personal interviews might intimidate participants whereas the more casual atmosphere of a focus group discussion where respondents gave their feedback in a conversational manner would be more generative. A pilot test using both interviews and focus groups proved that participant interaction in the focus groups generated more significant responses in contrast to one-on-one interviews. In the one-on-one interviews, respondents were often unable to recall details about the program and were not really keen to share information on an individual basis.

The pilot study also assisted in assessing the effectiveness of the focus group questions. Useful feedback was received from the participants about the clarity of the questions and they also provided suggestions on missing elements in the discussion leading to a helpful revision of topics and questions. The pilot study also revealed that the participants’ enthusiasm to answer questions was high in the beginning and lagged significantly near the end of the session. Therefore, questions were restructured in a sequence putting the most important questions at the beginning and leaving the least important ones till the end.
In addition, the main focus of the research was pared back from reality TV as a whole in Malaysia to a focus on AF in particular. For the pilot study, three local reality TV programs were discussed: Cari Menantu (Looking for Daughter/Son In-law), which is a reality dating show, Project Runway, a syndicated reality game show, and AF. The focus of this research has been narrowed down to AF partially because it is the most popular program compared to the other two programs. Furthermore, it was apparent that AF’s overwhelming popularity meant that the viewers have much common knowledge of the show compared to the other two programs. Concentrating on one subgenre such as the reality talent contest, could give me a deep understanding of the issue rather than spreading my focus across different reality types that would generate broad but superficial insights.

The actual fieldwork was conducted in 2009 and at the time that AF season 7 was being aired. The fieldwork was conducted in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, as most of the residents in those cities subscribe to the satellite television channels that air most of the reality TV programs. Hence, it can be said that AF viewers are mostly people living in Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley (part of Selangor). This focus was necessary because the study needed a location where most of the residents subscribe to the satellite channel (Astro) and have access to AF. Apart from the focus groups, I also conducted observational research at three AF ‘live’ concerts. I took this opportunity to conduct some informal interviews with some fans at the concert.

Thirteen focus group discussions were conducted (including four focus groups during the pilot study phase) with a total of sixty-three participants. According to Patton

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6 Although I am focussing on AF, the respondents in my study were told that they could freely discuss other local reality talent shows. In some cases, the respondents used other local reality talent contests as examples to compare and contrast with AF.
the sample size in qualitative research can be any number and it depends on the aims and purpose of the research and the accessibility to the researcher within the time available.\textsuperscript{7} For my research study, I chose between three and seven people for each focus group as this seemed to work best in generating a useful range of perspectives and maintaining a conducive research environment.

It has also been argued that groups should be homogenous in nature since “[m]eeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different” (Morgan, 1998, p. 35). Slim and Thompson (1998) even argue that participants in a focus group discussion should be “of the same sex and largely equal in social status, knowledge and experience so that confidence is generally high and no-one feels threatened” (p. 119).\textsuperscript{8} In this research, I chose age as the main way of ensuring some sort of similarity for groups that would ensure a productive discussion. Given the cultural norms involving respecting seniority in Malay society and significant differences in the cultural experiences between generations, I used age as the basis for dividing the group and encouraging free-flowing discussion, creating three different demographic groups – 18 to 26 years-old, 27 to 35 years-old and 36 years-old and above.

At the beginning of the study, I sought out respondents who followed AF irrespective of their ethnic/racial background. This was partly based on the knowledge that there had been at least one Chinese-Malaysian and one Indian-Malaysian contestant in the

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Morgan (1988) regarding focus group compositions.
\textsuperscript{8} At first, the respondents in my focus group discussion were also divided into groups according to gender, as I thought that the participants would feel uncomfortable and threatened with people of the opposite sex. However, after I realised that age was the more useful parameter, I asked respondents if they minded being in the same group. They said they were comfortable talking about their opinions on AF and reality TV without any gender barriers.
early seasons. The Chinese-Malaysian contestant had in fact gone on to win the first season suggesting that the program might have established a following among Malaysia’s other significant racial/ethnic groups. However, despite searching for non-Malay AF viewers through the snow-ball technique of asking friends, family and colleagues, I was unable to find any participants for my study from a non-Malay background. This is probably due to the subsequent proliferation of a number of language and ethnic-specific reality talent shows in Malaysia in the wake of AF’s popularity (see chapter 2), as well as more ethnically oriented television channels generally.

Chapter outline

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first seeks to define the theoretical perspectives, the overall context and overview of the study, with an extensive literature review on the broader socio-political context of Malaysia, its television industry and the genre of reality TV. This section consists of three chapters.

Chapter 1 discusses the cultural, social, and political context within Malaysia by highlighting the evolution of a discourse of modernity in Malaysia. In this chapter, the rise of popular culture will also be examined, with growing linkages of global culture in order to situate Malaysia within global modernity.

Chapter 2 examines the landscape of the broadcasting industry in Malaysia and the development of reality TV in this country. It traces the political economy of the broadcasting system in Malaysia, and maps out the growth of local reality TV programs covering all sub-genres.
Chapter 3 looks at a general overview of reality television as a genre, on one hand, and discusses *AF* as a hybrid text on the other. It presents the background of reality TV including its history, types and the literature on reality TV within the global context. *AF* and its innovations as a text of the reality genre will be discussed in relation to its thematic content, narrative structure and audience positioning.

Section two presents analyses of responses from the ethnographic research of *AF* viewers. From the context laid in the first three chapters, three major questions arise with regards to audience perception, attitude, and engagement with *AF*.

Chapter 4 answers the question of how audiences derive pleasure from the hybrid text that had been theoretically discussed in chapter 3. The pleasure of hybrid text is examined through multiple spectator positions, and the narrative complexity of *AF* as a mixture of game show and soap opera genre.

In chapter 5, I look at the relationship of the program to issues of local identity and popular culture, in order to answer how local audiences negotiate this emerging genre of reality talent contest, which has been explained as a ‘glocalised’ cultural artefact.

The last chapter of the thesis, chapter 6, relates to audience attitudes and behaviour given the new features of the voting system, transmedia nature, and ‘live’ performances that have arisen with the birth of this innovative format of the reality TV industry. Using the typology of ‘fans’ and ‘followers’, this chapter also provides insights into the importance of recognising the diversity of audiences according to their viewing practices and levels of engagement with the program.
PART 1

CONTEXTUAL FRAMES
This chapter argues that it is only within a frame of the social, political and cultural context of Malaysian modernity that we can interpret the likely cultural significance of AF for audiences. Accordingly, the first section of this chapter will discuss the evolution of a discourse of modernity in Malaysia, periodising key moments from the colonial era to the present and highlighting key issues shaping Malaysian modernity, such as Malay hegemony and Islamic revivalism. Secondly, I will discuss the rise of popular culture in Malaysia and its growing linkages with global culture in order to highlight the notion of popular culture as a site for participating in global modernity, whilst articulating local expressions of indigenised modernity. In particular, I will focus on popular music as a means of contextualising the popularity of the singing contest shows that are the forerunners of AF. The third section of the chapter discusses the debates around global modernity and cultural identity in Malaysia that have arisen with the rise of the reality TV phenomenon in the country and its connections with glocalisation, format adaptation and celebrity culture.

Examining modernity in Malaysia – periodisations, discourses and conflicts

The British colonial regime had begun consolidating its rule in the region in the late nineteenth century and by 1919 “the entire Malay peninsula had come under some kind of British control” (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 205). British rule had far-reaching impacts on socio-economic development in Malaysia. It began the drive for modernisation in the region with ‘the assurance of security’, ‘the establishment of
infrastructure, especially a communications system’, ‘establishment of an effective legal and administrative system’, and ‘the organization of manpower’ (pp. 207-208). Thus Malaysia’s forays into modernisation in the late nineteenth century began as a project of “neomodernity entangled with colonial inheritances” (Stivens, 1998, p. 117).

Two major developments contributed to the emergence of the modern Malaysian nation in the colonial period. The first was the solidification of markers of cultural identity in terms of race and ethnicity. It has been claimed that a sense of the cultural identity of Malayhood emerged in the colonial period and “[c]ontemporary Malay ethnicity can be said to be derived from the elements of modernity introduced by colonialism” (Lee, 1992, p. 161). Also, the importation of Chinese and Indian migrant labour into Malaysia (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 208) greatly affected the demographic makeup of the country and this has continued to shape Malaysia’s current status as a multi-racial nation. Secondly, it was in the colonial period that the geographical boundaries defining Malaysia were drawn up. As Hooker (2003) notes, “[f]or the purposes of its national history, the government has defined Malaysia as the territory occupied by its modern component states; that is, the Peninsular and Sabah and Sarawak, with Singapore being included in events which occurred before 1965” (p. 3).

After independence in 1957, the nation experienced social instability. The most significant expression of this instability was the so-called ‘race riots’ of the early 1960s which revealed tensions around inter-racial discord and socio-economic inequalities in the country. After the quelling of the riots, Malay dominance was established by the ruling party, UMNO, as the key strategy to maintaining stability in
the nation. New policies were launched to rectify socio-economic inequality between different ethnic groups particularly the perceived marginalisation of Malays in the economic sphere (Mutalib, 1993, p. 29). The majority of Malays survived on the fringes of the economy in rural areas as fishermen while the urban areas of commercial activities were monopolised by the Chinese who worked as tradesmen which led to Chinese dominance in the economy (Khoo, 2006, p. 14).9

A New Economic Policy (NEP) was formulated in 1971, partly in response to concerns about the socio-economic imbalances between ethnic groups, in particular the gap between Malays and non-Malays and to “alleviate the plight of the Malays by modernizing them” (Khoo, 2006, p. 14). The implementation of the NEP saw dramatic socio-political restructuring leading to Malay dominance and widespread privatisation. Major organisations like MAS (Malaysian Airline Systems) were gradually privatised over the next two decades for greater efficiency and profitability. In the privatisation strategy, “[t]he re-distributive emphasis … remained an important element” (Lee, 2003, pp. 2-3), with the Privatization Guidelines stipulating that not less than 30 per cent of equity in privatised projects be reserved for Bumiputeras10 (pp. 2-3; also see Anuar & Wang, 1996, p. 267).

Consequently, rural Malays migrated to the city during the 1970s and 80s, to take up new jobs in the growing industrial sector (Khoo, 2006, p. 14). After twenty years of modernisation under NEP, the majority of Malays who originated from the kampung (village) were settled in both suburban and urban areas and became part of the new

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9 In this schema of occupation-race division, indigenous Malays worked as farmers or fishermen, Chinese as middlemen or tin miners, and Indians as rubber tappers (Khoo, 2006, p. 14) which also led to divisions of habitation with the majority of Malays living in the kampung (villages), Chinese in urban areas, and Indians in plantations (Lockard, 1998, p. 211).
10 “The term Bumiputera generally refers to the Malays but it includes several other indigenous groups as well” (Khoo, 2006, p. 13).
urban Malay middle class (p. 14). Therefore, it can be said that modernisation had the greatest impact on Malays, as 30 per cent of Malays who had historically been a rural people moved to urban areas, thus affecting Malay lifestyle in general (Mutalib, 1993, p. 29).

In 1979, a corresponding New Cultural Policy (NCP) was introduced and “took aggressive efforts and steps to raise the presence of Malay culture, religion and language in the public space” (Lee, 2000, p. 12). There are three principles underpinning the NCP which form the basis of Malaysian National Culture:

First, it must be based on the indigenous culture of this region. Second, suitable elements from other cultures could be accepted as part of the National Culture. And third, the Islamic religion needs to be an important component in the moulding of the National Culture. More than that, it is also clearly stated that acceptance of the second principle would be in the context of the first and the third. (Nain, 1996, p. 160)

These three factors listed by the NCP establish a hierarchy of criteria determining what constitutes ‘national culture’ in Malaysia. First of all it stresses the primacy of the claim of indigeneity, thus privileging Bumiputeras over races that have migrated to the region in the last few centuries. Secondly, it outlines that other ‘migrant’ cultures could be assimilated in the dominant ‘national culture’ as long as they did not oppose its basic tenets. Thirdly, even while underscoring indigeneity as a claim over other non-Malay races, the policy placed Islam as the foundation of national culture, thus essentially privileging the Malay Muslim majority and marginalising non-Muslim Malays.

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34 The Malays who lived in the rural areas normally spoke Malay language and adhered to Malay customs or adat (Crouch, 1996, p. 165).
The ‘question of ethnicity’ has been a point of contention in discussions of Malaysian modernity given its multi-racial demographic, that is, predominantly Malay, Chinese and Indian. Malay ethnic identity has been successively promoted by the government as the core of the nation’s identity on the basis that “Malay culture is the defining characteristic of the ‘Malaysian culture’” (Musa, 2002, p. 272). The Federal Constitution defines a Malay as “one who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs” (Mutalib, 1993, p. 18).  

While the constitution confers the denomination of Malay ethnicity to a person on the bases of religion, language and customs, one must note that in the first place Malay culture is in itself not a given or unbroken lineage. It has been argued that the notion of Malay culture has been constructed and shaped continuously by social and political forces. Mutalib (1993), for example, notes that the term ‘Malay’ is not a monolithic category but one constructed by a range of “historical, racial and more modern perspectives” (p. 17). In his words:

[I]t is useful to try to view Malay culture as a configuration consisting of ingredients coalescing with each other – including adat (customary norms and oral traditions), some of which are Islamic while some are Hinduistic in content), ethnic nationalism (a strong sense of wanting to uphold ‘Malayness’), and Islamic principles and values. (Mutalib, 1993, p. 19)

Thus, Mutalib (1993) concludes that the concepts of ‘Malay’ and ‘Malay culture’ “are indeed quite ambiguous” (p. 17). Indeed, it has been claimed that “any evaluation of

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12 Mutalib (1993) highlights that religion is more important factor than ethnicity in defining Malayhood. He says that Malayhood can also be applied to a person of a non-indigenous race “who converts to Islam, speaks the Malay language and generally observe Malay custom and culture”, but a born Malay who rejects Islam as his religion may also lose his entitlement as a Malay person (p. 18).

13 Adat refers to a Malay code of ethics relating to everyday social customs and behaviours that do not have a religious connotation and are not regulated by Islamic norms.
Malaysia’s cultural make-up will usually lead back to the modern/traditional binary opposition” (Md Yusof, 2010, p. 183). What Md Yusof (2010) seems to be implying here is that while people use categories of modern or traditional to adjudicate the definition of ‘Malayness’, ‘Malayness’ in itself is ambiguous and difficult to pinpoint but anything that can be legitimated as ‘traditional’ is often retrospectively proclaimed as ‘authentic’ Malay culture.

In 1991, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (the then Prime Minister of Malaysia) launched Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020), indicating a new agenda for the nation (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 256) and revising the political-economic directions of NEP and NDP (National Development Policy) (Khoo, 2003, p. 20). NEP was replaced by NDP, given the persistent criticism of NEP (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 256) for its parochial orientation towards Malays. Wawasan 2020 was launched to serve as a future-oriented policy of the “post-NEP” era (Khoo, 2003, p. 20). Greider (2004) explains that Wawasan 2020:

[S]tood for the shared ‘vision’ of what Malaysia intended to become: a self-sufficient industrial nation, with an economy that will grow eight times larger by 2020, with a people who will be, as Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad often emphasized ‘psychologically new Malay subservient to none’. (p. 163)

Besides Wawasan 2020, there was rapid technological development and industrialisation during Mahathir’s time in the 1980s which laid the groundwork for the evolution of modernity in the nation with major infrastructure developments carrying ‘nationalist ambitions’ (Khoo, 2006, p. 12), such as the Petronas twin towers, the MSC (Multimedia Super Corridor), the KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International
Airport), and LRT (Light Railway Transit). *Wawasan 2020* also relatedly sought to intervene “within the context of highly contested local/global debates about Islam, science, and modernity” (Furlow, 2009, p. 197). The government’s focus on the Malay majority effectively remained although it was articulated in a different vocabulary with Mahathir Mohamad using the term *Melayu Baru* (New Malay) to continue bolstering the socio-economic rise of the newly urbanised Malays.

i. **Alternative modernity: Discourses and directions**

Along with the technological and economic processes of modernisation, the Malaysian construction of modernity is also shaped by anxieties about the inherently Western nature of modernity. Consequently, local cultural forces have been valorised in order to create an indigenous version of modernity. Of these forces, Islamic revivalism in particular has played an essential role in shaping the discourse of Malaysian modernity since the 1970s when “Islamic resurgence increasingly intrude[d] into public life” (Stivens, 1998, p. 232). This movement challenged the perception of Islam as a traditionalising force hindering the path of modernisation. Instead, it mobilised Islam as a crucial cultural resource for constructing a sense of modernity in the country “suggesting that Islam participates in modernity as a globalizing force as well” (Khoo, 2006, p. 11). Indeed, Islam was seen as the main force that could neutralise the degenerative effect of the Western elements of modernity and lead Malays to the path of indigenous modernity. Stivens (1998) has noted that the “idea of ‘westoxification’ … has real currency among a substantial
portion of Malays, who look to a future Islamic state as an alternative path to modernity” (p. 91).14

The launch of ABIM or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) in 1971, “probably the most successful of [the] revivalist movements” (Nair, 1997, p. 29), attracted a broad spectrum of Malay youth and proved to be a key moment in the Islamic revivalist campaign to position religion as a relevant, contemporaneous and modernising force. ABIM was established by a few alumni of the National Association of Malaysian Islamic Students (PKPIM), comprising graduates from local as well as international universities who had both a religious and a secular education (Jomo & Cheek, 1992, p. 85). ABIM gave young Muslims an opportunity to participate in preaching and missionary activities (called *dakwah* or *dawa* in Arabic) either through specific platforms like universities or generally in the public sphere (Gatsiouinis, 2006, p. 80). This new wave of Islamic influence became synonymous with the “pillar of Malay identity” (p. 80).

However, the growing popularity of *dakwah* movements and their potential threat to the supremacy of the state as a parallel authority also caused anxiety for the government (Yousif, 2004). Consequently, the government also took up this path of rigorous Islamisation to appease the masses and defuse the claims of other non-governmental bodies like ABIM as the sole bearers of the Islamic faith. During this period of Islamic resurgence, both Malay-based political parties, the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the opposition party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) (PAS) competed for Malay support through

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14 She draws the idea of ‘westoxification’ from Ayatollah Khomeini’s notion that “a toxic Western way of life poisons the rest of the world” (Stivens, 1998, p. 91).
Islam-oriented policies (Gomes, 2007, p. 150). Hence, government-driven Islamisation policies pervaded all aspects of social life from educational to economic institutions. During his time, Mahathir even declared his administration’s policy to “Islamise the government machinery” in 1984 (Mutalib, 1993, p. x) and a Shariah (Islamic) legal system was developed alongside the secular judicial system (Furlow, 2009, p. 202). Later in September 2002, the then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi introduced the concept of Islam Hadhari, “officially translated as ‘civilisational Islam’” (Abdul Hamid, 2006, p. 115), which can be understood as “a progressive form of Islam which espouses a joining of forces between the ulama and professional technocrats, a rational acquisition of knowledge, a balance between spiritual and material development, and religious tolerance” (p. 115). Abdul Hamid (2006) adds that with the Islam Hadhari concept the government proclaimed its renewed efforts in embedding Islam as a guiding principle for the state alongside its existing constitutional framework, even instituting Islam as an extra-constitutional framework guiding the state (p. 115).

Thus, it can be said that Islam has not withdrawn from the public sphere in this socio-cultural mobilisation of the nation towards modernity, but instead emerged as the dominant force dictating the terms of modernity in Malaysia. The Islamisation policy also affected the broadcasting industry as televised programs were continually assessed according to Islamic perspectives. As Kahn (2003) notes, this process “has served to accentuate existing divisions between Malays and the West, but also between Malays and other Malaysians” (p. 157).

Another ideological discourse that has become a critical cultural resource in shaping modernity in Malaysia is adat. Adat can be defined as secular “codes of ethics and
behaviour in a range of different social circumstances or situations affecting individuals or groups” (Karim, 1992, p. 14). Adat is an indigenous code of ethics governing areas of social behaviour for Malays that are not addressed by the religious norms of Islam. Adat has been seen as a repository of social norms unique to Malays as an ethnic group and representative of authentic Malayhood. It is also said to derive from social norms of village life which is seen as the source of authentic Malay culture where the “village (kampung) emerges as a favourite site for the idealization of culture and morality” (Beng-Lan, 2002, p. 54).

It has also been argued that “[t]he evolution of the Malay adat has always been mapped according to definitions of Islam” (Omar & Che Dan, 2006, p. 49). Thus, these two discourses run parallel to each other in the sense that Islam sanctions certain areas to adat, but often there are also points when there is conflict between the two. In Reclaming Adat, Khoo (2006) examines the conflicts and negotiations between adat and Islam in articulations of cultural identity in literature and cinema produced by middle-class Malays which attempt to “reclaim, reconstruct, and reconstitute it in its various forms” (p. 5). The same can also be seen in reality TV productions, although such gestures and rhetoric often appear to be somewhat banal (as will be discussed in chapter 5). Similar to the discourse of adat in films, adat in reality TV programs has also been debated around female sexuality, coarse language, as well as music and dance forms (p. 5). Although things like mysticism and witchcraft were widely practised in the past as part of social customs, any aspect of adat which can be deemed inappropriate and forbidden in Islam, is now perceived as not acceptable in contemporary Malay culture.
Through these efforts to construct Islam and *adat* as authentic cultural traditions for producing an indigenous modernity, one can see the concept of ‘alternative modernity’ at play. Gaonkar (2001) coined the term ‘alternative modernity’ to draw attention to the diverse manifestations of modernity in various cultural and political contexts across the world and how they may differ from hegemonic Western models. Gaonkar (2001) argues that “[t]o think in terms of ‘alternative modernities’ is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity” (p. 1). Accepting the pervasive presence of modernity, we must instead appreciate the changeable forms and wide-ranging forces modernity can exert in specific socio-historical contexts. Similarly, Appadurai (1990) has also voiced this opinion saying that “different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently” (p. 17) and Straubhaar (1997) says that “different countries have distinct path to ‘modernity’” (p. 295).

Gaonkar (2001) has observed that alternative modernity places a renewed emphasis on the distinction between ‘societal modernization’ and ‘cultural modernity’. While Malaysian modernization has seen key institutional transformations in terms of the centrality of a market-driven economy, mass media, increased social mobility, urbanization and so on, it is in fact the ‘cognitive transformations’ (p. 2) accompanying these changes that have become sites of anxiety and widespread social debate. The sphere of popular culture is a crucial territory where such cognitive shifts – such as changing notions of the relation of self and society - are articulated and experienced. Through the forces of ‘societal modernization’ and ‘cultural modernity’, it can be said that modernity involves concomitant changes in the structural construction of the society as well as its cultural orientations.
It is the element of cultural modernity that has emerged as a bone of contention in postcolonial, non-Western nations like Malaysia as they define themselves in the mould of modern nation-states without losing their traditional social order to the cultural values of Western modernity. The anxiety over this conflict between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ has strongly shaped the articulation of a Malaysian modernity. As Kahn (1992) argues, modern Malay culture is shaped within two frames: that is “a debate with ‘the west’” and “notions of modernity” (p. 174). In fact, the two ideas are insidiously entangled with each other as modernity is often seen as being a Western legacy which must be re-defined to suit the local context. As Kahn (2003) notes, “a rising ambivalence towards ‘Western-style’ modernization, a concern with the possible loss of cultural, moral and spiritual values among most ‘ethnic’ Malays” has made Malay people eager to talk and debate about modernity (pp. 152-153).

Although my research does not specifically focus on women, the debate surrounding female Malay Muslim dress can be used as a telling example from popular culture that might further clarify this idea of ‘alternative modernity’ (it also contextualises a discussion of fashion in AF in chapter 5). While there was a somewhat liberal attitude towards Western dress in early Malaysia, in the later decades of Islamic revivalism, there was growing anxiety about women wearing Western dress and the Islamic dress style was also developed during that time. The tudung (hijab or head scarf worn to cover the head) began to be worn by the majority of female Muslim students in secondary schools and local universities during the late 1980s. Now women wearing tudung has become very common in Malaysia as it has become “absorbed as mainstream cultural habits” (sic) (Hilley, 2001, p. 189). Although head scarves predated the tudung and can be seen in Malay films of the 1950s, the head scarf
(selendang) worn over the shoulder or tied at the waist was made from a thin sheer cloth and was used as part of Malay dress without the Islamic injunction to cover the hair. On the other hand, there is a steady increase in women wearing tudung in media, and it can be related to the Islamic convention in Malaysian modern society. Omar and Che Dan (2006) explain this situation at length:

The increased visibility of women wearing the tudung in the media, by political leaders, religious figures, pop stars and others may be perceived as a manifestation of the construction of the ‘ideal Malay/Muslim woman’ within the context of modern-day Islamic Malaysia: she is one who celebrates her femininity without transgressing religious boundaries, and who also plays active roles in modern society. (p. 49)

With reference to dakwa clothing worn by factory women, Ong (1995) found that educated women were “likely to don dakwa robes that soon became the Malay woman’s working uniform, replacing the body-fitting batik sarung-kebaya of the days before the Islamic resurgence” (p. 181) and “dakwa clothing became a symbol of depeasantization, a process of class mobility whereby successful Malay women explored their gender identity in modern Islamic terms” (pp. 180-181). This example of everyday cultural politics over female dress can be seen as a telling example of the ideology or imagination of ‘alternative modernity’ where pre-existing cultural traditions are not rejected but in fact valorised and resurrected as articulations of modernity.

Another feature of this formation of an alternative modernity is that “[n]on-Western countries have tended to look to the West when gauging their nearness to or distance
from modernity” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 204). This has resulted in a range of different stances to the West – sometimes aspiring to Western models, sometimes measuring progress in relation to perceived Western standards and at other times opposing them. In contemporary Malaysia the cultural shifts brought about by modernisation have frequently provoked the latter attitude of opposition to Western norms. The government has regularly announced that, “[m]oral values are critical to combat Westernisation in both a general sense and in the sense of what many Malaysians view as a decline in moral values associated with the rise of modernity in the West” (Furlow, 2009, p. 203). Malaysians are constantly being told not to duplicate Western styles and practices but to strive to maintain high moral values based on Malaysian ‘culture’, Islam, and ‘tradition’ (Beng-Lan, 2002, p. 54).

In addition to this oppositional stance to Western cultural influence, a perceived rise in affinity with its Asian neighbours has contributed to the vision of an alternative regional modernity in Malaysia. This shift can be traced to the rise of the Asian Values discourse valorising the “shared values, collectivism and consensus” of the Asian region (Zawawi & Ibrahim, n.d., p. 34). It can be argued that Malaysian modernity is “now bypassing the West and finding a resonance in other Asian modernities while simultaneously recognizing their difference” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 204). According to Manan (1999), the Asian Values rhetoric propagated by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir during the 1990s enforced that firstly, “values are learnt differently in the West and the East”, and secondly, “Western-style democracy can lead to undisciplined and disorderly conditions inimical to development” (p. 362).

The rhetoric of pan-Asian brotherhood and resistance to the West also resulted in the

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15 Apart from the Islamisation policy, ‘Asian Values’ and ‘Look East Policy’ are part of Tun Dr. Mahathir’s legacy. Mahathir, together with other politicians from other countries, such as former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Ishihara Shintaro (former Governor of Tokyo), framed and promoted the Asian Values ideology in the mid-90s to counter ‘Western values’ (Langguth, 2003, p. 25).
introduction of the ‘Look East’ policy in 1981 which exhorted Malaysians to imitate Japan’s industrialization and work ethic (Beng-Lan, 2002, p. 40). While Islamic revivalism is a key moment of Malaysian construction of alternative modernity within the national context, the Asian Values discourse can be regarded as the key concept within the idea of global modernity that Malaysia was creating to claim its membership in the larger East Asian geopolitical region.

**Popular culture, alternative/global modernity in Malaysia**

i. **Popular music — modern traditions**

In the contemporary Malaysian context, popular culture has emerged as a site for the Malays to imagine and engage with modernity. As Gaonkar (2001) has noted, the forms of modernity are now increasingly controlled by global media (p. 1). Specifically, with reference to Malaysia, Kahn (2003) proposes that the cultural dimensions of modernity can be examined in the current developments in Malay popular culture, such as popular music and performance (p. 153). In contemporary Malaysia, the advent of mass media and marketing strategies have brought rapid development in the growth of Malaysian popular culture with recordings, radio, television, ‘live’ shows, nightclubs, and discos taking over other traditional performing arts (Lockard, 1998, p. 223).

Popular music, in particular, can be seen as the backbone of the contemporary entertainment sphere. In the 1960s, Western popular music began to increasingly fill airtime on Malaysian radio and reach the market in the form of music records as Anglo-American rock and roll music became popular (Lockard, 1998, p. 224). In the latter half of the 1960s, many Malaysian groups began imitating the Beatles and
singing in Malay, English, Cantonese, and Tamil (p. 225). These groups came to be known as *Pop Yeh Yeh* (named after the popular Beatles song ‘She Loves You’) (p. 225). With the rise of *pop yeh yeh*, there was also a rise of rock and pop bands, most of which named themselves in English, such as ‘Rhythm Boys’, ‘Singlap Five’, ‘Wanderers’, ‘Clifters’, ‘Jayhawksers’, and ‘Hook’ (p. 226). The popularity of the Western music genre affected the dress style and by the end of 1960s, Western fashion such as blue jeans and the European fashion of miniskirts had increasingly become popular among the youths, in cities like Kuala Lumpur and also in rural areas.

The cult of *pop yeh yeh* faded in 1971 and its decline brought a new change – the base of Malaysian popular culture shifted from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. According to Lockard (1998), the 1970s was a tough time and only some musicians were able to survive on income from their musical careers or gain extensive popularity (p. 235). While this condition suggests a decline in the popular music industry, television programs, on the other hand, increasingly began to show regular programs allocated to popular music and annual amateur contests (p. 235). From 1963 to 1976, the so-called ‘modern Malaysian music’ was created through symphonic-style concerts such as *Malam Irama* (Musical Evening) concert (1963 – 1965), *Malam Irama Malaysia* (1966 – 1970), and *Konsert Perdana Mentri* (the Prime Minister's Concert) (1971 – 1976) (Chopyak, 1987, p. 442).

The mid-1980s saw the rapid development and revival of the Malaysian music industry as nearly twenty record companies were established (Lockard, 1998, p. 242). Although the local Malaysian music industry began to grow, Western artists continued to dominate the market and function as “heroes of local popular culture” (p.

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16 Local musician, M. Osman sang a song titled ‘Suzanna’ which “may have been the first local song in this genre”, and it was soon followed by many other local pop songs of this kind (Lockard, 1998, p. 225).
Madonna and Michael Jackson were extremely popular in Malaysia, with even Madonna dress-alike contests (p. 243). Likewise, many Malaysian stars imitated Western stars, for example, Isma Aliff imitated Weird Al Yankovic and Sahara Yaacob imitated Tina Turner (p. 243). Reflecting Iwabuchi’s (2002) comment of Japanese pop stars, these Malaysian pop stars also “represent a variety of ‘Asiannesses’ that intensely indigenizes ‘Westernness’ or ‘Americanness’” (p. 105). Apart from the Western influence, the Malaysian music industry was also influenced by Indonesian singers, Chinese singers, and a few Filipino and Japanese stars who also sold well in Malaysia (Lockard, 1998, p. 242). The increase in popularity of Japanese stars can also be seen as a reflection of the ‘Look East’ Policy of the time (p. 243).

Later, in the 1990s, the genre of rap was taken up in Malaysia. Local male rap groups, 4U2C and KRU attracted a large following, and accomplished high sales among young people, especially teenage girls (Lockard, 1998, p. 259). But many of the rap groups were perceived as being excessively Westernised and therefore ‘un-Islamic’ (p. 259). This led to some groups like 4U2C being banned from performing on radio and television (Vatikiotis, 1993, p. 33). Grunge and rap fashions, punk hairstyles and ‘heavy metal’ music were adopted by teenagers, which provoked the government to ban advertisements portraying youths wearing baseball caps backwards, following the fashion of these rap singers (p. 233).

It can be summarised that the music industry has experimented with the foreign cultural influences and local musical traditions by blending local themes in song lyrics, incorporating modern music with local music, and sometimes by changing traditional melodies or songs (Lockard, 1998, p. 244). For example, in the late 1990s,
*nasyid* groups (an Arabic style of religious music chanting Islamic verses) (Tan, 1992, p. 284) emerged with the success of Raihan (a male *nasyid* group) and Huda (a female *nasyid* group), who also performed regularly on television (Kahn, 2003, p. 155). Kahn (2003) describes *nasyid* groups as possessing “a distinctive Islamic image – adopting a global form of Islamic dress and singing inspirational songs which, at least on the surface, avoid reference to sex and love in favour of positive Islamic sentiments” (p. 153). The popularity of *nasyid* groups indicated a significant shift in Malaysian popular music, illustrating the entry of Islamic revivalism in the arena of popular culture and this attracted the interest of many media scholars (e.g. Kahn, 2003; Sarkissian, 2005). Contemporary *nasyid* vocal groups can be interpreted as a popular expression of ‘Malayness’ and a simultaneous “identification with modern Muslims throughout the world” (Kahn, 2003, p. 162). A popular male *nasyid* group, Raihan, combines global popular and local cultural traditions with their songs which are a mixture of “*acapella*-style songs and ballads” (p. 153), and the “lyrics are mainly sung in Malay, with a liberal admixture of Arabic words and phrases” (p. 155), but some are sung in English as well.17 Hence, *nasyid* can be seen as proof of the cultural dimensions of larger debates over modernity manifesting in popular music and defining the “self-perceptions of ordinary Malays” (p. 154).

**ii. Cultural tensions over popular music**

The performance of popular music in Malaysia has been subjected to restrictions as Islam assumed a central position in cultural debates. In the late 1980s, any type of popular music that could be deemed offensive or unsuitable by Islam could be banned (Lockard, 1998, p. 248). In 1986, the Association of Muslim *ulama* (religious/Islamic

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17 Rabbani, In-Team and UNIC *nasyid* groups recorded some of their songs in English. Raihan became the first *nasyid* group to record a song in Mandarin called ‘Ching Ai, Ching Ai’ (Sarkissian, 2005, p. 134).
authorities) declared all forms of popular music, especially those of Western imitation as *haram*¹⁸ (forbidden by Islamic law) and the Islamic authorities also “labelled all women who sang for a living as violating Islamic requirements” (p. 248).

The national channel RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) also began to ban songs with offensive lyrics which could incite violence, particularly heavy metal music which could be perceived as violent and too Westernised (Tan, 1989, p. 155). A local singer, Sahara Yaacob, was banned in 1986 because the censors argued that the title of her song ‘Ustazah blues’ denigrated the image of *Ustazah* (a religious teacher) by conflating it with a nightclub singer. In addition, it argued “a good Muslim should not sing the blues, especially not in a nightclub” (*New Straits Times*, 5 December, 1986, cited in Tan, 1989, p. 155). Besides these restrictions on certain songs or artists, all public rock concerts were banned in September 1986 (*Utusan Malaysia*, cited in Tan, 1992, p. 286). Even foreign rock groups or singers such as the Scorpions and LaToya Jackson were deemed musically and morally unsuitable for local culture and prohibited from performing in concerts in Malaysia (Lockard, 1998, p. 242). These actions exemplify a moral panic about “the dangers of modernity, especially Western-style modernity” (Stivens, 1998, p. 93) and such worries were given extensive coverage in the newspaper and media. Eventually, this ban was lifted. Rock concerts are currently permitted but with the proviso that rock groups, local and foreign, adhere to the regulations stipulated by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

¹⁸ *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning ‘forbidden’. It is an Islamic code used to refer to anything that is prohibited in Islam.
Government interventions in popular music still occur, for example, in 2008, the runner-up in a local reality talent format *One in a Million (OIAM)*, Faizal Tahir was censored for exposing his chest at a ‘Rockin’ Birthday Concert’ organised by private television station 8TV in celebrating its fourth anniversary. Since then, 8TV had been banned by the Malaysian government under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) mandate against airing any ‘live’ or recorded concert performance for a period of three months. Faizal Tahir was also banned from appearing ‘live’ on TV from three months for his ‘improper’ stage behaviour.

This brief outline of the history of popular music shows that different genres, Western or local, have existed simultaneously. It has demonstrated that one cannot ignore the fact that Malaysian popular music is intensely imbricated within ‘U.S. cultural imaginaries’ (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 16). However, although some music is fundamentally derived from Western styles, it is actually being hybridised with a combination of local and foreign cultural traces (Lockard, 1998, p. 223).

The growth of the local popular music industry has been accompanied with and facilitated by an increase in the production of television programs centred on popular music and talent contests. As a popular cultural form entrenched within the longstanding tradition of the televised singing competition in the country, *AF* can also be understood within the context of the development of popular music in Malaysia and the latter’s role in articulating a sense of participation in a contemporaneous global modernity.

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19 He was seen removing his shirt during his performance exposing a red "S" word, imitating the logo of the American comic book hero *Superman*, painted on his chest (Leo, 2008).
Format adaptation in reality talent contest: Modernity, glocalisation and cultural identity

i. Format adaptation in reality TV and glocalisation

It is now an oft-acknowledged notion in media studies that “[t]he United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 64). Further contesting the notion of U.S. cultural imperialism, scholars argue that the potential concern is not solely the fear of Americanisation (Sonwalkar, 2001, p. 507), but that “for the people of Irian Jaya, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for the Cambodians, Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic republics” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 295). Examining the transnational networks of production and importation of popular culture in Malaysia, Khoo (2006) offers a related argument commenting that “it would be inaccurate to equate modernity and globalization with homogenous Westernisation” and “popular cultural influences come from multiple directions and locations: Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain, India, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, and Egypt” (p. 11). In terms of the current market of reality TV formats, Waisbord (2004) observes that Western European companies have more copyright holdings for reality TV formats than the United States (p. 361).

In contrast, Iwabuchi (2002) argues that regardless of the different geographical locations and aesthetic features of cultural production, “these popular cultural forms are undoubtedly deeply imbricated in ‘U.S. cultural imaginaries’, but they
dynamically rework the meanings of being modern in Asian contexts at the site of production and consumption” (p. 16). Although there is a vast and extensive network of popular culture industries operating outside the U.S., Iwabuchi’s argument seems to suggest that this situation does not necessarily mean the rise of an alternative paradigm of popular culture or the complete erasure of U.S. dominance. Indeed, instead of such sweeping statements dismissing or accepting U.S. imperialism, we must firstly acknowledge that popular culture as a concept is “imbricated in a US cultural imaginary” (p. 16) and secondly examine the subtle nuances in the adaptation of popular cultural forms in other locations.

Echoing this thought, Keane (2004) argues that “[t]he key to understanding the changing relationship between peripheral media systems and the distribution dominance of USA (Hollywood) is the format” (p. 13). Examining the influence of foreign formats in Europe, Waisbord (2004) states, marketing formats enable American producers, for instance, to penetrate through Europe or work on co-production with their local counterparts (p. 363). Indeed, the current rage for format adaptation is a clear example of the subtle workings of cultural imperialism which cannot be summed up in a clear-cut either/or position about cultural dominance of any kind. Non-Western countries no longer depend on cultural products from Western locations; they adapt them for the local audiences that serve to suit local tastes but still retain the broader aesthetic imperatives of ‘U.S. cultural imaginaries’. As Iwabuchi (2002) argues, “[i]n this sense, they are neither “Asian” in any essentialist meaning nor second-rate copies of ‘American originals’” (p. 16).

The term ‘glocalisation’, which has had significant currency in cultural and media studies, provides an appropriate framework for describing the concomitant forces of
homogenisation and differentiation at work in format adaptation, which link the local to the hegemonic global but simultaneously articulate the global in different forms at the local level. Glocalisation refers to strategies of “cultural borrowing, appropriation, hybridization and indigenization” without simply imitating the foreign or global aspects (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 93).

Indeed, Robertson (1995) notes that the Oxford Dictionary of New Words acknowledges the term ‘glocalisation’ as being “formed by telescoping global and local to make a blend” (p. 28). It captures the contradictory and counter-intuitive cultural dynamics at play in an age of globalising media economies.

Television formats, of which AF is an example, are key instances of the global-local relationship. In other words, while the format is recognisably global, it simultaneously contains some sense of cultural control over the content and values of the program. As Ang (1996), notes, “it is hard to distinguish here between the ‘foreign’ and the ‘indigenous’, the ‘imperialist’ and the ‘authentic’: what has emerged is a highly distinctive and economically viable hybrid cultural form in which the global and the local are inextricably intertwined” (p. 154).

On one hand, the global dissemination of formats may suggest the global integration of media economies and the standardisation of content (Waisbord, 2004, p. 359). For example, American Idol is built as a global brand produced in a uniform format across the world with the same blue colour scheme, theme music, slogans, stage, and the same technical styles of lighting, editing style and camera techniques, as well as the judging panel of ‘nasty judge’ and ‘nice judge’ (Coutas, 2006, p. 378). Indeed, “[a]ll of the elements that create the format are in themselves a sign system” that is used

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20 This term is being developed from Japanese business practice, from the Japanese word dochakuka (cf. Oxford Dictionary of New Words).
consistently across different countries and makes the show clearly identifiable across different locales (p. 378).

On the other hand, the content of adapted formats for each country is differentiated. Formats provide a ‘template’ for reality programs, but their content is adapted in different countries to suit local cultural preferences. Compared to canned shows, formats are open texts that can be adapted according to the local culture “because they are designed to ‘travel well’ across national boundaries” (Waisbord, 2004, p. 368) in contrast to “canned shows … [that] are steeped in specific national cultures” (p. 371).

Iwabuchi (2004), for example, has noted the differences in the adaptation of reality shows from Japan to America, focussing in particular on the Survivor franchise. He comments that whereas “the main feature of the US version is the exposure of naked human nature, as witnessed in betrayals and plot forged among contestants to expel a particular rival, the Japanese version places more focus on the inner mental conflicts of each challenger” (p. 25). Format distributors are also usually quite well aware of the cultural sensitivities of the receiving country, as is apparent from this statement by Fremantlemedia (cited in Kretschmer & Singh, 2010, p. 36):

In Pop Idols (Britain), show judge Simon Cowell’s caustic comments were acceptable on television whereas in American Idol (where Simon was also a show judge) such comments could never have been made in public. Similarly, in Asian territories such as Singapore, etc. where the culture is much more polite, or seen to be polite, we had to ensure judges follow local customs and traditions. (VP, Development, Fremantlemedia)
It has also been argued that although the format may have originated in the West, the localisation strategies in producing a program are critically important and not just tokenistic (Coutas, 2006, p. 382). Past research has demonstrated that the implementation of format adaptation has reduced cultural tensions as format adaptation strategies enable local producers to remove any obvious or potentially contentious foreign cultural traces and modify the original program in accordance with the local culture (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007, p. 10).

Format adaptation has also emerged as one of the easiest means for broadcasters to produce local programs with the assurance of using a formula that has been proven successful in other locations. It has also allowed broadcasters to produce local programs with minimal creative input or risk and to fulfil quotas set by governments for locally produced programs (Waisbord, 2004, p. 363).

### ii. Responses to, and critiques of, glocalised formats

Existing literature on transnational media consumption has, for the most part, focussed on how local television industries are adjusting to the globalising media economies and how local producers are adapting global formats for local audiences (Fung, 2004; Iwabuchi, 2004; Moran, 2004). Those studies of transnational consumption that do consider audiences attitudes and engagement have tended to focus on genres like drama and soap opera (Chua, 2008; Leung, 2004; Yoshitaka, 2008). This study seeks to extend existing research by highlighting issues relating to the politics of consumption of a glocalised product in the popular subgenre of the hybrid reality talent show exemplified by *AF*. 
The interpretation of texts produced by viewers is part of a ‘cultural struggle’; as Ang (1996) puts it, reading a popular media text is, “an ongoing struggle over meaning and pleasure which is central to the fabric(ation) of everyday life” (p. 43). What is considered offensive in one country might not be so in another country and “the extent to which [these social matters] will be recognizable and acceptable within particular cultural settings may vary considerably” (Moran, 2009, p. 155). Al-Ra’is, for example, an adapted version of Big Brother, was banned in Bahrain for showing a male and female contestant giving each other a welcoming kiss on the cheek (Lynch, 2005, pp. 33-34).

Likewise, while some programs receive high ratings in many countries, it does not mean that it will travel well to other countries. Big Brother, for example, was never produced in Japan, as the Big Brother format was deemed “to be too nasty for Japanese viewers” (Iwabuchi, 2004, p. 26). While Big Brother was not considered suitable for production in many Asian and Islamic countries, Big Brother enjoyed spectacular success in Australia, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Switzerland, just to name a few, but only had average ratings in the U.S. (Van Zoonen, 2001, p. 669).

As reality TV shows have gained currency in local television programming, a host of conflicts have arisen. Particularly, ‘gender relations’ and ‘public behaviour’ issues (Moran, 2009, p. 50) in reality TV have incited criticisms about these programs in Islamic countries. The Turkish version of Big Brother was banned for twenty-four hours when it showed a scene where a housemate was massaging another housemate (Lavender, 2003, p. 15). Ala al-Hawa Sawa (On Air Together), a Saudi MBC program based on a mixture of successful American reality dating shows The Dating Game and The Bachelorette, for example, stirred controversies in the country (Lynch,
Although it avoids elements like nudity and revealing outfits that might cause offence, the basic premise of women choosing from a variety of male contestants as part of an arranged marriage process was perceived as culturally controversial (p. 32). Apart from Islamic countries, Asian countries have also expressed concern about the degradation of public taste due to reality TV.

In Malaysia, reality TV has also incited extensive cultural debates. The dating format show *Mencari Cinta* (Looking for Love) was lambasted by a range of ordinary and official commentators in the press for being ‘too Westernised’ (*Malay Mail*, 1 January 2007, p. 8), and was terminated after its first season. While *AF* is a singing competition and the format is not as risqué as some other reality TV shows, it has still been blamed for moral decadence. In particular, *AF* has been criticised for mimicking inappropriate Western cultural practices like physical contact between male and female contestants – in the form of congratulatory or conciliatory hugs at the elimination rounds. Reality shows were labelled *haram* in Islam by a mufti from Perak who said that “[these reality TV programs] promoted free mingling between the sexes which … could lead to moral collapse” (*Agence France Presse*, 4 September 2005). Due to these sensitivities, *Malaysian Idol’s* executive producer Michael Christian Simon admitted that the contestants “[were] instructed to avoid physical contact” (*Agence France Presse*, 4 September 2005). Although the government and religious leaders have been at the forefront of these criticisms of *AF*, Zawawi and Ibrahim (n.d.) found that there are indicators of divided acceptance coming from academicians, entertainers and Malay viewers (p. 41).

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21 There was unanimous criticism of this show from all quarters of Malay society, the viewing public, political and religious leaders. For example, Datuk Jins Shamsuddin, a famous veteran actor said, “I am disappointed with it as it is too Westernised and portrays women as commodities” (*Bernama*, 3 September, 2005).
As mentioned in my introduction, AF’s popularity surged in season 3 with the presence of Mawi.\textsuperscript{22} Mawi’s persona as a humble, religious, conservative ‘Malay kampung man’, diligent in his adherence to Islamic norms and well-versed in Quranic recitation, attracted him overwhelming support from all quarters of the Malay populace. While singers like Sharifah Aini and Sahara Yaacob had been criticised in the past because they started as Quran recital or religious poetry (\textit{nasyid}) singers but deviated to perform popular music (Lockard, 1998, p. 248), Mawi’s reverse career path of competing in a popular music contest on the basis of his ‘traditional’ outlook earned him mass support. Mawi, as an example, shows that reality programs are also capable of positive political appropriation. Mawi was even invited to perform at a concert\textsuperscript{23} in Kelantan, a province governed by the conservative Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS) which had banned any public entertainment performances involving singing, dancing or carnival rides since 1995 (p. 248). The celebration of the national through popular TV shows raises the broader question of ‘banal nationalism’ at work (which chapter 5 takes up in more detail).

But is the preference for localised programs always related to such visible political, nationalist concerns? Iwabuchi’s (2002) study provides an interesting remark as he found that the popularity of localised programs in Japan is closely related with “how Japan localises the original” (p. 96). With reference to the local version of \textit{Who Wants to Be A Millionaire?}, Iwabuchi (2002) found that Japanese audiences were not concerned about whether the program was a Japanese origin or not, but if “the program contains a ‘Japanese odour’ through localization” (p. 96). In Singapore, it

\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, his astonishing popularity has been described as ‘Mawi Mania’ which not only affected ordinary people, but also some leaders in Malaysia. The speaker ended a session at the Legislative Assembly by reminding the members to vote for Mawi the next night (Nadzmi, 2005).

\textsuperscript{23} The concert was held for the launch of the state capital of Kelantan as an ‘Islamic city’ (\textit{Agence France Presse}, 15 September 2005).
has been reported that “game shows that are translated from Western formats into local English shows become successful because of their careful blend of familiar game show structures, celebrity hosts, local faces, as well as the use of English language – accessibility to Singaporean audiences from many walks of life” (Lim, 2004, p. 113).

On the other hand, Chua (2007) has claimed that ‘foreignness’ and familiarity are both desired by Singaporean audiences in different forms. He argues that while Singaporeans felt that “local programmes generally deal with issues of Singaporean everyday life, with messages that are relevant and didactic but, precisely because of these features, can become ‘tiresome’ rather than ‘entertaining’. … Thus, foreignness must remain recognizably foreign in the programmes” (pp. 129-130). Given these claims we may ask do Malaysian audiences prefer to watch local reality TV programs that contain many aspects of local culture, or the ones that portray global ‘foreign’ images, or they do not mind watching a mix of both?

The concept of ‘feeling glocal’ (Iwabuchi, 2004) is useful to describe the dynamics of viewer pleasure in watching a localised version of a global format like AF. Iwabuchi (2004) explains this situation in the following manner:

[T]he format business has given audiences a pleasure in sharing the common frameworks and the irreducibly different appearances that manifest in local consumption. Put differently, what is being promoted is not simply ‘global localization’ that aims to adopt the common to the difference but also ‘local globalization’ that makes audiences feel ‘glocal’, that is, a sense of participation in a global society through the
reciprocated enjoyable recognition of local (in most cases, synonymous to ‘national’) specificities articulated through the shared formats. (p. 34)

An adapted version of a global format program gives the audience a sense of contemporaneous modernity; they participate in the pleasures of global consumerist popular culture but with local participants and content that they can identify and relate with. The risk of alienation due to the foreignness of an imported format is removed as local actors, language and content become recognisable signifiers that an audience can relate to.

Lim (2008) asserts that the reception of adapted reality programs by local audiences in Malaysia reflects the accommodation of global aesthetic tastes and local cultural values. She says Malay responses to reality TV:

[C]an be read as articulations or dynamic responses and resistances to global forces, especially true of a country attempting to embrace globalization in the ‘Islamic’ way – a new Islam that is friendly to global capitalism, rendering support to progress, development and (positive) changes whilst ensuring that efforts towards embracing globalization are constantly in accordance with Islamic values. (p. 71)

She further argues that the popularity gained by local reality TV programs indicates that Malaysia accepts modernisation but at the same time does not undermine the existing faith in Islam (p. 72).

In this chapter, I have developed an understanding of Malaysian participation within global modernity, and its expression in local popular culture histories. In the next chapter, I map and analyse the development of the Malaysian media landscape which
has provided an environment for the proliferation of reality TV shows, focussing on the reality talent type of show exemplified by \textit{AF}.
CHAPTER 2
AN INDUSTRIAL PERSPECTIVE: THE RISE OF REALITY TV GENRE
AND AKADEMI FANTASIA

This chapter aims to unravel some of the complex threads of historical change in the
development of the broadcasting industry in Malaysia and the emergence of reality
TV as a popular genre occupying a significant proportion of channel schedules. This
chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will provide an overview of the
Malaysian television industry in terms of the variety of channels, ownership,
government policy, and program content to map the trajectory of its development.
Secondly, this chapter will discuss the emergence of reality TV specifically through a
political-economic perspective in order to situate the rise of this genre in a media
landscape of interactive technologies, globalised media markets and fragmented
audiences. The last section will provide an overview of reality TV in Malaysia since
its formation in the early 2000s, describing the main programs and styles of the genre,
and especially focussing on the dominance of the subgenre of reality talent contest to
which AF belongs.

The context of television industry in Malaysia

i. History and development of television industry in Malaysia

There are broadly three types of channels in the Malaysian television industry –
national channels, private channels and satellite/cable channels. The national channels
RTM1 and RTM2, and private channels TV3, NTV7, channel 9 and 8TV, are free-to-air
and can be viewed by all local viewers either in Peninsular or East Malaysia. In
contrast, satellite or cable channels require subscription fees and additional reception

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apparatus like satellite dishes. The Malaysian television industry began in 1963 with the telecast of the first national channel *Rangkaian Pertama* (The First Channel).\(^{24}\)

Lacking experienced staff and adequate finance (Abdul Wahab, 2002, p. 57), the station could only produce 3.5 hours of airtime every day for the first few weeks of its operation, and a total of 24 hours per week, with the local programs, including news and entertainment, taking up only 12 hours (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 54).

Needless to say, the lack of capacity in producing local Malay programs also meant that the national channel failed to satisfy the needs of the broad spectrum of the Malaysian populace and also other races in the country (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 55). In November 1969, *Saluran Dua* (The Second Channel) was established with a purported mission to encourage a spirit of unity amongst all races in Malaysia by airing programs that used languages other than Malay (Abdul Wahab, 2006a, p. 170).

*Saluran Satu* and *Saluran Dua* were both part of a national TV network owned and financed by the Malaysian government, and under the administration of the Department of Broadcasting in the Ministry for Information (Kitley, 2003, p. 49). From the beginning, then, the government had a strong role in shaping the place of television in Malaysian culture.

Due to the lack of expertise and the high-cost of producing local programs, the national channels tended to purchase TV programs from America (Karthigesu, 1991). In the 24 hours of airtime during the first week of *Saluran Satu*’s broadcast, almost half (48.1 per cent) of the programs were imported, mainly from America and Britain (p. 103). At the time, the channel claimed that imported programs such as the *Woody Woodpecker Show, Adventures of Robin Hood, Cliff Richard, Alfred Hitchcock*;

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\(^{24}\) At the time Malaysia already had an established and stable newspaper distribution and radio broadcasting system (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 19).
Presents, The Saint and The Bugs Bunny Show were only to be used as ‘time fillers’ until local production improved (Karthigesu, 1991). Since then, television programs from the West have consistently exceeded the number of local programs (p. 103). From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, there was a shift in program content as locally produced programs began to assert their presence alongside imported programs (Thompson, 2007, p. 157).

In 1978, Saluran Satu (The First Channel) changed its name to RTM1 and later in 1991 changed it again to TV1 (Abdul Wahab, 2006a). Similarly, Saluran Dua was also renamed TV2. The Malay language was used as the main language for TV1 and all imported programs aired on TV1 used Malay subtitles. According to Thomas (2005, p. 133) and Kitley (2003, p. 49), three-quarters of RTM1 programming was in Malay in compliance with government policies to use the national language for national unity and the rest were in English. RTM2 imported 60 per cent of its programs, and the English language dominated the channel at 54 per cent, Malay at 21 per cent, Mandarin 14 per cent, and Tamil 11 per cent (Kitley, 2003; Thomas, 2005).

Apart from program content, important structural changes in the Malaysian broadcasting industry were introduced in 1984 when Mahathir Mohamad introduced Dasar Penswastaan (Privatisation Policy), and this policy ended the tradition of government monopoly in the media sector (Abdul Wahab, 2006a, p. 173). But in Karthigesu’s (1994) view “the government’s decision to allow a private company to operate a television network alongside a government network, cannot be interpreted as a move to liberalize broadcasting institutions”. In his view “it was an economically motivated decision” with the intent to make the media sector a competitive and
profitable business (p. 82). During this era the RTM Director General made this related comment:

We want more sponsors for our programmes. Only by making our programmes more effective in terms of viewership can we hope to have any response. We cannot afford to screen ineffective programmes anymore with RTM on the road to corporatisation. (The New Sunday Times, 1 January 1989, cited in Nain, 1996, p. 173)

By ‘effective’ programs the Director General seemed to indicate “programmes that are commercially viable and hence attractive to potential sponsors” (Nain, 1996, p. 173). Given these imperatives for profitable entertainment, Western television programs were not rejected outright despite the parallel rhetoric of the time about the problematic moral influence of Western cultural products (cf. Nain, 1996, p. 174).

Contemporaneously there was a trend of watching imported programs of video-viewing especially in the Chinese community (Abdul Wahab, 2006; Hashim, 1989; Karthigesu, 1994), as well as viewers in Johor (South Malaysia) watching channels from neighbouring countries such as Thailand, and Singapore (Hashim, 1989, p. 104), which were seen as threatening national sovereignty. It was thought that the entry of private television stations into the market would make the sector profitable and aid the development of local production companies, which in turn would help the government to battle the rise of videotape usage and foreign channels (Karthigesu, 1994).
The privatisation policy\textsuperscript{25} led to the birth of the first private channel, TV3 in 1984 (first in the Klang Valley region then nationally the year after) (Kitley, 2003, p. 50). As a commercial channel, its main objective was to make a profit (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 84), rather than social development. So, it is not surprising that TV3 bought many new programs from overseas (Abdul Wahab, 2006a) such that almost 90 per cent of its program content was imported at the beginning of its operation (Hashim, 1989, p. 112). However, Hashim (1989) also insists that TV3 also wanted to reflect national aspirations, conform to the principles of \textit{Rukunegara} (national ideology), promote Islam (the state religion) and safeguard national identity (p. 117).

In terms of program flow and scheduling, TV3 brought a competitive spirit in the market. Forced to compete with TV3 for audience share, RTM attempted to improve its program content by replacing less appealing programs such as documentaries with foreign dramas, sitcoms and sports in primetime slots (Tan, 1992, pp. 287-288). RTM also moved a step ahead of TV3 by airing foreign music video clips, even though these arguably sometimes contained violent and/or potentially indecent images conflicting with the government’s guidelines (p. 288).

After TV3, Malaysia’s second private TV station, MetroVision, began transmission on 18\textsuperscript{th} February 1995 in Kuala Lumpur (Waheed, 1999).\textsuperscript{26} MetroVision targeted a sophisticated multi-racial metropolitan audience and brought in popular American shows such as \textit{Seinfeld, Frasier, Ally McBeal, Fame} and \textit{3rd Rock from The Sun} (Waheed, 1999) subtitled in the Malay language. MetroVision suspended its services in November 1999 and at the time it was reported that this was just a temporary

\textsuperscript{25} The privatisation policy also led to the growth of local production houses such as HVD entertainment, Bright Network, Eurofine and Ten on Ten which began producing some content for RTM1 and RTM2 (CheLah, 2001, p. 41).

\textsuperscript{26} It was then expanded to Perak, Kedah and Johor in June and October respectively (Kadir, 1997).
suspension to enable its extension plan (to expand its service to urban centres in North and West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia) with a planned relaunch in early 2000 (Shanti, 1999). However, MetroVision remained inactive from that time due to what was vaguely reported as ‘financial constraints’.27

In 1996, ASTRO (Astro All Asia Network Plc), the home of AF and the first Malaysian satellite cable operator, commenced its operation. Astro services consist of over 80 television channels and 16 radio channels and it “is the region’s leading cross-media operator with direct-to-home satellite television services in Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia”.28 The rise of Astro could be marked as a culmination of the amendments of the 1988 Broadcasting Act (Hashim, 2010; Kitley, 2003) and the technological shift in the broadcasting industry. As Abdul Wahab (2006b) notes:

Undoubtedly, the new technology revolution in communication technology has allowed ASTRO to introduce a more ‘sophisticated’ viewing experience for its audience. Known as interactive and multimedia services which was made possible through the convergence and divergence of existing ‘old’ and ‘new’ media technologies, ASTRO currently offers various interactive TV and multimedia services ranging from video on demand (pay per view), games, stock link, chatting, SMS, icon download, internet banking which were not available in the ‘television market’ previously. (p. 7)

27 No further details concerning these ‘financial constraints’ were publicly reported.
Astro is currently owned by Ananda Krishnan (a close associate of Mahathir), and he also owns the Maxis telecommunication company (Zanuddin, 2007, p. 75). Astro channels include four private local channels (TV3, NTV7, Channel 9 and 8TV) and two government channels (TV1 and TV2). Astro airs in six different languages with 43 channels in English, 20 channels in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), 13 channels in Malay, nine channels in Tamil, one channel in Korean, one channel in Indonesian, two channels in Arabic and drama programs in various languages including Spanish, Filipino, Japanese and Thai (Pawanteh, Rahim & Ahmad, 2009, p. 23). The programming strategy of Astro was that of providing an immense choice of channels, at least two of each genre, and up to 480 hours of programming per day (Thomas, 2005, p. 156).

Apart from airing various international channels, Astro also offers a variety of in-house channels that only show local content and seek to portray local issues relevant to the needs of various ethnic groups in Malaysia. For example, Astro Ria channel targeted Malay audiences airing locally-produced programs in Bahasa Melayu, Astro Wah Lai Toi targeted Chinese people with Cantonese/Mandarin programs, and Astro Vaanavil targeted Indian viewers with Tamil language programs. Astro also launched more in-house channels catering to a multi-racial audience with different requirements and tastes, such as Astro AEC, Astro Xiao Tai Yang, Astro Awani and Tutor TV. In the year 2005, Astro produced about 1300 hours of in-house content in key languages (Malay, Chinese, English and Indian languages), with a further 5,000 hours of subtitling and to a lesser extent, dubbing of imported programs. In the beginning, not everyone could afford to subscribe to Astro as the installation fee was

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29 His empire which comprises Astro and Maxis has made AF as a SMS based voting system pertinent and easier to be established. As a Maxis holder and Astro’s owner, he gains profit from both – the program and the SMS votes.

30 (http://www.astro.com.my)
very high at around RM1499 (CheLah, 2001, p. 11). Now due to the reduction in the cost of installation and rise in income levels as well as the variety of programs it offers, Astro has increased its subscription base significantly. In terms of audience demographic, almost 80 per cent of the Chinese population, nearly 90 per cent of the Indian population, and just 55 per cent of the Malay population subscribe to Astro (The report: Malaysia 2008: Media and advertising, 2008, p. 219).

Given the economic and technical imperatives around the importation of programs, Malaysian viewers have been familiar with Western programs for at least three decades (Karthigesu 1998, pp. 42-43). All local stations, ranging from government television stations, to satellite cable operator, were extensively airing Western programs. Amongst all channels, TV1 airing the least amount of Western programs, as it uses Malay language as its main language (as stated earlier in this chapter). However, since 1996 the U.S. has not directly dominated Malaysian television content as local TV stations started to increase the amount of local programs on air in accordance with the objective of the Ministry of Information to air more local programs and limit foreign programs to 40% of total airtime. Although this objective for regulating the proportion of foreign programs was prescribed in the 1980s, it was not taken seriously by TV stations until 1996 (Karthigesu, 1998, p. 40). It is important to note that local channels still airing Western programs during that time, although the amount had been reduced. While the number of local programs increased, most of the locally produced programs, whether they were talk shows, sitcoms or musical programs, were copied from foreign programs (Nain, 1996). The Malaysian version of Selamat Pagi Malaysia (Good Morning Malaysia) was copied from Good Morning America (U.S.), Muzik TV (TV Music) from music video programs on MTV (U.S.), and Getting Together, a comedy drama was based on the
American sitcom *Friends* (Wang, 2010, p. 31). This condition shows that the local program content is still American in nature.

While Malaysian TV stations struggled to produce their own local programs, it was actually programs from neighbouring countries that began to overtake U.S. content. Consequently, the flow of imported programs from Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan was the new phenomenon in the Malaysian TV industry and every station was flooded with Asian dramas (Abdul Wahab, 2006a, p. 183). A local newspaper reported that foreign soap operas, for example Indonesian shows such as *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*, were often more popular than local programs (*Bernama Daily Malaysian News*, 11 April 2007).

In 1997, Malaysia’s third private free-to-air network NTV7 was launched. It was owned and run by Natseven TV Sdn Bhd (a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Prima Berhad). With its slogan of ‘*Saluran Ceria Anda*’ (Feel Good Channel) it promised viewers “a ‘feel good’ experience, through content that is high in creativity and at the same time portrays the importance of strong family and community values and national integration”." The new channel began the trend of purchasing a number of Latin American telenovelas that began to attract local audiences (Abdul Wahab, 2006a, p. 182). Zahora Gany Bathusha, NTV7’s Vice-President for brand content acquisition told the *New Straits Times* that Latin American “telenovelas are appealing because they have strong storylines and have values found in Asian culture” (Farinordin, 2003, p. 3). Beginning with *Maria Mercedes*, which had more than 600,000 viewers, NTV7 continued its success with *Mis Tres Hermanas* (My Three

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31 (http://www.ntv7.com.my/About-Us.aspx)
Sisters) and *La Usurpadora* (The Pretender) (p. 3). In fact, the *Yo Soy Betty La Fea* soap series attracted more than 800,000 viewers in 2003 (p. 3). The U.S. adapted version of *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*, titled *Ugly Betty*, also aired on local channel (8TV) in 2007.

NTV7’s success with telenovelas from Latin America brought a new shift in the local television landscape as every TV station began to consider this alternative source of international content. Since then, TV3 and TV2 along with most other Malaysian networks have adopted NTV7’s strategy. Although viewers have to watch these soaps with Malay subtitles or in dubbed versions, they continue to regularly attract hundreds of thousands of viewers. In recent years, this penchant for non-Western content has now shifted to programs with content from neighbouring Asian countries. The impact of the so-called “Korean Wave” (see Iwabuchi, 2008) has been significant in Malaysia, as noted in newspaper reports of the “thousands of Malaysians [that] have become addicted to Korean romantic tear-jerkers like *Autumn in My Heart*, *Winter Sonata* or *Summer Scent*” (*New Straits Times*, 25 August 2004, p. 14).

Six years after NTV7 commenced, the fourth private network Channel 9 began its operations in 2003 and “it was the first free-to-air TV station to specifically identify and target its audience – young, urban, adult Malaysians, primarily between the ages of 15 and 35” (*New Straits Times*, 5 September 2003, p. 5). This network promised to offer “lifestyle entertainment that is both intelligent and innovative, and has a high degree of interactivity” (p. 5).

After about four months of Channel 9, another private channel called 8TV was officially launched on 8 January 2004 although it had been running test transmissions
to viewers in the Klang Valley since 2003 (Josephine, 2003). Similar to Channel 9, 8TV also catered to young and urban viewers in general and the Chinese community in particular, although Media Prima Chief Executive Officer, Abdul Rahman Ahmad told the *New Straits Times* that “while 8TV caters to Chinese viewers, Indians and Malays will not be forgotten” (*New Straits Times*, 22 July 2004, p. 8). The programs aired on 8TV were mostly popular international programs such as *American Idol, Fastlane, Platinum, America's Next Top Models, CSI: Miami*, and *Gilmore Girls* (Koh & Low, 2003, p. 7). Both these newer channels attest to the changing preferences of an increasingly globally-oriented populace in Malaysia as well as recognition by the television industry itself of differentiated market segments within the country.

The other relevant structural change in the television industry in Malaysia has been the introduction of pay television stations. In 1995, Mega TV started operations as Malaysia’s first subscription-based 24-hour pay TV cable television service, and managed to acquire 130,000 subscribers in 1998 (*New Straits Times*, 28 March 1998, p. 24). However, Mega TV ended its operations due to economic problems in 1999. It was only in the mid-2000s that pay TV resurfaced again and continued to exist as profitable businesses. MiTV was launched on 5 September 2005 broadcasting “a range of local and overseas TV channels complemented by unique and interactive features available from the set-top box”.32 MiTV offers more than 30 channels, ranging from entertainment programs to news (Chow, 2005). MiTV Corporation Sdn Bhd deputy chairman and chief executive officer Datuk Rosman Ridzwan said, “MiTV has something new and different to offer the vernacular viewers” (Chow, 2005). It has different programs targeting niche markets; there are Cantonese, Hokkien, and Mandarin programs for the Chinese, programs in Tamil, Telugu, 32 (http://www.utelecom.com.my/corporate/press_18dec06.htm).
Malayalam and Bollywood for the Indians, and Dangdut, Nusantara and Islamic content for the Malay viewers (Chow, 2005). However, being a close rival of Astro, MiTV was not able to reach viewers, and the number of subscribers was very low, at below 5,000 subscribers within the first three months of its operation (Ramly, 2005).

About three months later, another pay television called Fine TV was launched in December 2005, offering 18 different channels, with programs ranging from drama serials, karaoke, movies, game shows, educational programs, cartoons and animations, sitcoms, sports, reality TV, music videos et cetera. Fine TV introduced another development over free-to-air television channels with its watch-on-demand service where programs are not scheduled and viewers could watch the programs they chose at will 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Just like watching a videotape or DVD, viewers could also pause, stop, rewind or fast forward while watching their favourite programs. Besides watching TV programs, viewers could also use Fine TV as a telecommunication portal linked to the Internet. In the words of the President of Network Guidance Sdn. Bhd (Fine TV operator), Ida Rahayu Mohd Noor, Fine TV’s goal “was to cater for specific audience in the Klang Valley such as families and individuals living in condominiums” (Syed Ali, 2006), meaning audiences belonging to a higher socio-economic background who make up a “faster, time-constrained and more intellectual market” (Syed Ali, 2006).

ii. Government roles in the broadcasting industry

In contemporary Malaysia, the field of media, production and consumption forms a focal point for its engagement with the project of modernity. Commercial media is

seen as a vehicle of the modernisation strategy to implement the idea of ‘open skies’ that sought for “the push for the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as well as deregulatory policies” (Wang, 2010, p. 24). These two aspects made satellite television possible, “[a]lthough the idea of “open skies” was earlier rejected by the Ministry of Information” (p. 24). The government nevertheless still plays a strict disciplinary role in monitoring media and stipulating broadcasting policies. It states that “local programmes should reflect the multi-ethnic composition of the country, observe that Islam is the official religion, should not portray any ethnic group in a bad light, and should not air programmes that offend any religious sensitivities” (p. 24).

Between the 1960s and 1970s, television not only became a medium for the government to strengthen its position and promote a spirit of nationalism, it also enhanced Malay dominance (Abdul Wahab, 2006a). According to Kitley (2003), “[p]rogramming in 1970s was influenced by the National Economic and National Cultural Policies of 1971 which selectively promoted Malay culture and attempted to fast-track the involvement of ethnic Malays in the commercial life of Malaysia” (p. 49). Furthermore, it has been noted that media images have been framed to suit the agenda of the Malay dominance and national unity set as the prerequisites of New Economic Policy and Vision 2020 (Khattab, 2006, p. 349).

After nearly a decade, the audience soon started to become tired of the somewhat boring and ideological TV fare mandated by the government and started to search for other entertainment alternatives (Kitley, 2003; Zanuddin, 2007). Viewers in the Southern Peninsular areas like Johor were watching channels from neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Singapore as they were able to get reception of these channels with a slight adjustment of their TV antennas (Kitley, 2003, p. 49). In
addition, the spread of video cassette technology also increased significantly at that
time, providing an alternative for viewers to access entertainment (p. 49).

Mahathir’s ‘Look East’ Policy was another government policy that had major
implications on the larger socio-political context as well as the media landscape. For
example, the ‘Look East’ Policy encouraged the importation of Japanese television
programs to Malaysia by RTM (cf. Wang & Nain, 2001). In addition, the growth of
Islamic revivalism during Mahathir’s rule also impacted the broadcasting industry. In
1988, Radio and Television Station (RTM) announced that it was considering that
Islam should be the only religion to be broadcast on radio or television (Mualib,
1993, p. x). On its radio and national TV stations, “[c]alls to prayer are broadcast at
each of the five prayer times” and Friday prayers from the National Mosque broadcast
every week on both radio and television (McDaniel, 1994, pp. 121-122). The
introduction of the Islamisation policy “stepped up many Islamic-related programmes
and issued other policy directives” (Mualib, 1993, p. 30).

Before the launch of TV3 in 1984, RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) adhered to a
policy that popularity was of less importance than serving and educating its audience,
and promoting the ideals of the *Rukunegara* (the national ideology) (Karthigesu,
1994, p. 83). This emphasis could also be associated with the early development of
national TV back in 1973, as Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, the then Minister of Information
stated that “television was not regarded by his Ministry as an ‘entertainment box’”
(cited in Grenfell, 1979, p. 8). He explained that imported television programs were
being put through a rigorous selection process and local productions were being
developed with a view to screening content which was in concern with the national
goals set out in *Rukunegara* (cited in Grenfell, 1979). In regards to this, the local
production should be more concerned with producing television programs, so that it is in line with the national goals, and not merely entertainment.

All television programs aired on national channels or private terrestrials need to undergo a censorship board screening according to the Broadcasting Act (1988) (McDaniel, 1994; Thompson, 2007). On the other hand, all private television channels are regulated by the Private Broadcasting Supervision Unit (WhiteKnight, 1997, cited in Thompson, 2007, p. 158). The 1988 Act was amended in 1996 with the introduction of new television networks, for instance, cable and satellite television, pay TV and video on demand (Nain & Wang, 2004, p. 256). In 1998, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act was established to regulate “the converging industries of broadcasting, telecommunications and on-line services in accordance with the national policy objectives”.

Although the criticism of foreign cultural influence took hold in the later decades, fears about its cultural impact were being voiced even before television was introduced to the country. A journalist of Malayan Times in 1962 wrote:

A most important aspect of TV is its programmes. It is to be hoped that the future Malayan TV audiences would not be inflicted with too many shoddy, canned features bought from abroad, such programmes like

35 "The broadcast law contains just four sections: (a) introduction, including a definition of terms and conditions of effect; (b) broadcasting licenses, including scope of activities, licensing procedures, penalties, license validation, powers of the minister to alter conditions, and suspension or cancellation of licenses; (c) powers of the minister to give directives and approve inspections, including the requirement to follow minister’s directives and permit inspections; and (d) licensing rules for assembly or distribution or trade in radio-and television-receiving equipment" (McDaniel, 1994, pp. 94-95). “Guidelines for program content are contained in a ‘code of ethics of broadcasting’ drawn up by a Cabinet committee in 1988. The rules were meant to supplement and define the broadcasting Act’s provisions. Among other matters, the code sets standards for dress, hair length, advertising, and sexually suggestive portrayals” (p. 96).

certain undesirable film, will have a bad influence on people. (cited in Karthigesu, 1991)

Elements of sex and violence in imported programs were always a source of contention and many programs with materials suspected of corrupting Malaysians values such as “bedroom scenes and kissing as well as blood and gore” were censored and excised (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 84).

In 1995, Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat voiced his concerns about violence, horror, sex and counter cultural elements on television (New Straits Times, 12 November 1995, p. 6). Programs with violence such as wrestling were required to be aired after 11pm and rated 18SG “which meant they contained non-excessive violence” (New Straits Times, 22 July 2004, p. 8). Although imported programs “were carefully picked to avoid excessive violence and sex elements” (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 74), numerous scenes and dialogues seemed to slip by the censors. Given these strict censorship guidelines, Hagiwara et al. (1999) find that “[a]lthough both foreign and local programs can challenge the society’s basic norms and values, the challenges must be balanced, conservatively expressed and ultimately have a positive contribution to humanity in the eyes of the censors” (p. 9).

The discussion in this section on the government’s significant roles in the Malaysian broadcasting industry serve as a background to illustrate that any television programs or materials should follow a specific guidelines. In this context, it can be understood that the emergence of reality shows such as AF is a consequent of a shift in the broadcasting act and regulations, which are closely related to the changes in viewers’ taste. However, it is also important to note that the proliferation of contemporary
television programs also must be delineated within Islamic principles and the ‘Look East’ Policy.

**Reality TV: An industrial perspective**

**i. Political economy**

In the previous section, I have mapped the larger history of the television industry in Malaysia, its program content, issues of ownership and government media policy. Having outlined that context, this discussion now turns to the genre of reality TV in particular and its emergence in the Malaysian television environment. Reality TV can be considered as the single most influential change in programming to have impacted upon Malaysian TV industry in the recent years. This reality TV phenomenon was inaugurated by *AF*, which succeeded in attracting huge audiences and made local producers aware of the opportunities possible in the adaptation of reality TV formats. In order to understand this transformation, it is important to trace the changes in the international television landscape and note how Malaysian television was in turn affected by global developments.

Although this research is focussing on the audience responses towards reality TV, it is useful to map out the political-economic dimensions of the phenomenon of reality TV in order to explain the rise of the genre’s popularity in the Malaysian context. As Raphael (2004) argues:

> [W]ithout understanding the political-economic forces that drove the spread of this genre, textual and audience studies may risk reifying it as an expression of audience demand, or of their creators, or of a cultural,
discursive, or ontological shift unrelated to the needs of those who run
the television industry. (p. 119)

Indeed, the rise of reality TV is not merely the result of the creative innovation in
content; it is tied to material imperatives of technological advances and economic
conditions in the larger political-economic context of the television industry that has
given birth to and enabled the expansion of reality TV across the globe. The economic
imperative was the main reason for shifts in the television industry since “[p]rivate
television, no matter where it is situated, constantly demands new and cheap
programming that can deliver audiences to be sold to advertisers” (Waisbord, 2004, p.
365). As Lim (2004) has noted, with reference to the rise of the game show format on
Singaporean television, format adaptation is a result of the “structural features of …
broadcasting industry and ideological framework set by local media policy” (p. 109).
Examining the rise of reality TV in Australia, Roscoe (2004a) finds that technological
growth, changes in regulation practices and production processes contributed to a
shift in the television industry with the rise of the reality genre (p. 182).

Reality TV, on the whole, is cheap to produce (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; Dauncey, 1996;
Deery, 2004; Hill, 2002; Liu & Chen, 2004; Roscoe, 2004a) which means that
“[e]conomically, the genre fits the needs of producers and distributors alike for cheap
programming” (Raphael, 2004, p. 124), in contrast to other genres like soaps or
sitcoms which have high overheads in terms of actor fees, scripts, sets and so on. For
local television industries facing technical or budgetary limitations, “[b]uying
formats, then, is a cost-saving strategy that eliminates some of the highest fixed costs
that fiction programming demands” (Waisbord, 2004, p. 365). In fact, some studies
(e.g. Hill, 2005; Raphael, 2004) suggest that the television industry began to produce
reality TV in order to resolve its economic crisis. Compared to soap operas and fictional dramas, reality TV can be produced with a small budget using ordinary people as cast members and non-professional actors. Reality shows based on crime and emergency, for example, are cheap to produce with minimal expenditure on sets or costumes (Raphael, 2004, p. 125).

At the same time, technological innovations in the home entertainment market continually produced newer ways of distributing, packaging and consuming programs that undermine older models. It has been argued that the rise of reality TV in the late 1980s was a consequence of changes in the U.S. television industry (Raphael, 2004, p. 121). In an environment of broader economic restructuring in the U.S. in 1980s, its television industry saw the rapid growth of cable channels, spread of video usage, and local independent stations. The advent of pay TV allowed viewer flexibility and internet TV undermined the market share of large broadcasting corporations. The television industry sought to incorporate technological innovations within its traditional programs in order to create novel entertainment forms that would stem the attrition of viewers to other media.

Reality TV is perhaps the most remarkable product of this path of innovation undertaken by TV broadcasters incorporating a transmedia production like websites, and chat forums as well as call-in-voting systems to create an interactive and holistic ambience around the main televised program. Platforms like SMS, phone-in voting, and websites could also generate additional revenue and advertising fees. Big Brother is an example of a successful format that is embedded within a multi-platform stretching from televised programs to official websites (Lavender, 2003, p. 16). The official website created by the producers also became “an instantaneous source of
feedback as to how audiences were reacting to particular developments in the house” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 167). With its innovations reality TV has adapted to “[c]hanges in the technical landscape to bring a new complexity of production processes constructing innovative relationships between producers, texts, and audiences” (Jones, 2004, p. 210).

Another reason for the proliferation of reality TV is that it is suited for circulation and franchising as a format in a globalising media economy. Broadcasters can either adapt and produce local versions or directly import a popular foreign version. Citing an Indonesian producer, Keane (2004) says that foreign programs are no longer being imported as much as before because the local producers can make their own “good innovative local content” by adapting global formats (p. 14). But sometimes buying the license for a global patent can be prohibitively high undoing any savings in production costs. This is the case in Hong Kong where the license fees were viewed as extremely high and alternatives had to be found if networks wanted to screen reality shows (Fung, 2004, p. 80).

However, it must be noted that reality TV “has not always solved the economic problems it was meant to address” (Raphael, 2004, p. 132), as some subgenres of reality TV now involve huge costs. Reality TV programs which employ ‘live’ programming, for example, have become expensive to produce, as Friedman (2002) notes, “[w]hile live television had originally been inexpensive to produce, increased viewer expectations and technological improvements made regularly scheduled programs more expensive than their filmed counterparts” (pp. 3-4). Similarly, AF, the

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37 In terms of the current market of reality TV formats, Waisbord (2004) states that Western European companies have more copyright holdings for reality TV formats than the U.S. (p. 361). On the other hand, Keane (2004) finds that Japan is the biggest player in the format industry worldwide, especially to the East Asian region (p. 15). Programs like Iron Chef, Future Diary, and Happy Family Plan are targeting the global market (p. 15).
first program of its kind produced locally in Malaysia, is the biggest television project undertaken by Astro; it has high production costs and the novelty of the format has led to high labour costs, involving 15 cameras, and 80 crew members (Arfah, 2003). Executive producer, Sheikh Mohd Sofiyan Abdul Rahman, said that AF budgeting has impacted the overall budget of the network: “I had to relook the whole year’s calendar and juggle the fund allotment, which resulted in some programmes including dramas and movies being cancelled or deferred” (Samat, 2003a). These budgeting issues are not specific to AF alone; some other adapted programs such as Malaysian Idol could not deliver profits and was discontinued after a few seasons (Abdul Wahab, 2010).38

ii. Rethinking the audience: Reality TV and the broadcasting industry

Reality TV as a genre has become a dominant player in primetime viewing globally and in Malaysia, as a result of the conjunction of cultural preferences and techno-economic imperatives. In particular, technological and economic forces also have had a huge impact on how the industry conceives the audience. With the emergence of a plethora of channels within the broadcasting business as well as alternative means of home entertainment, the audience has become more fragmented. The changes in technological advancement, regulation practices and production processes brought a new conception of audiences as “more fragmented, sophisticated, knowing, and as a consequence, more demanding” (Roscoe, 2004a, p. 182). Consequently, “advertising revenues now had to be spread among a larger pool of distributors; and how this dilution of advertising spending created pressure on broadcasters and cablecasters to cut per-program production costs” (Raphael, 2004, p. 121). In Malaysia too, the political-economic restructuring of the broadcasting industry with technological

38 “[A]lthough the rationale to withdraw Malaysian Idol was not revealed, it is believed that the decision to discontinue the Idol programme, is likely to have to do with the economic reason” (Abdul Wahab, 2010, p. 26).
forces and economic considerations also led to the fragmentation of the audience among the plethora of private, cable, free-to-air channels as well as other media of entertainment. Given the strong competition between local television stations, most of them jumped on the bandwagon of the reality TV genre and produced their own versions to recoup audiences who had switched their interest to other channels.

In the last section, I discussed the technological imperatives behind the incorporation of transmedia production which enabled the TV industry to extend their commercial activities and creative property beyond just telecasting the program. This is not merely a case of adapting technological innovations but a shift in the industry’s conception of viewers from a passive audience to a more active audience. Through reality TV programs, viewers can actively participate in interactive platforms like the voting system and web-based forums (e.g. chat rooms and blogs).

Media convergence has changed viewer relationship with television texts as well as given a new direction to the nature and forms of audience engagement. In conventional scripted genres of television, producers exercise sole control over the narrative of the program, but in reality TV programs audiences can now exercise some control over the way the program unfolds. In the reality format, audiences are given the power to choose their favourite contestants and control the narrative of the program through the interactive format of the voting system. This power of active participation for the audience blurs the boundaries between consumers and producers and also shows that the industry conceives the audience as knowledgeable viewers (Roscoe, 2001, p. 485). However, it must also be acknowledged that the power exercised by the audience is quite limited because viewers can only use means like the voting system that have been predetermined by producers and “the audience is
essentially able to select from a limited range of narrative paths that are initially
defined by the text” (Holmes, 2004b, p. 165).

Nevertheless, this kind of interactive television of the reality TV genre “implies that
the nature of audience engagement is being altered irrevocably” (Michelle, 2009, p.
137) and signals a new type of ‘active viewer’ who not only actively interprets the
meaning of the text but participates in controlling its narrative. As Tincknell and
Raghuram (2002) explain, “[the] new kinds of ‘interactive’ media texts also makes
the idea of the active audience newly interesting because it suggests that such
audiences may go beyond simply responding to a text – they may also help to change
it” (p. 201). This form of active participation does not only add a new dimension to
the old concept of active viewer but, as Holmes (2008) argues, it also signals a new
direction in audience research. Holmes says that in the interactive reality format, the
use of active viewer “pivots on the very concept which has historically occupied
centre stage in the study of media audiences; yet, at the same time, it is widely
acknowledged that the study of media audiences is at a crossroads” (p. 13). Since the
general consensus on audience as key participants in media culture, the central
discussion in audience research has now moved on from affirming the nature of
audience as ‘active viewers’ to enumerating the terms of their participation (e.g.
Roscoe, 2001; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002).

The use of ordinary people is also a significant feature of reality TV. While issues
relating to reality TV and its content as a genre will be examined in the next chapter,
it is pertinent to note here that a major shift has occurred in reality TV where
“ordinary people have gained unprecedented access to representation in the media”
(Turner, 2010, p. 33). This can be seen as part of the industry’s strategy of attracting
audiences by promising them the immediate vicarious pleasure of watching ordinary people in different dramatic scenarios in a different paradigm of entertainment than watching professional actors in scripted narratives. Jenkins (2006) holds the view that the Idol format program “offers up a fantasy of empowerment” (p. 64).

Malaysian TV industry, reality TV, format adaptation and AF

i. Reality TV in Malaysia

In this final section I outline the rise of the reality TV genre and global format business in the broadcasting industry in Malaysia. A nominal starting point for this account is the turn of the century when the Ministry of Information issued a guideline for all TV stations that 80 per cent of their airtime must be devoted to locally produced programs (Utusan Malaysia, 20 February 1998, n. pag). Due to this conjunction, local producers became quite desperate to produce local programs to fulfil the quota. Apart from producing local programs such as dramas, talk shows, sitcoms et cetera, local producers started to franchise and adapt popular game show formats such as Roda Impian (from the U.S. original Wheel of Fortune) aired on Astro, the first format program to be adapted and produced in Malaysia in 1997, and Who Wants to Be a Millionaire (from the British version of Who Wants To Be a Millionaire) aired on NTV7 in 2000. Soon after, Survivor, an adventurous reality show was aired on NTV7 in 2000 and became popular with local audiences, lasting till its sixth season in the country (Hussein, 2003). Survivor’s success in attracting local audiences encouraged other stations to import reality TV programs like Combat...
But these were all, of course, foreign-produced reality shows.

Fortunately, the global rise of reality TV as a genre in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with this period of uncertainty in the local industry when producers were scrambling for creative ideas for their own programs and needing to comply with government’s regulations around local program quotas (as has been stated in Chapter 2). The genre of reality TV with its easily adaptable standardised formats emerged as the best solution for local producers to fulfil quota guidelines. In 2003, AF - a locally produced adaptation of a popular Mexican format La Academia first aired on TV Azteca - became the first major big-budget reality format show in Malaysia. After the success of AF, the local reality TV industry really took off and about 26 locally produced reality shows had appeared by 2005 (Syed Ali, 2005). From educational and informative reality TV to more entertainment-oriented formats, Malaysia now has all the different variants of reality TV. However, among all the different subgenres, the reality talent format is demonstrably the most popular among local viewers and producers. These types of programs now dominate the primetime slots of various channels and TV stations; TV3, NTV7 and Astro top the list in terms of the number of reality programs on air. The domination of locally-produced reality TV on the airwaves demonstrates some fundamental shifts in the broadcasting industry in the nation, namely, the active participation of local producers in an increasingly interconnected global television market of formats, the waning influence of Western content, as well as the rise of reality TV as a dominant entertainment form.

39 Although this program highlighted the themes of homosexuality and immorality, but it did not create controversy in Malaysia.
Although reality talent contests dominate the programming in Malaysia, local producers have attempted to adapt other forms such as the reality game show and reality dating show which are popular worldwide. TV3, for example, tried to attract the audience by producing *Explorace*, the first Malaysian adventure reality TV in 2003, similar to the U.S. *Amazing Race*, where couples compete with each other to complete a given task in a travelling assignment. Malaysia also became the first Asian country to adapt the media conglomerate Endemol’s *Fear Factor* which was produced by a local production house, Juita Viden and aired on NTV7 in 2005 (Saharani, 2005b). In 2005, viewers were introduced to *Mencari Cinta* (Looking for Love), the first Malaysian dating reality show aired on TV3, where ten men compete to win a woman’s heart. This program created a lot of controversial issues when it was accused of aping the West, and was opposed to Eastern values as it is inappropriate for a Muslim woman to choose her partner from among ten men at once. While this program created a lot of controversy and was accused of being ‘morally degenerate’, it was also nominated for the ‘Best TV Reality Programme Award’ in 2005 in the ‘Sri Angkasa Award’, a prestigious award in the broadcasting field (*Bernama*, 3 March 2006). However, *Mencari Cinta* was nevertheless discontinued after its first season probably due to the controversy. Soon after, in 2006, another dating reality show, *Cari Menantu* (Looking for an In-Law) was produced by TV9, targeted at TV9’s niche audience of urban youth. While based on the concept of a dating show, *Cari Menantu* was full of educational information about love and marriage according to Malay and Islamic protocol. In the climax of the show the top three couples were married according to the Malay culture and Islamic religion.

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40 Media Prima TV Network chief executive officer Datuk Farid Ridzuan says, “The station targets its viewership at young Malays rooted to their traditions” (Tiong, 18 March 2006)
41 Another reality dating program called *Cornetto Love? Perhaps* (NTV7) targeted non-Malay audiences.
Apart from dating shows, the subgenre of charity reality programs is also very popular with local audiences. *Misi Suara Hati* (Heart’s Voice Mission) and *Bersamamu* (Be With You) are fly-on-the-wall reality documentaries seeking to create awareness about the poor and disadvantaged. In *Misi Suara Hati* produced by Astro, nine students from various local universities diligently raise funds (Samat, 2005) to help sick people with chronic diseases who need monetary help. *Bersamamu* aired on TV3 depicts the life-stories of people with physical disabilities or economic problems and collects funds through the program to help them.

Other reality game competitions such as *Nescafe Kick Start, Olay Total White Aspirasiku* (Olay Total White My Inspiration), *Resume untuk Mawi* (Resume for Mawi) and *Mencari Bintang Pantene* (Pantene Star Search) are also popular. In *Nescafe Kick Start*, twelve selected youths compete with each other to win RM150,000 to achieve their dream career (Saharani, 2005a). In *Resume untuk Mawi*, inspired by the popular reality show *The Apprentice* (Lee, 2006), nine short-listed contestants compete for the job of personal assistant to Mawi, the winner of AF3. Another reality game show, *Olay Total White Aspirasiku* also offered jobs to the top three winners on TV3, “either as a broadcast journalist, an assistant producer or a marketing executive” and became relatively popular in 2005 with average viewers of 1.2 million weekly (Saharani, 2005c). Another popular program at the time was *Mencari Bintang Pantene*, a reality talent search for a female between 18 and 25 years old to become the next ambassador for the ‘Pantene’ shampoo brand (*Malay Mail*, 2 November 2006, p. 10).

Lifestyle reality programs are also popular with Malaysian viewers: local programs that fall under this category include *Deko Bersama Eric* (Deco with Eric), *Malaysia
Most Beautiful, and the most recent show, Gadis Melayu (Malay Girl). In Deko Bersama Eric, an interior designer expert Eric uses his interior decoration expertise to transform the house of selected participants. In Malaysia Most Beautiful (8TV), fifteen finalists compete to win the title of Malaysia Most Beautiful (Noor Kamal, 2005) and like many other reality talent formats, viewers choose the winner through the SMS voting system. The recent reality show, Gadis Melayu is very different to other reality TV contests of its kind, as it is pitched on a different concept; it is not a beauty pageant contest, but a search for a wholesome Malay girl in this challenging globalised era. The girl must not only be attractive but have the appropriate academic and religious background and be charming in personality, devoted to her family, efficient in the kitchen and the workplace (Hamzah, 2009).

Other reality programs following the same formula of the talent search contest like AF with contestants performing and living together for a particular period of time include Raja Lawak (King of Comedian) (2007), Anak Wayang (Cinema Actors) (2009), Imam Muda (Young Imam) (2010), and Pilih Kasih (Favouritism) (2009). All these programs were produced by Astro, except Pilih Kasih which was produced by RTM2. Anak Wayang and Pilih Kasih is a talent search for actors while Raja Lawak is a hunt for a stand-up comedian. Imam Muda is a competition among young men to become the best imam and gained attention for its aggressive Islamic content. This program attracted much media attention and a local newspaper reported, “the primetime show had attracted worldwide interest for its progressive take on Islam, with contestants – dressed alternately in flowing robes and smart suits – grappling with issues such as

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42 Although it is a new program, however it had attracted 836,000 audience for the fifth show of the first season (Hamzah, 2008) which equates approximately to 28% of Astro’s subscriber base. At the moment of this thesis writing, Gadis Melayu has been continuing its third season in 2010.
bathing an HIV-positive corpse and counselling unmarried pregnant women” (Hassan, 2011).

Apart from these reality TV programs involving ordinary people as contestants, there were also a few shows involving celebrities, for example, Sehati Berdansa (Dance with One Heart), Antara Dua Dunia (Between Two Worlds) and Wakenabeb (Gotcha). Antara Dua Dunia is a fly-on-the-wall ‘docusoap’ format where a celebrity lives with a local family in a rural area for a few nights and adapts themselves to their lifestyle. Wakenabeb, similar to the American MTV show Punk’d, creates mock situations tricking a celebrity to see how they react.

Overall, from the background of content development discussed in this section, it can be said that reality television programs in Malaysia boast quite a lot of variety and they have enabled the local industry to overcome the lacklustre performance of other locally produced soaps and sitcoms. The next section will focus on the subgenre of reality talent contests, primarily the reality talent contest, to which AF belongs. This is not only the dominant genre on local television, apart from the different variants discussed earlier, it also has longstanding roots in televised musical competitions in Malaysia in the decades prior to the advent of reality TV.

ii. The development of reality talent contest and AF

The televised singing contest has a long history in Malaysia which can be traced back to the widely watched Bakat TV (TV Talent) introduced by RTM in 1971 (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 100).43 Another program, Juara Kugiran, also gained popularity in the 1970s and local musical programs constantly ranked amongst the top ten in the 1970s (p. 43 Bakat TV is a series of competition that went for 22 weeks, and it offered an amount of money for the winners.

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137). Viewer comments in newspapers often indicated their passion for local musical shows and dislike for foreign music (p. 146).

In 1975, *Bakat TV* was changed to *Bintang RTM* (RTM Stars) the name with which it still continues (*Malay Mail*, 3 March 2008, p. 27). *Bintang RTM* created many popular singers for the music industry such as Sudirman Haji Arshad, Rohana Jalil, Ramlah Ram, and more recently Siti Nurhaliza (the most famous singer in Malaysia to date) and Misha Omar, just to name a few. There were many other locally-produced singing competitions, such as *Aneka Ria* (Joy Variety), *Mekar dan Segar* (Blossoming and Fresh), and *Pesta Lagu Malaysia* (Malaysian Music Feast) as well as a talent contest program for children, *Pesta Lagu Kanak-Kanak* (Children Music Feast) and the popularity of local musical programs on national stations continued until the 1980s (Karthigesu, 1994, p. 177). All these programs, except *Bintang RTM* have now been discontinued.

*Muzik-muzik* (Music) introduced around the mid 1980s by TV3 is also one of the longest running singing competition programs in Malaysia. In contrast to *Bintang RTM*, *Muzik-muzik* is a competition of professional singers. Held every week, the competition progresses to the final annual round with *Juara Lagu* where the best singers compete. A quite recent talent competition called *Sinaran Passport Kegemilangan* (Glorious Passport to Fame) on TV3, a talent quest program where the contestants were required to sing and act, also gained popularity for quite a while. Other than that, there was also a program called *Asia Bagus* (Asia is Terrific)⁴⁴, a talent search contest across Asia, which made its debut on TV3 but moved to NTV7 in 1998 and became a big hit in Malaysia (Kadir, 1998).

⁴⁴ *Asia Bagus* is a talent quest program produced by Fuji TV (Japanese TV station) in cooperation with Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan and South Korea (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 100).
These singing competitions belonged to the era before reality TV emerged as a coherent genre and refashioned older formats and monopolised TV airtime. *Popstars* (a New Zealand origin program) produced by NTV7 in 2000 was perhaps the first reality talent singing competition to begin in Malaysia but it failed to have a strong impact among local audiences. The phenomenal success of the reality TV genre and reality talent format in Malaysia only happened when *AF* appeared on the scene. In June 2003, the reality talent format took centre stage with *AF*, drawing record audiences and attracting widespread public interest. *AF* was part of Astro’s strategy to give its Malay channel called Astro Ria a ‘facelift’ (Samat, 2003b). Zainir Aminullah (programming head) said that the huge success of Astro’s Chinese and Indian talent contests (on Wah Lai Toi channel and Vaanavil channel respectively) had triggered this idea to produce a similar formula for Astro Ria Channel. He said, “I spotted a ‘gap’ on Ria and began looking for a Malay talen-time show with a difference to fill that hole” (Samat, 2003a). And when he was approached with an idea to adapt a popular Mexican format *La Academia* by his friend from Juita Viden (a local production house) he saw it as the right opportunity (Samat, 2003a).

The adaptation of *Akademi Fantasia* in Malaysia does not constitute a significant reworking of the original format, *La Academia*. Similar to other licensed adapted format, *La Academia* format also comes with a ‘production bible’ which includes every details of the show, as explained by Zainir Aminullah (Astro’s programming head):

> Initially, when we signed with TV Azteca, it provided us with reels and materials on what the show was all about. What they also gave us as part

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45 *AF* is the first Asian country to adapt *La Academia*. Soon after its success in Malaysia, *La Academia* was also adapted by other countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the U.S.
of the idea was an extensive production manual, something we refer to as the ‘production bible’. (Samat, 2003a)

Although AF had been provided with ‘production bible’, it has given some flexibility in changing its concept according to the local cultural context and audience preference. According to Zainir, Astro was “given some flexibility in terms of elimination rule and total number of contestants, except the procedure of determining the winner which should follow the original format” (Samudin, 2005).

Although it enjoys widespread success now, AF actually faced some initial difficulties in gaining contestants and audiences. A local newspaper reported that the number of people that attended the audition for AF1 was not high (Kadir, 2003a). Astro promoted AF with a catchy tagline ‘Nak Cuba?’ (Want to Try?) to advertise its new format and concept in order to attract people to participate as a contestant, but audiences seemed unsure and ambivalent in the beginning about what AF was about. Apart from that, Astro also struggled in gaining audiences for the first few weeks in spite of extensive media promotion by the producers. As a local newspaper reported, “The producer had to even ‘invite’ the audience to come for the weekly concerts, at least for the first three weekends” (Malay Mail, 1 January 2007, p. 8).

As noted previously, AF only really became a cultural phenomenon with the winner of AF3, Mawi. AF was subsequently credited with changing the way in which local audiences perceived locally-produced programs. Audiences “who were not even bothered with any local production before, are now ‘touched’ by the programme” (Kadir, 2003b). Since Bakat TV in the 1970s, “[i]t has been quite a while since the Malaysian public got so excited over a local production” (Kadir, 2003b). AF’s popularity is highlighted in the Astro Annual Report (2006):
Our series of talent quests continue to rate highly with our viewers. The most anticipated programming highlight of the year was, again, our reality talent quest *Akademi Fantasia (AF)*. The third season which climaxed in August 2005, not only garnered tremendous short messaging service (SMS) responses, but continuous news coverage on its aspiring stars, and its champion Mawi became a never-seen before phenomenon in the local music industry. (p. 31)

It has been noted that “*Akademi Fantasia* ended up to be a major success and started the reality TV trend which was followed by other television stations” (*Malay Mail*, 1 January 2007, p. 8). Even the longstanding singing contest program *Bintang RTM* also began to incorporate some innovations of the reality talent contest, including a voting system. TV3 came up with *Mentor* which became quite popular and continues into its fifth season in 2011. Other locally-produced reality talent programs such as *Blast Off, MyStarz LG, Who Will Win?, Rock Unite*, and *Project SuperStar* have also had a measure of success.

There are also reality talent contests especially targeted to Chinese and Indian viewers. Astro produced *Astro Talent Quest* for Chinese viewers and *Vaanavil Paadhaltiran Pott* for Indian viewers (Lee, 2005). 8TV introduced *Malaysian Idol* in 2004, an adapted version of Britain’s *Pop Idol* (*New Straits Times*, 12 June 2006, p. 16). NTV7 launched *Audition*, an original local production, which imitated the exact same formula as *AF*, with contestants living together in a house and performing (singing and dancing) at the end of the week, but it did not fare as well as *AF*. However, *Malaysian Idol* and *Audition* only managed to last until their second seasons.
After 8TV terminated *Malaysian Idol*, the channel created another reality talent show called *One in a Million* (*OIAM*). Although the program has the same concept and format as *Idol*, except for a few changes in the audition session where contestants have to undergo some additional challenges to proceed to the next stage, the program did much better. This may be due to the fact that the prize money of RM1,000,000 cash, the highest in the business, managed to attract a broad spectrum of enthusiastic contestants from amateurs to professionals. For the latest *OIAM* 3, it was reported that there were more than 30 celebrities in the pool of more than 3,000 participants in the audition rounds (*New Straits Times*, 22 December 2008, p. 14).

After experiencing the success of *Mentor*, TV3 came out with another reality talent contest called *Gangstarz* which searches for a vocal group from across Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, offering lucrative prize money of US100,000 (RM342,000) and a recording contract with a local company (*New Straits Times*, 16 June 2008, p. 22). For its second season, it even broadened its reach to invite people from Thailand and the Philippines. Lately, *AF* has also begun to latch on to this internationalisation strategy in terms of possible contestants, in order to widen its appeal. Accordingly, from the seventh season, professional artistes as well as contestants from Singapore were allowed to participate in *AF*, although no Singaporeans have to date featured in the contest (*The Star*, 16 January 2009, n. pag).

In this chapter, I have illustrated that the emergence of reality TV is closely related to the restructuring of the political economy of the broadcasting industry in Malaysia. The remarkable growth of the genre articulates closely with the concurrent fragmentation of the Malaysian audience and its demand for shows that are local but nevertheless demonstrate an engagement with the global via their similarities to
international programs. In the next chapter, I will discuss the genre of reality TV, the modes of spectatorship it offers as well as its central thematics, as a means to further contextualise my audience study of AF.
CHAPTER 3
FORMAT AND NARRATIVE: WHERE DOES AKADEMI FANTASIA FIT WITHIN THE GENRE OF REALITY TV?

This chapter will examine the textual content of the genre of reality TV as a whole and the program of \(AF\) in particular. I begin by providing an overview of the discussions about the genre of reality TV, different perspectives advanced by scholars about the origins and development of reality TV, the audience of reality TV and the various subgenres that have proliferated. This discussion is followed by a description of \(AF\) in terms of the format of the program and its concept as an ‘academy’ transforming ordinary people into star performers. Finally, this initial descriptive account of \(AF\) will be extended to a theoretical discussion encompassing thematic content, narrative structure and audience positioning the program. I discuss the key themes of \(AF\) as a dialogue between ordinary people/celebrity and private/public self, the blurring boundaries between fact/fiction, the unpredictability of the unscripted drama and investment of the viewer in the purported realism of reality TV; the narrative complexity of \(AF\); and the diverse range of viewer positioning in \(AF\) as voyeur, voter, and judge.

Defining the parameters of reality TV as a genre

i. The history and genre of reality TV

Scholars have advanced divergent views about the origins and definitions of reality TV following the popular recognition of the genre. The definition of reality TV is arguably fluid and complex because its hybrid nature accommodates a variety of genres and, complicating matters further, ‘reality-based’ texts have also changed over
time (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 2). According to Bonner (2003), the term ‘reality television’ was initially used to describe the “American phenomenon of direct television where footage was taken of what purported to be the everyday activities of people at the ‘sharp end’ of public service activities – police and emergency response workers” (pp. 24-25). In this vein, the police show American Cops was considered a ‘reality TV’ program as it was seen as a reflection of ‘real life’, with minimum ‘technical intervention’ like “lighting, editing, commentary or explanation of what was happening” (Bonner, 2003, p. 25). The British television industry also had similar kinds of ‘reality TV’ shows like those ‘cop’ programs in the U.S. (Hill, 2000: pp. 222-226).

However, some scholars have noted that the genre as it was represented in those programs with real-life scenarios and minimal technical production was actually called ‘factual television’ and not ‘reality TV’ in its time (Hill, 2005; Kilborn 2003). The term ‘factual’ television was used to refer to the prevailing documentary-based programs, such as ‘drama-doc’ and ‘docusoap’ (Bignell, 2004, p. 184). According to Hill (2005), if we trace back the history of such factual programming, we can see that the genre has always been quite prolific in terms of content with different formats like Cops as well as reality game shows and talent contests (pp. 44-46). Thus Hill (2005) has argued that reality TV, which has gained ascendancy in this decade, is actually not a new genre as such but a new term for factual entertainment and popular factual programming (p. 40). She adds that the term ‘reality TV’ became popular after the success of reality game shows, following which “the various terms used to describe popular factual programming have mainly disappeared” (Hill, 2005, p. 46). In particular, she points out that it was the success of Big Brother that led to the re-
definition of reality TV as a more distinct genre, in contrast to the more generalist ‘popular factual programming’.

Tracing the origins of reality TV programming from factual entertainment, scholars have offered disparate views on the origins of the genre. Some argue that reality TV originated in the U.S. (e.g. Kilborn, 1994) while others claim it is a product of British television (e.g. Bignell, 2004). Although this section does not attempt to provide a comprehensive genealogy of reality TV, I will discuss some debates about the origins of reality TV as it provides insights into the hybrid nature and traits of contemporary shows like AF.

Baker (2003) believes that reality TV programming emerged in the 1950s when Dragnet and The Big Story were broadcast on U.S. television channels (p. 68). However, I would argue that while Dragnet is a type of police show that dramatises real events based on true stories from police files, it is not really a reality TV program since it did not involve ordinary people, which is the most important feature of the genre. In contrast to Baker (2003), many scholars contend that the reality TV program originated from the U.S. but from a program called Candid Camera which captured unscripted videos filming ordinary people for comic stunts (Clissold, 2004; Kilborn, 1994; Ouellette & Murray, 2004). Aired since 1948, Candid Camera not only predates Dragnet, but it is the first program resembling the reality genre “because of [the] use of hidden camera – an element that even to this day greatly distinguishes types and experiences of reality TV” (Clissold, 2004, p. 50).

On the other hand, in the British television landscape, Bignell (2004) believes that Video Nation (a series produced by the BBC) was the first to premier TV programs
featuring ordinary people, followed by Video Diaries which became popular on British television from 1995 to 2000 (p. 200). Recently, Iwabuchi (2004) has claimed that reality TV programming was actually pioneered by the Japanese media industry with *Katochan Kenchan Gokigen Terebi* (p. 29). He asserts that the concept of *America’s Funniest Home Videos* was taken from this program although “it remains internationally unacknowledged” and it was the Japanese media that introduced the interactivity concept (p. 29). Raphael (2009) also shares this opinion as he believes that the U.S. reality TV programs actually “drew on foreign models in the first place” (p. 132).

These different debates highlight the difficulty in tracing the origins and definition of reality TV as a genre. In one of the first comprehensive attempts to define reality TV, Kilborn (1994) stipulates three criteria:

a) the recording ‘on the wing’, and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups;

b) the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatised reconstruction;

c) the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its ‘reality’ credentials. (p. 423)

However, other scholars have argued that the criteria listed by Kilborn (1994) address the earlier reality TV programs of ‘factual programming’ not the contemporary manifestations of a genre since it has broadened and diversified so much. For example, Ouellette and Murray (2004) argue that “the first two descriptions appear to prioritise ‘real’ crime or emergency services programming” (p. 3), prevalent in the
1990s until 2000; but the recent type of reality TV program is not only limited to such programs. Holmes and Jermyn (2004) point out that the early definitions of reality TV emphasised the use of ‘real people’ and ‘real life’ (pp. 4-5), but the new varieties of reality TV is more ambiguous presenting “life lived to the televisual arenas of formatted environments in which the more traditional observational rhetoric of documentary jostles for space with the discourses of display and performance” (p. 5) (cf. Corner, 2002; Roscoe, 2001). The criterion of depiction of ‘real life’ has, in this formulation, been overtaken by simulated reality and performance-based shows in “the emergence of the global ‘event’ formats of Reality TV (such as Big Brother, Popstars and Survivor et al.)” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 3).

In a more recent study, Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) collated five general characteristics to define reality TV, which are – it portrays ordinary people; it is shot in a natural environment; it is unscripted; it contains narrative and is entertaining (p. 304). Nabi et al.’s (2003) description seems mistaken in its second criterion because more recent reality TV programs are filmed in a set-up environment rather than “filmed at least in part in their living or working environment” (p. 304). Also, reality TV programs can be more educational (e.g. Supernanny) than just entertaining (e.g. America’s Got Talent). Instead of Nabi et al.’s (2003) summary, Hill’s (2005) definition sounds more suitable to describe the recent reality programs. Hill (2005) defines reality TV as “a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people … reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama” (p. 2). Instead of trying to erect limitations to define the genre that can be proven wrong by some new development or different criterion, Hill’s (2005) definition is more malleable and takes into account the diversity of programs in the genre.
Different broadcasting environments across countries have also shaped and produced different types of reality programming. For example, “[i]n the UK, the strong historical presence of public service broadcasting and documentary television has ensured that certain types of reality formats are related to public service and documentary ideas and practice” (Hill, 2005, p. 8). In contrast, the U.S. reality TV types are more geared towards ‘commercial and entertainment ideas’ as the U.S. broadcasting history developed in the ‘commercial broadcasting’ mode rather than the ‘documentary television’ mode (p. 8).

However, Corner’s (2004) summary of the broad development of the genre through different stages is a useful perspective that can accommodate the various formats of reality TV. Corner (2004) identifies the development of reality TV through three phases – the ‘action/incident’ program, ‘docusoap’ format and the combination of the two phases with ‘games frames’ (pp. 291-292). He describes the ‘action/incident’ phase as encompassing programs that portray something related to “emergency services and of the police”, for example *Crimewatch UK*, and *America's Most Wanted*. Then, the ‘docusoap’ formats took over the network channels in the second phase, which in contrast to the ‘action/incident’ programs, had a “more relaxed observational style”, “combined with some of the pleasures of narrative development and characterisation associated with the British, European and Australian ‘soap’ tradition, in which ordinary lives are the primary focus” (Corner, 2004, p. 292). The third phase is more hybrid as it combines the elements from the first and second phase, and applies the game show narrative (p. 292). Programs that fall under this phase are reality TV formats like *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*. One of the earliest reality

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46 However, in Corner’s (2000) earlier writings, he called the third phase ‘docushow’ exemplified by cookery or DIY programs (cf. Corner, 2000, p. 687). This ‘docushow’ phase is somewhat limited in order to explain more current reality shows such as *Survivor, Big Brother* and ‘Idol’-like format.
game shows, *Big Brother* (originating in the Netherlands and produced by Endemol in 1999) was a pioneer in this shift (Bignell, 2004, p. 201). Broadcast in 12 European countries, the USA, Australia and Argentina (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002, p. 201), the format has since then been bought and adapted in Asian countries like India. Bignell (2004) describes *Big Brother* as a combination of several television genres as it combines elements from different genres like talent contest, ‘real-life soap opera’, and documentary (p. 201). These three phases outlined by Corner (2004) are very useful in understanding the development of reality TV to the current phases of reality TV.

As much recent research has demonstrated, reality TV now does not just hold appeal for viewers as light entertainment as its antecedents did in earlier decades, it has now indisputably become a dominant genre in primetime programming (Dauncey, 1996; Kretschmer & Singh, 2010). Reality TV has overtaken primetime slots which were earlier dominated by soap operas, talk shows and game shows as well as leading to a reduced role for drama and documentary production. In Australia, reality programs such as *Big Brother* and *Popstars* had been criticised for leading to a decline in drama production (Roscoe, 2004a, p. 182). In Malaysia too, audiences have lost interest in dramas, talk shows and magazine programs which had dominated the screens for a long time. Astro programming chief Zaini Amirullah noted the success of *AF* with some surprise saying “*Akademi Fantasia* would be a hit among local viewers as its appeal was mainly in its fresh format. Frankly, I never thought it would create such a hype” (Samat, 2003a).
ii. The audience of reality TV

There are diverging opinions on the target audience of reality TV. Hill (2002) noted that factual entertainment is watched by everybody, but adults are the predominant age group who watch popular types of reality TV (p. 327). In Hill’s (2005) next study, she finds that the reality game show, Temptation Island, attracted the 18 to 49 age group (p. 35). According to Hall (2006), the targeted audience for reality TV programs are “educated, relatively young, and primarily middle-class” (p. 207), however, she suggests future audience research on reality TV should consider other age groups and also to understand whether they ‘read’ reality TV programs in the same manner as younger viewers. The MARS survey (cited in Soong, 2003) also found that people who most watched reality TV belong to the age group of 18 to 24, and viewership levels drop with older age groups. Nichols (1994) asserts that reality TV seeks to attract a larger audience segment, and this suggests that reality TV should appeal to mass audiences (p. 60).

A study conducted by Nabi et al. (2003) among 252 residents in Tucson, Arizona found that younger people and “people with less formal education” were regular viewers of reality TV but gender and race were not significant criteria (p. 319). But the study also adds that each type of reality TV attracts different types of audience age groups (p. 326). Raphael (2009) notes that advertisers believe that reality TV, especially tabloid, crime-time and emergency programs appeal more to pre-teenagers, seniors, and low-income viewers, and fail to draw the attention of wealthy 18 to 35 year-olds (p. 133). But he also finds that some other kinds of reality TV programs such as Survivor manage to attract high-income viewers as well as desirable young-adult viewers (Carter, 2000). Likewise, teens and young adults were the predominant
age groups that were watching Temptation Island. Hill (2002) also notices age differences in different programs and noted that “sixteen- to thirty-four-year-olds were two times more likely to have watched [Big Brother UK] than older viewers” (p. 331).

It is also worth noting here that the target audiences of reality TV programs are closely aligned to the target audience of the channels on which they are aired. For example, Big Brother Australia’s target audience runs parallel with Network Ten’s target audience of people from 19 to 39 years old (Roscoe, 2001, p. 483). However, Big Brother UK has a slightly different target audience of viewers aged 16 to 34, that is, an “educated, upwardly mobile viewer” that fits with the Channel 4 target audience (Hill, 2002, p. 337).

Audience engagement with reality TV is often defined through the notion of interactivity, an element unique to reality TV that distinguishes it from other television genres. The interactive SMS voting system in particular is supplemented with chat rooms and websites devoted to those programs. For Baker (2003), the elements of interactivity offered by reality TV is the primary reason for its popularity amongst audiences (p. 67). Some researchers believe that Big Brother succeeded all over UK, Europe, the U.S. and Australia because of the ‘range of sites of access’ of its transmedia production (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002, p. 201), and the interactive voting format that allowed viewers to determine their winners (Hill & Palmer, 2002; Van Zoonen, 2001).

Lastly, the enjoyment of watching reality TV also has been connected with the opportunities of socialisation that it affords between viewers as they discuss the
performance of a particular contestant or develop mutual preference for a certain contestant to build ‘social affiliation’ (Lundy et al., 2008, p. 218). In other words, this capacity of reality TV to enable ‘social affiliation’ impacts how viewers have conversations, watch and participate in reality TV. Hill’s (2002) research on Big Brother audiences also found that “the social and performative aspects” make it popular among the audience who most enjoyed “watching the live ‘eviction’ show …, followed by seeing ex-contestants talk about their experiences …, watching the nightly TV program …, and talking about the program with friends/family” (Hill, 2002, p. 333).

### iii. Reality TV and its subgenres

As I noted earlier reality TV only gained ascendancy in television programming from around 1999 (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 3). The most successful formats such as Survivor and Big Brother pioneered this shift with programs involving real people with interactive audience participation. Although reality TV took the centre stage after the success of the first Survivor series aired on CBS in the year 2000 (Foster, 2004, p. 271), “it is not yet clear what the character and limits of this genre are” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, as cited in Lunt, 2004, p. 330). Therefore, this section will try to examine the different sub-genres that fall within the scope of reality TV.

Baker (2003) has proposed four categories of reality television – Artificial Person in Ordinary Settings (Artificial/Ordinary); Artificial Person in Extraordinary Settings (Artificial/Extraordinary); Real People in Ordinary Settings (Real/Ordinary); and Real People in Extraordinary Settings (Real/Extraordinary) (p. 59). Although one must concede that any criterion of classification will have its limitations, I think that the
criterion of participant involvement used by Baker (2003) is not as useful as it fails to
capture the complex forms of contemporary reality TV formats that employ varied
techniques in a number of dimensions like narrative structure, visual aesthetics and
style, subject-matter, and so on. Instead of trying to flatten out all of the programs into
one monolithic form, and then neatly placing them into categories determined by a
single criterion, it is perhaps better to choose a method that plays up the differences
and divergences in the field.

In contrast to Baker’s (2003) subgenre division, Ouellette and Murray (2004) and Hill
(2005) suggest that one must look at the divergent formats and identify different sub-
genres. For Ouellette and Murray (2004), reality TV can be divided into various
subgenres, the most prominent ones being gamedoc, the dating program, the
makeover/lifestyle program and the ‘docusoap’ (pp. 3-4). They also identify other
types of reality TV like popular court programs, reality sitcoms, and celebrity
variations (p. 4). For them,

What ties together all the various formats of the reality TV genre is their
professed abilities to more fully provide viewers an unmediated,
voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what might be called the
‘entertaining real’. This fixation with ‘authentic’ personalities, situations,
and narratives is considered to be reality TV’s primary distinction from
fictional television and also its primary selling point. (Ouellette &

Relatedly, Hill (2005) divides reality TV types into nine subgenres such as
‘infotainment formats’, ‘surveillance reality formats’, ‘fly-on-the-wall docu-soap
formats’, ‘lifestyle formats’, ‘reality game formats’, ‘reality life experiment formats’,

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‘reality talent formats’, ‘celebrity reality formats’, and ‘reality clipshow formats’ (pp. 7-8).

Having adopted this elastic but productive notion of subgenre as a means of defining a program, I will explore the particular subgenre that is of importance for this study of AF, which is the reality talent contest. This research will use the term ‘reality talent contest’ (Ouellette & Murray, 2004, p. 4) and ‘reality talent format’ (Hill, 2005, p. 7) as interchangeable terms to describe the program examined. AF fits under this subgenre as it “transform[s] ordinary people into celebrity performers” (p. 8). Some scholars like Bonner (2003) place reality talent contests like Popstars and Search for a Supermodel in the category of the reality game show because they share “contrived situations, observing what happens and usually reducing the number until only one remains” (p. 26). But the reality talent show is actually different from the game show in terms of the way winners are selected and how the contest is carried out. Johnson-Woods (2002) asserts that the winner of reality talent shows are rewarded because of a purported talent or achievement whereas winners are rewarded for “simply being liked” or on the basis of luck in reality game shows (p. 67).

**Defining AF as a reality TV program and a reality talent show**

**i. The format of AF**

AF combines the Idol concept of a singing competition, where the audience choose their favourite contestant through a voting system, with a Big Brother format supplementary show which tracks the daily lives of the contestants as they live together in a common residence for the 9-10 weeks of the contest. There are normally
12 contestants for each season, from which the top 5 contestants in the last stage compete with each other in a finale and the contestant with the highest number of votes is declared the winner.

AF is actually divided into four separate shows – Diari AF (AF Diary), Konsert AF (AF Concert), Imbasan AF (AF Recap) and Tirai AF (AF Curtain). The daily lives and training routines of the contestants in the house are shown on Diari AF throughout the week from Monday to Friday at 8.30pm. Then, at 9.00pm every Saturday, the contestants perform in a live concert in front of the three judges and studio audiences in Konsert AF. There are two additional segments besides these main weekly programs. Imbasan AF is a ‘live’ program, which recaps the entire week and is aired right after the concert, although in the later seasons it was aired the next day. However, Imbasan AF was discontinued in the fifth season and replaced with Debat AF (AF Debate) in which controversial issues of the preceding concert or elimination were discussed by a few panels consisting of music experts, media professionals, and even some invited AF fans. Tirai AF is a special program aired before the main season, where AF participants and trainers for the season are introduced to the public. Filmed in a documentary mode, the producers go to the homes of each contestant and ‘surprise’ the contestant with the announcement of their selection.

Apart from Imbasan AF and Tirai AF, there are two other affiliate programs of AF called Trek Selebriti (Celebrity Track) and Muzik@Ria. In Trek Selebriti, the host, Jimmy Shanley, follows each eliminated contestant to their hometown to provide an extensive coverage of their lives after he/she entered AF. In Muzik@Ria the

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47 Diari AF and Konsert AF were aired during prime time slot (from 8 to 11pm). Hisham (n.d.) reports that according to the police, roads in Kuala Lumpur were very quiet every Saturday night between 8 to 11pm (at the time AF concert was aired (this information was based on an interview with Asrul (Operational Head, Talent Coordination Creative Services, Astro))
contestants share their experience as well as the ups and downs of their stay in the AF ‘academy’. In 2007, there was a special one-off program called *Fail Sulit AF* (*AF*’s Secret File), which showed past clips and revealed sensationalistic details about contestants of *AF* from the very first season (*Malay Mail*, 3 January 2007, p. 11). These affiliate programs of *AF* show that *AF* can not only be regarded as a transmedia production using multiple media platforms of television, Internet and mobile phones (as discussed in chapter 2), but it is also a composite media property spread over multiple programs on television.

Every *AF* season involves four stages. The earliest stage of the *Trek Selebriti* (Celebrity Track) program features auditions held around Malaysia.\(^{48}\) In the very first season, the audition was just open to people in Peninsular Malaysia, but from the second till the sixth season, the auditions also took place in Sabah and Sarawak. In the earlier seasons, auditions were open to all Malaysians aged 18–27, while in the sixth and seventh seasons the age limit was raised to 18–45 years old (*New Sunday Times*, 18 January 2009, p. 27). The selection rounds are a popular component of talent reality shows as viewers are able to “see behind the scenes at the audition” and observe “talent in the making” (Hill, 2005, p. 33).

Twenty contestants are shortlisted from the auditions and they compete in a special program called *Prelude AF* in front of a crowd where they are judged by the producers, the *AF* principal and trainers. The judges select 12 final contestants after determining their voice quality and performance. These 12 contestants are selected for

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\(^{48}\) At the auditions, the contestants have to go through three stages. Firstly, they have to register by filling in forms about their personal background, their interests, things they like and dislike, and their dreams. Secondly, the contestants have to go through a vocal test by singing in front of a few assessors. If the contestant performs well and is liked by the judges, the contestant is given a green card to move to the next round otherwise he/she is given a red card signalling expulsion. After this the contestants have to pass another stage where they undergo a character and personality assessment.
the main program to compete in the weekly *AF Konsert*, and sent to live in the ‘academy’ where their lives are tracked on *Diari AF*.

*Diari AF* revolves around the life of these 12 contestants in the house; their trainings and daily routines are recorded and publicly aired. Male and female contestants are housed separately due to Islamic/Malay cultural norms. However, in their daily singing and dancing classes, the 12 contestants do come together. This part of *AF* is similar to *Big Brother* in its presentation of what Roscoe (2001) has termed as ‘the performance of everyday’ “displayed in a simulated ‘natural environment’” (p. 478) where the narrative is “constructed around the housemates, their personalities, interactions with each other and how they cope out of their normal environment” (p. 480). Their lives are filmed on 16 hidden cameras (Samat, 2003a), but the producers select and organise the representations of the contestants’ actions and everyday lives in *Diari AF* to form a dramatic narrative like a soap opera (Hassan Basri, 2004, p. 202). The ‘drama’ of *Diari AF* is constructed around the contestants’ interactions with each other and the trainers, as well as the manner in which they cope with their daily routine in the ‘academy’.

After training for a week, all the contestants perform in the *Konsert AF* held on Saturday night. The concert starts with the contestants introducing themselves, informing the audience about their song and announcing their individual tagline. Contestants are then critiqued by the three judges following their performance. In the first four seasons, the panel was made up of one resident critic and two invited critics. However, from the sixth season, *AF* changed the panel to three resident critics with no

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49 Every contestant had their own individually-created tagline to attract supporters in the earlier seasons; for example, “susah-susah aje” (Why all these troubles!) by Felix (*AF2*), “redah aje” (Just Face It) by Nadia (*AF6*), “wasap-wasap” (what’s up! what’s up!), and “bereh” (settled) by Heliza (*AF5*). There are also tag line that do not constitute any meaning, for instance, “breeep-breeep” by Farah (*AF2*), and “praaap” by Kefli (*AF3*). However, this concept has been discontinued from *AF* season 6.
invited critics. At the end of every concert, they sing the AF theme song ‘Menuju Puncak’ (Towards the Top) together. Soon after that, there is an elimination ritual where the host announces the name of the contestant who has the least number of votes and they leave the contest with an emotional farewell. With some minor variations these are the basic standard rituals of most ‘Idol’ format reality talent contests.

However, AF is a little different from the standard elimination rounds of other talent contest shows, as it is heavily embedded in a melodramatic mode of narrative which has been argued in the popular press as the main reason for its success amongst local audiences. The contestants are pointedly given their personal luggage on stage to symbolically reinforce their elimination. The hosts endeavour to make the elimination part as dramatic as possible and Aznil, the popular former host of AF, was lauded for his ability to infuse as much melodrama and emotion as possible. Sometimes at these moments, a sorrowful air takes over the entire studio, with many people including the judges and trainers, shedding tears. In fact, capitalising on this emotional and melodramatic nature of the program, ‘Premier’ tissue brand has become one of the major sponsors of this program strategically advertising their programs at these ‘poignant’ moments.

Before AF, local audiences rarely saw such overtly emotional content especially in live entertainment programs and it was “[f]or the first time on Malaysian television, uncensored, real and raw emotions are being displayed right before our eyes, although they are beyond the normative ideals” (Hassan Basri, 2004, p. 201). Astro’s Malay programming head, Zainir Aminullah said “[t]he interactive show, which managed to evoke emotional reaction among the audience, has made it one of the most watchable
shows in Bahasa [Malay language] around” (Samat, 2003a). This emotional appeal is also acknowledged by AF’s executive producer Sheikh Mohd Sofyan Abdul Rahman who said that the attraction for the audience to watch AF “lies in the tangible element of the show” (New Straits Times, 19 July 2003, p. 3).

In the final stage of the competition, the top five contestants perform two songs (one song was selected by the trainers and AF production team, while the other is a new song specially composed for the contestants). The contestant with the most votes is selected as the winner and he is declared to have successfully completed his journey in the AF ‘academy’ to become a star.

ii. The concept of AF: An academy for creating celebrity

AF has revamped the conventional talent contest. The concept is not just about the search for a star, but as the name suggests, the program positions itself as a kind of academy for training ordinary people to become budding celebrities, and this is a key thematic focus of the program. This ‘academy’ metaphor runs throughout the show. The contestants are called ‘student’ and the trainers ‘teacher’ with a ‘principal’ at the head. Every season, there is a new principal who is chosen on the basis of their success and expertise in the field of show business. The trainers on the show who become the principal’s team are also chosen on the basis of their expertise. There is also an advisor who looks after the ‘students’ especially after the training hours. In the ‘academy’, they learn everything about becoming a star – voice improvement, drama training, public speaking, personal grooming and dance classes taught by experienced trainers from the broadcasting industry (Kadir, 2003a). In some of the

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50 The contestants can only communicate with the facilitators, trainers and principal and other contestants. They cannot be contacted by phone from the outside and there is no TV, radio or newspapers in the house.
current AF seasons, they also had to learn to speak English properly. At the end of the final concert which is presented as a kind of ‘graduation’ day for the contestants, they are dressed in specially designed gowns with hoods and mortarboards that look similar to academic graduation gowns and they are given trophies and bouquets to mark their success. This simulation of an ‘academic student’s graduation’ is used to demonstrate the end of learning for successful candidates in this academy for star performers.  

This story of a talent search promises that anybody can be a star within a few months. In fact, nowadays, the Malaysian media business is dominated by reality TV contestants and winners, who often find work as high profile DJs, actors/actresses, or hosts if they do not succeed in becoming successful singers. These new faces of ‘instant pop stars’ have also become ambassadors and spokespersons for local and international brands.  

As one critic has noted, “What is particularly noteworthy about reality celebrity is the way these individuals are dispensed through celebrity place along synergistic paths” (Collins, 2008, p. 103). In relation to Survivor’s success in launching its progenies, Collins (2008) notes that “popular CBS Survivor contestants are effectively cross-

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51 Amongst other lucrative prizes, the winner was given RM10,000 cash prize which has been increased to RM 25,000 since the fifth season. Furthermore, the winner in this particular season will receive a four-room bungalow in Malacca's A Famosa Resort and a holiday trip to South Africa, worth more than RM700,000 (New Straits Times, 11 March 2008, p. 23)  
52 Akademi Fantasia winners, such as Mawi (AF3 winner), Vince (AF1 winner), Zahid (AF2 winner), Faizal (AF4 winner), Mila (AF5 winner) and Stacey (AF6 winner) have become spokespersons and ambassadors for consumer brands. For instance, Mawi is even said to have monopolised the marketing industry as he became the ambassador for a wide range of products, from cosmetics to food, automobiles to hypermarkets. He is not only the spokesperson for brands like Mamee, Silky, EON (Edaran Otomobil Nasional), Canon, Carrefour Hypermarket, KL Tower (Kaur, 2006), Power Root and The National Anti-Drug Agency (Malay Mail, 7 May 2007) but an ambassador for the promotion of Korean tourism. The Power Root Marketing Sdn Bhd, the manufacturer of the Ali Cafe and Extra Power Root brands of energy drinks, has also appointed other AF runners-up such as Marsha, Farah and Adam together with Mawi in order to promote the energy drink’s brand. Furthermore, Mamee, an instant noodle brand has chosen Felix, and Amelia to join Mawi as their brand ambassadors. Contestants like Farhan and Lotter (AF’s runners-up) had been offered a contract to become Toyota representatives (http://www.maestrotalent.com.my/AboutUs.aspx). Winners of another reality talent show called OIAM such as Suki and Faizal Tahir have also signed contracts with Pepsi (Malay Mail, 9 May 2007, p. 33).
promoted through various Viacom holdings, in some cases as actors, but most often as guests, playing themselves” (p. 103). In Malaysia too “[t]he blend of music, television and ‘manufactured’ celebrity is a formula Malaysian audiences are comfortable with” (Samat, 2004a). Local reality TV formats continue to capitalise on the popularity of some contestants or to keep their careers in the public eye by launching flagship programs after the main program ends. *AF* season one director Khairul Mizan Shagol, accepted that programs such as *Reunion AF* and *AF Selamat Hari Raya* were created for this purpose. Although it has been a huge success with audiences globally, reality TV has also been criticised for not creating stars with any longevity, but making what Rojek (2001) has termed as ‘celetoids’ (p. 20) who become a celebrity in a short period of time and fade from the public memory as quickly as they became popular. Furthermore, *AF* has often been criticised for producing singers without talent or personality (Mohd. Faizal, 2008).

**Explaining the thematic content, narrative structure and the role of audience in *AF***

**i. The Juxtaposition between celebrity and ordinary people**

Watching ordinary people in ‘real life’ scenarios can still be considered as the most appealing factor of watching reality TV and also its distinctive feature in contrast to other genres like soap operas, sitcoms and fictional dramas.53 Indeed, a reality TV fan has been quoted as saying, “The viewers want to see people who look or act like we do. If we wanted fake, we’d be watching sitcoms” (Gardyn, 2001). It is argued that

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53 While most studies (Andrejevic, 2004; Hall 2006; Nabi et al. 2003; Roscoe 2001) report that people watched reality TV because they enjoyed watching ordinary people “who are a bit like us” (Roscoe, 2001, p. 479), a study found that Swedish and British viewers disliked relating themselves with reality TV participants (Hill, 2007, p. 173). Swedish viewers even dismissed reality TV participants, calling them ‘media hot’ with pejorative connotations “that implie[d] something unSwedish” (p. 173).
since reality TV contestants are ordinary people, watching those ordinary people that look like us, enable ‘possibilities of identification’ (Roscoe, 2001, p. 479). In a study conducted with young adults, Hall (2006) found that “one could relate more closely to the cast members because the programs featured regular people rather than actors” (p. 205). Likewise, a study of Malaysian audience response to a local adapted version of ‘Idol’, found that the involvement of ordinary people was one of the main appealing factors of *Malaysian Idol* (Lim, 2008, p. 76).

By putting the star system as the main ‘narrative’ of the program, it “symbolically represents the dream of ordinary people in a media-saturated world” (Jian & Liu, 2009, p. 536). Yet, the narratives of these reality talent shows are specifically organised around the ‘search’ for a star, so they are arguably still very traditional in their articulation of fame (Holmes, 2004a, p. 114). I think that the issue here is that while engaging ordinary people, they use traditional modes of articulation of celebrity with a very self-conscious play on the discourses of conventional stardom. According to Turner, Bonner and Marshall (2000), “celebrities are people the public is interested in; if the public is interested in this person, they are a celebrity; therefore, anyone the public is interested in is a celebrity” (p. 9). On the other hand, some people become famous for an achievement and others are just well-known for the ‘well-knownness’ (Boorstin, 1961, p. 57). While conventional celebrities are created and promoted on the basis of their distinction from other people in terms of their possession of a unique talent or achievement, participants in reality TV programs achieve their celebrity on the basis of their status as ordinary people. But the cult of celebrity that is so pervasive in reality TV has not been examined in detail; as Collins (2008) claims, the idea of celebrity manufactured through reality TV needs further investigation (p. 88).
If we examine this field, we can see that reality TV generates celebrity for its participants in a manner different from conventional celebrities. Harmon (2005) has noted that, “[c]elebrities of the twentieth and twenty-first century differ from all previous ones, as the lines between public and private, ordinary and famous, proper and improper have narrowed or even disappeared” (p. 99). While Harmon (2005) is not talking about reality TV celebrities per se, her idea that a shift has occurred in the cult of celebrity and public perceptions of it from earlier periods is applicable to the field of reality TV celebrities. For example in the Idol format reality talent shows, the contestants are lauded for their ‘talent’ on the basis of their status as ordinary people and consequently promoted as celebrities where the distinctions between the ordinary/famous, public/private become completely blurred.

These distinctions construct the way audiences discuss and perceive the contestants, and Hill (2010) concurs, “[a]udiences frequently discuss the difference between performed selves and true selves in reality programming, speculating and judging the behavior of ordinary people, comparing the motives and actions of [the contestants]” (p. 459). Studies of reality TV have proven that the main attraction of watching the dialectic between public/private is the moments of authenticity within the push and pull between the contestants as ordinary people and celebrities (Hill, 2002; Holmes, 2004b). In depictions of the conventional celebrity, “the split between the I and Me is often disturbing” (Rojek, 2001, p. 11). The public presentation of self is always a staged activity for the conventional star in which the human actor presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve. In contrast, reality talent contests create a different mode of articulation, where the contestant’s public persona is based on what is seen as their true private self, where “[t]he private sphere is constructed to be revelatory, the ultimate site of truth and meaning for any
representation in the public sphere” (Marshall, 1997, p. 247). There is a promise of getting an understanding of the real true person through access to the private individual behind the contestants. In reality TV, the ‘private self’ always becomes complementary to the ‘public self’ and the reality star attains celebrity for what is understood as their private self. Locating this as a cultural shift, Marshall (1997) argues:

In a sense, the representation of public action as a manifestation of private experience exemplifies a cultural pattern of psychologization of the public sphere. [Thus], the formation of a public subject is reduced to various psychological motivations, pressures at the micro level, the expression of family interest and personality traits. (p. 247)

When it comes to the ‘idea’ of authenticity, the audience are really concerned with the contestant’s ‘integrity of the self’ and their truthfulness in presenting themselves (Hill, 2002, p. 336). Consequently, they look for moments where contestants are doing ordinary and daily things and this “leads to a particular viewing practice: audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are ‘really’ themselves in an unreal environment” (p. 323). In Roscoe’s (2001) study of Big Brother, she found that “the show provides a site in which the psychological and emotional are foregrounded, enjoyed and deliberated over” (p. 478). With reference to Big Brother again, Johnson-Woods (2002) has noted that viewers vote for the person who they think as representing certain characteristics idealised by viewers, for example, a nice character, a sense of humour, and friendliness (p. 145). Biressi and Nunn (2005) found that to “appear too ambitious, too outrageous, too performative, is to invite audience disdain. Yet to appear too dull, too isolated, too introverted is also
invite banishment” (p. 151). Hill (2005) notes that viewer judgment is governed by two questions: “how well the contestants play the game, and also how well contestants remain true to themselves” (p. 69). In contrast, Johnson-Woods (2002) sees the social dynamics between contestants on Big Brother as a determinant of voter preference: “Observed across the series, a nomination and eviction pattern emerged; people were nominated and voted out because of group dynamics, then relationship dynamics, and finally individual dynamics” (p. 143).

But we must remember that although reality TV involves ordinary people, their portrayal is strategically structured and choreographed in a way that their actions and aspirations “mattered to the audience” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 206). While a conventional singing competition focuses on the vocal talent and showmanship of the contestants, reality talent contests go beyond these qualities. The contestants’ depictions are interwoven with their personal background to create an emotional link between the contestant and the audience. The personalities, behavioural traits, personal backgrounds and relationships of the participants also become a key area of evaluation in contrast to traditional singing competitions. In the analysis of Supergirl, Jian and Liu (2009) find that, “[t]hese background spots are not only ingeniously created to enhance the melodramatic content of the show, but also to display the ordinariness and authenticity” (p. 537).

There is also an implicit promise in reality talent shows that ordinary people can change their lives and achieve their dreams, which also raises the stakes of audience involvement in such shows in contrast to more conventional genres, as they “could inspire the audience by implying that they too might be able to achieve their goals” (Hall, 2006, p. 205). In this sense, AF can also be related to the idea of ‘makeover’
that has been examined by a number of contemporary television scholars (Dover & Hill, 2007; Lewis, 2009; Morris, 2007; Weber, 2009). Redden (2008) has noted this conflation of the makeover narrative with the reality talent shows saying that “what is most distinctive about the new talent shows is their promise to change people … [t]he narrative structure of makeovers and other shows based on personal lifestyle modification require that people are changed in the end” (p. 135).

Audiences correlate such stories to their own desires for success and social mobility. As Reiss and Wiltz (2004) have noted, “The more status-oriented people are, the more likely they are to view reality television and report pleasure and enjoyment” (p. 373). In these reality talent contests, viewers are ‘invited’ to partake in the joy of fulfillment of the dreams of contestants, who are ordinary people like themselves, but undergo a series of transformations to become a better self.

Thus, “the relationship between ordinary people and celebrity culture, which has occupied a central place in the rise of reality TV” (Holmes, 2004a, p. 113) is the main thematic content of reality talent contests like AF. This in turn is accompanied by an emphasis on the authenticity of the private self of the contestant in contrast to the facade of performance associated with conventional celebrities.

ii. Narrative complexity in the storytelling format

As I explained earlier in this chapter, the term ‘reality TV’ is quite broad and actually refers to a plethora of subgenres. In addition, the format of AF with its multiple segments of a concert, documentary and real life drama all melded within the narrative of a search for a star, actually crosses over a lot of different subgenres
within reality TV. This hybrid mixture of subgenres in AF is similar to Big Brother, where “there are the nightly episodes and the weekly shows and each resembles a different genre. The nightly episodes are ‘docusoaps’; the Thursday night shows are most like talk shows; the Saturday and Sunday shows are a cross between talk shows and variety shows” (Johnson-Woods, 2002, p. 66). The nature of this hybrid format involves a cross-generic of narrative structures with “the potent mix of suspenseful competition (game show), person-watching (reality TV) and stories of personal transformation (lifestyle)” (Redden, 2008, p. 134).

On further examination, the hybrid narrative of AF is not just limited to mixing different subgenres of reality TV, but cross-generic usage of narrative modes from soaps to documentaries that add to its narrative complexity. Due to its hybrid nature, reality TV programs also blur boundaries between fiction, documentary and drama (Hill, 2005, p. 2). Many scholars have engaged in debates to make sense of such crossovers. While some see a program like Big Brother as having greater affinity with soap operas than observational documentaries or gameshows (Roscoe, 2001, pp. 480-481), others have situated Big Brother within the ‘gamedoc’ convention (Collins, 2008; Ouellette & Murray, 2004) and documentary format (Turner, 2005). Bateman, Bennett, Benyahia, and Wall (2010), however, categorise Big Brother as belonging to all these three genres, along with Roscoe (2001) who says that Big Brother “owes as much to drama (soap opera) as it does to the fly-on-the-wall observational documentary, and the gameshow” (p. 485).

This cross-pollination of genres is accompanied by hybridisation of different narrative structures specific to them, thus contributing to the complexity of narrative structure in programs like AF. In particular, reality TV programs like AF extensively use
elements of melodramatic narrative conventions, interpersonal relationships and emotional conflicts derived from the genre of soap operas. Ang (1985) argues that “in most soap operas the conflicts forming the foundation of the dramatic development of the narrative always have to do with difficult family situations” (p. 78) and a tragic structure of feeling of the soap opera genre emerges from such conflict and reconciliation in the plot. In AF, the dramatic plot encompasses the difficulties faced by the contestant on this journey to become a celebrity; the conflicted relations between the contestants and the trainers; the anxieties about performance; and the struggle of being locked in a house far away from family members. A tragic structure of feeling is evoked by the drama of conflict, emotional breakdown, reconciliation and fulfillment of dreams among the contestants. The narrative of the reality talent contest is driven by two ‘engines’: “built-in potential conflict” and “renovation and care of the self” (Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007, p. 59).

Although it is obvious that reality TV like AF borrows melodramatic narrative conventions from soap opera, it appeals to the public in a different way than soap operas. AF extensively uses narrative devices from soap operas like short narrative sequences, cliff-hanger scenes with surprise elements and character sketches of contestants. However, the narrative is rendered more complex because it is unscripted and unpredictable. As a Big Brother producer stated, “This is a soap in which the participants themselves write the script. No matter how constructed the event, or how closely it conforms to the structure and narrative of the soap opera, there is always a potential element of unpredictability in the show” (Roscoe, 2001, p. 481).

The narrative complexity of reality TV also derives from the fact that while soaps can be dismissed as being fictional stories by the viewers, reality TV “blur[s] the
conventional boundaries between fact and fiction, drama and documentary and between the audience and the text” (Roscoe, 2001, p. 474). In soaps, viewers may treat an extraordinary event with an ironic distance or assume a position of complicity by suspending disbelief. But whatever the case they just take the content at face value for the melodramatic pleasure it delivers. As Ang (1985) notes, “Within the framework of a popular fiction form like soap opera, exaggerated events such as kidnappings, marital dramas and chance meetings with great consequences should not be regarded and assessed for their referential value, but as bearers of the melodramatic effect” (p. 64). However, with the reality talent contest, the referential value and melodramatic effect are conflated. Viewers of reality TV look for the thrill of a dramatic event while simultaneously evaluating its ‘referential value’ as a real incident. Hall (2006) has noted that viewers place a great deal of importance on this sense of realism or ‘referential value’ and constantly measure it by invoking criteria of typicality and factuality. Given the documentary constructive element within reality TV, the show involves “an implicit ‘reality contract’ to be negotiated between programme and viewer” (Jones, 2003, p. 402). Also, whilst the lives of the characters is “just a game” in the soap opera, a reality talent format invites the audience to experience the “lives and destinies” of real people (Buckingham, 1987, p. 69). The viewer invests emotion in the story of the contestant’s journey because it affects the contestant’s real life, who is not just a fictional character. This blurring of fact/fiction and the viewer’s investment in its purported realism heightens the narrative complexity of reality TV.

On a different note, Lundy et al. (2008) found respondents who disparaged the realism of reality TV and said that it was not real (p. 222). This does not undermine my earlier point about the investment of viewers in the realism of reality TV. In fact,
it supports that argument because with a constant guard against falsities in the promise of realism in reality TV, these respondents still show that they are concerned about measuring the referential value of reality TV.

Furthermore, while they are dismissive of reality TV and its manufactured reality, they still continue to enjoy it. As Hill (2007) in her chapter on ‘Reality Modes’ finds, viewers criticise reality TV while simultaneously enjoying it as ‘a guilty pleasure’ (p. 104). The perceived or purported realism of the reality genre not only raises the stakes of viewer investment in the narrative, it also creates a greater sense of identification where viewers derive vicarious pleasure from seeing an ordinary person like themselves enjoying the limelight. Lundy et al. (2008), cite respondents who said that watching ‘ordinary people’ in reality TV was a kind of ‘great escape’, since they felt a part of the drama shown and could immerse themselves in the narrative (p. 213). Hill (2007) has explained this sense of escapism as well as identification saying that,

> Reality modes of engagement are perhaps best explained as dream-like experiences. Sometimes the experience of watching reality TV can be positive, but more often it seems like a ‘mad dream’ where ‘viewers are caught in intermediate space’, as reality TV blurred the line between fact and fiction, and the public and private (p. 108).

Many researchers have noted that the appeal of voyeurism also contributes to viewer enjoyment of programs like *Big Brother* (Baruh, 2009; Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002) and such voyeuristic pleasure reaches a peak when the viewers can see emotional conflicts like fights or scheming among the contestants.54 Hall (2006) and Lundy et

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54 Based on E-Poll’s findings, age and gender are two of the most significant factors in watching reality TV shows (Gardyn, 2001). 18 to 34-year-olds are most likely to watch reality TV because of the conflict among participants, while older audiences in the 35 to 54 age group, watched it to keep track of the contestants’ strategies (Gardyn,
also confirm that viewers take pleasure in ‘seeing people behaving badly’ (p. 210). Furthermore, they also found that viewers enjoyed watching reality TV because of its comedic nature (p. 214). Similarly, Ebersole and Woods (2007) also found viewers who said that they liked watching The Real World, The Bachelor/Bachelorette, and Survivor because they found it humorous and funny to watch the “‘stupidity’ of the characters and their actions” (p. 36). This sense of outraged disbelief at what is really happening, the unpredictability of the unfolding events, and the sense of being privy to the scene of action as it happens, are missing from conventional scripted programs and add to the narrative complexity of reality TV programs like AF.

iii. Viewer-positioning/modes of address

Another area of discussion in the genre of reality talent contests such as AF, relates to the aspect of viewer-positioning. Past research has shown that many reality TV shows have honed audiences to make critical evaluations of the content they watch (Mathijs & Hessels, 2004, p. 71). It has been noted that “when audiences watch reality TV, they are not only watching programmes for entertainment, they are also engaged in critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviour of ordinary people in the programmes, and the ideas and practices of the producers of the programmes” (Hill, 2005, p. 9). Furthermore, Hill (2007) also notes that a reality TV viewer assumes multiple roles while watching – “as witness and interpreter, and occupying multiple spaces, between fact and fiction” (p. 110).

2001). Similarly, Hill (2002) also found that “younger viewers, especially with college education, were more likely to enjoy seeing group conflict” (p. 333). If we compare the pleasure obtained across gender, men were more attracted to watch reality TV programs that portray “physically attractive contestants”, while women were more fascinated to watch “because they like guessing the outcomes” (Gardyn, 2001).
In the last section, I noted that the conflation of referential value and melodramatic effect creates narrative complexity in reality programs. This point about blurring realism/fiction also extends beyond the narrative structure of the content of the program to the positioning of the viewer in the show. As Andrejevic (2004) notes, “the promise of access to reality” in the reality format, for instance Big Brother, does not rely solely on “the production process and providing access to unedited footage, but also through its incorporation of audience participation” (p. 122). Thus, the notion of constantly juggling fact/fiction, constructed/spontaneous events in reality can be extended here to argue that the narrative format of the reality TV positions the viewer in a more active role of judging and criticising content. Viewers implicitly enter into a contract of suspension of disbelief in fictional programs or assume a position of passive receivers of information in factual, documentary programs. In contrast, reality TV is structured so that the viewer has to constantly have his guard up. Hill (2007) argues that “[t]he intermediate space of factual genres can be transformative. And at times we will personally connect with something in a program, reflecting on what that person or real event means to us, creating a powerful self-reflective space” (p. 110).

Similarly, in the previous section I argued that voyeurism aids the narrative complexity by offering a “real” unpredictable drama unfolding in a private restricted domain; but here I will argue how this sense of voyeurism constitutes a viewer position in reality TV that differs from other programs. With “the promise of access to surveillance-based reality” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 117), the viewer assumes a vicarious position of being an unwitting viewer of a drama, of being a voyeur to an unpredictable, unscripted and realistic drama unfolding then and there. According to Johnson-Woods (2002), there are a few ways in which contestants react to the camera surveillance; “some played up to the cameras”, “some mimicked television shows”, 126
and “sometimes they adopted different roles” (p. 129-130). The enjoyment revealed by Hall (2006), Hill (2007), Lundy et al. (2008), and Ebersole and Woods (2007) show that the viewers enjoy what Hill (2005) termed as ‘people watching’ or Corner (2000) refers to as ‘nosey sociability’ (p. 687). However such voyeuristic appeal is also a kind of guilty pleasure, as the knowledge of the ‘bad-ness’ of watching such drama adds to its appeal. Some viewers said that it was bad to “enjoy watching people getting exposed to difficult thing” in programs like Robinson (Hill, 2007, p. 108) and many viewers said that they did not like to watch people doing private things in Big Brother (Hill, 2002, p. 334). While some of these respondents may have turned away from reality TV due to these objections, most others discredited such voyeurism as bad but accepted it as the thrill behind the guilty pleasure of watching reality TV.

In addition, to such self-reflexive viewer positioning, Biltereyst et al. (2000) (cited in Mathijs & Hessels, 2004, p. 64), have argued that viewing attitudes for a program like Big Brother traverses shifting rounds, sometimes assuming a ‘distanced attitude’ and sometimes an ‘engaged attitude’ which relates with ‘identification’. They also connect “(inter)personal and emotional relations” and “participation and power during successive episodes of the show” as viewing attitudes towards the earlier viewing positions (in Mathijs & Hessels, 2004, p. 64).

More obviously, the viewer of reality talent contests assumes the position of a judge evaluating the contestants on the show. In fact, judging the contestants is cited as one of the most common reasons behind the audience’s penchant for programs like Big Brother (Hills, 2002, p. 324). In addition to being implicitly positioned to assume the role of a judge, viewers are invited to actively engage in the process of voting. Viewers are made to feel that they are the ones who control the show’s results to
determine who should stay and who should leave. As Andrejevic (2004) claims “Big Brother exemplifies the equation of spectatorship with participation” (p. 133). Here they can become a supporter of a favoured contestant and a voter who actively campaigns for the contestant’s success. These multiple roles of judge, supporter and voter complicates the notion of viewer positioning in reality talent contests and also accords them a degree of active participation not available in conventional programs.

Given this underlying construct of the ‘active viewer’, reality programs often use a mode of address where viewers are directly deferred, referred and even appealed to in the program. It employs “a mode of address in which the programme host speaks directly to viewers as if he or she knows us and gives us a participatory role, an address which may explain a part of reality TV’s appeal” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 155). This mode of address differs from conventional entertainment programs like soaps where viewers are not directly acknowledged in the program. The viewer is assumed as a knowledgeable media-savvy person, and “there is a shared assumption that the audience possesses the media literate capabilities to assess the contestants/participants of the reality TV show – even though the criteria of judgement are often un-formulated and unspoken” (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 151).

The presence of the viewer in the discourse and mode of address in reality TV is quite pronounced; they are not regarded as an invisible, homogenous, passive body out there, but spoken to in direct, personal tones. Thus, it has also been said that reality TV has changed “the mode of address from the mass or the nation to the individual” (Lunt, 2009, p. 132).

These different dimensions of viewer-positioning point to the nuances are inherent in the concept of viewer in the genre of reality TV. Specifically with reference to AF, its
hybrid genre further complicates the notion of viewer positioning. As Biressi and Nunn (2005) assert, “the address to the reality audience varies depending on the format of the show” (p. 151). The unique cross-generic format of AF utilises different modes of address and enables multi-spectator positions within the program, from voyeur, active viewer and critical viewer with alternating moments of viewer attitudes.

In conclusion, this chapter constructed a theoretical basis for elaborating how a reality TV program like AF is constituted, in terms of its thematic content, narrative structure, format and generic orientations. The next chapter will provide an exploration of how Malay viewers obtain pleasure from the promise of transforming an ordinary person into a star, the multiple spectator positions and the narrative complexity in the show.
PART 2

KEY FINDINGS
CHAPTER 4
THE PLEASURES OF A HYBRID TEXT

As noted in the first part of this thesis, AF is an innovative program in that it mixes conventions of the soap opera and game show in a hybrid format. At the same time it capitalises on this hybridity by creating ‘spin-off’ programs like Diari AF (AF Diary), Konsert AF (AF Concert), Imbasan AF (AF Glimpse) and Tirai Akademi Fantasia (Behind the Curtain). In contrast to other reality talent contests, which only focus on staged performances, AF is more than just a singing competition as it also showcases the contestants’ lives and relationships in these additional programs. In this chapter I examine more closely the complex viewing pleasures that this program generates drawing on audience descriptions and evaluations of identified features such as its multiple spectator positions and ‘complex’ narrative.

In line with Mikos’s (2004) account of Big Brother, this chapter also argues that AF “as television text works on several levels” (p. 93). Due to its element of audience interactivity as well as its subjectivity of how celebrities are created from ordinary people, the program engages varying modes of address. As McCarthy (2009) has noted in her comparison between the first waves of reality TV with the recent versions (drawing on British and American contexts) (p. 26), modes of address constitute different spectator subjectivities for the viewers. While the first wave of reality TV is “understood as unequivocally good, instructive, and socially progressive through its association with social science …”, the recent wave has brought massive changes as it is positioned within “voyeuristic, theatrical, and exploitative formats and modes of address” (p. 26). While most contemporary Malaysian reality TV can still be categorised within the first wave of reality TV, AF blends the first wave and the
recent wave identified by McCarthy as it melds the instructive modes of address with a voyeuristic format.

In this chapter I argue that hybridity (in generic and textual terms) is a key mechanism in accounting for the pleasure audiences experience from AF. I will elaborate on three main themes to justify this argument. Firstly, as a hybrid text that melds the on-stage performance (like American Idol) with the off-stage lives of the contestants (like Big Brother), AF allows the audience to draw pleasure from seeing the construction of celebrity through the play between the ‘pseudo’-private and public selves. Secondly, it engages the viewer in the spectator position of ‘meta-judge’, inviting them to simultaneously evaluate the competencies of contestants, judges and host. Thirdly, the program heightens audience levels of excitement and emotional engagement by organising the program within a melodramatic narrative form that strongly draws on soap opera conventions.

The celebrity journey: The articulation of private selves and public selves

Reality talent contests have become a significant player in the production of celebrity, especially in Malaysia. At the same time, reality TV has also brought a new approach in terms of how viewers might identify with the ‘wannabe’ celebrity, that is, an ordinary person who wants to be a celebrity. AF is the first reality contest program in the country where audiences can witness the daily lives of the contestants off-stage. Thus, the contestants adopt their celebrity personae in a play between their private and public selves as ordinary people in the house and performers on the stage, subsequently raising the question of how audiences evaluate and view this new form of the construction of celebrities. This hybrid format that sets AF apart from other
programs might also be hypothesised as a key source of the program’s immense popularity. This proposition will be tested in this chapter through the responses obtained from the focus groups.

i. Authentic articulations of the self

The audience assumes a voyeuristic perspective on the lives of the contestants in the house in *Diari AF*, but one of the motivations of such a voyeuristic exercise for the viewers is to get a glimpse of the contestants as they ‘really’ are in their ordinary everyday lives. As Holmes (2004b) puts it, viewers look for an “authentic articulation of the self” in the contestants in reality TV (p. 159). In *AF*, audiences track this articulation of self across the dual narrative foci of the private and public lives of contestants. However, what identifies *AF* as a distinctive show is that a precondition of being judged a successful contestant (being a public celebrity) is the prior demonstration of an authentic self in the ‘private’ setting of the house.

Much of the pleasure of *AF* is derived in terms of the viewers’ perceptions or sense of familiarity with the contestants as ordinary people. In this case, *Diari AF* acts as the main source for viewers to witness the contestant’s true self as the viewers see them in a domestic setting doing everyday things. It is “within this framework we learn such intimate details as their bad habits, favourite turn of phrase, the names of their partners, their pets and so forth” (Holmes, 2004a, p. 116). Through such “repeated performance”, viewers form perceptions of their characters and judge them accordingly (Redden, 2008, p. 133). Indeed, by watching the contestants every day through the hidden video camera surveillance, the viewers easily identify with what Collins has called “media friends”. NK2 (female, 19, Diploma Student), one of the
research participants, confirmed that she likes to watch *Diari AF* as she can witness the true self of the contestants. AA (female, 36, Assistant Registrar) also likes to watch *Diari AF* as she can observe the behaviours of the contestants:

> When I watch the contestants on *Diari AF*, I can know more about them. For example, with whom do they get along ... and I can know about their behaviour ... maybe he/she is a kind of quiet person. (AA, female, 36, Assistant Registrar)

Her response shows that the private self of the contestants does indeed matter. She appears to want to know about the characters of contestants in a way that extends beyond just seeing them performing. Her response also suggests that *Diari AF* enables her to draw conclusions about “what the star ‘really is’” (Dyer, 2004, p. 10). MM1 likewise believes that this aspect of getting to know the contestants as real people behind the scenes is the key attraction of *AF*:

> People don’t only want to watch the singing performance itself, but they want to watch the contestants’ character ... when we can watch other people’s character, we feel enjoyable ... we want to know their off-stage character, instead of singing on stage. For example, it was quite exciting to watch the contestants quarrel in the house. (MM1, male, 26, Newsreader/Assistant Editor)

MM1’s comment reveals not just performance but also ‘behind-the-scenes’ conflict is an important element of the pleasure of the show.

When viewers feel that they know the contestants in terms of their individual personalities and behavioural traits, they begin to develop a preference for them on
the basis of such perceptions. AZ (female, 30, Document Controller) commented that she would normally choose a favourite contestant by the end of the first three weeks and then she would watch *Diari AF* in order to follow the activities of her favourite contestant. She followed her favourite contestant to see how he/she reacted to the challenges of living in the house, and how he/she behaved with other participants, trainers and *AF* guests.

From these comments, it is obvious that the respondents were attracted to watching *Diari AF* because they could learn and explore what the contestants are really like. Some viewers, however, dislike this aspect of the show, as they feel that it is inappropriate. MY1 said:

> At first, I also like to watch those things *(referring to contestants doing daily activities)*. But now, I don’t want to watch those things any more. I watched it in *AF2*, but I don’t want to watch those things any more. I didn’t watch the *Diari AF* for *AF* seasons 4 and 5. Since *AF2*, we knew the tactics - washing dishes, or whatever. I don’t want to watch those things funny any more. (MY1, male, 26, Master’s Degree Student)

MY1’s comment illustrates his ambivalence towards the *Diari AF* program; he felt that the format was interesting in the beginning, but after a few seasons the novelty wore off and he felt that such public broadcasting of contestants’ private lives was inappropriate or simply too banal. Similarly, NK1 also found that the mundane, routine and intense focus in the *Diari AF* was not enjoyable, as she said:

> It might be suitable to show those things for the contestants’ family to watch the activities of their son/brother/daughter/sister who became the
contestants, in order to know their development in the ‘academy’, but for us who have no relations with them, we do not find it as enjoyable to watch those things. (NK1, female, 19, Diploma Student)

While some viewers enjoy watching the diary so they can get to know the contestants ‘real’ self, a number of research participants expressed scepticism about whether the contestants would be their genuine selves on camera. AA5 (female, 23, Bachelor’s Degree Student), for example, said that since contestants know that their daily activity is being recorded, they would be on their best behaviour and might act as if they were trying very hard to give the best performance at the Konsert AF at the end of the week. She stated, “The contestants would not show their real self, but will pretend in front of the camera, but once off-camera, we don’t know how they would react, right?” AR (22, male, Radio Producer) also indicated, “the contestants were acting up. When you notice that you are being recorded, your will not show your true self”. In this respect, audiences appear to express recognition of the ‘constructedness’ and performed dimensions of AF’s narratives of the private self.

One participant, AM2 (male, 30, Customer Service Officer), however, felt that the contestants of the AF first season were very genuine compared to contestants in the other seasons, as the AF1 contestants had no idea that they were going to be recorded and showcased to the viewers. But MA1, from another group had a different view and argued that the contestants in AF season two onwards were also being their genuine selves. He said:

Although they know that their activities in the house are monitored on the camera, they cannot tell precisely when and where their activities are being recorded. They do not know where the cameras are. Anyway on
Diari AF, the contestants are mostly just doing the training that their teacher asked them to do. For me, it doesn’t look like they are acting up. (MA1, male, 24, Radio Producer)

In contrast to MA1’s defence of the contestants’ behaviour, AA4 (male, 35, Lecturer) made an intriguing argument about the audience expectations of the notion of realism on reality TV. He said that one must accept that since the contestants are somehow subconsciously aware of being monitored we cannot discount a level of pretence. Equally, though, as the observation technology becomes more invisible and backgrounded, they do probably slip back into habitual behaviour.

The popularity of Mawi attests to audience concern with ‘the ordinary’ and ‘the real’. In this respect, Asmawi Ani (the winner of AF3), famously known as Mawi, has emerged as the most popular contestant across all AF seasons. Mawi was the most frequently mentioned contestant across all age groups in the study, regardless of age and gender. Indeed, many of the respondents stated that they followed and enjoyed AF season 3 the most because of Mawi. When they were asked for the reason they favoured Mawi, many of the viewers specified his ‘aura’. While participants did not elaborate on their use of the term, I would argue that it seems to point to an interesting combination of a notion of inherent personality as well as privileging his exemplary Malay ordinariness.

According to SS2 (female, 29, Engineer), Mawi was adored by many people as he came from a disadvantaged economic background. In Trek Selebriti, when the

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55 ‘Aura’ is used in Malay and has the same meaning as in English.
56 He came from a poor family who lived in a government initiated land development area – Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) Taib Andak. FELDA develops new villages in remote areas. Settlers are given a few acres of land to plant oil palm or rubber.
production team visited his house to film him receiving the news of his selection as a contestant, he was very much constructed as a poor ‘kampung’ boy, which struck a chord with many viewers. During the sequence, he appeared dressed in Bermuda shorts without a shirt and his physical appearance further cemented that ‘ordinary kampung’ image. As SS2 put it, “With his appearance like that, plus the depiction of his poor house, it makes people feel sympathetic for him”. Her comment suggests that she admired Mawi’s courage in trying out for such a big contest, despite his less privileged socio-economic background.

Moreover, Mawi’s portrayal as a conservative and virtuous Muslim man also created a strong connection with the viewers, the majority of whom are also Malay Muslim. For instance, ZM (male, 41, School Teacher) stated, “He (Mawi) knows how to carry himself projecting his religious background image. For him, his religious practice is very obvious in comparison to other contestants before him.” As noted previously, personality and character play a key role in audience pleasure and the popularity of contestants. His popularity, however, was associated with the audience’s sympathy towards his poor ‘kampung’ boy construction. One newspaper reported that Mawi’s success was not because of sympathetic votes, as he never purposely ‘showed off’ to the camera or ‘denounced’ his ‘teachers’ (AF trainers) about his social status, in order to raise empathy among the viewers (Utusan Malaysia, 7 August 2005, n. pag).

However, other responses indicate that empathy appears to play a significant role in the voting. SM1 (female, 22, Radio Producer apprentice) said that she and her relatives always vote for a person from a disadvantaged background. According to SM1, “through Trek Selebriti, they can witness how the contestant’s house looks like, where is his/her school, and indirectly, we know how his/her life is, either he/she is
rich or not.” By getting a glimpse of the background of the contestant, they make judgements about who is more deserving of their votes.

Some viewers also find the contestants’ ‘un-celebrity-like behaviour’ easy to relate to. NH (female, 19, Diploma Student) stated, “they (the contestants) are quite humble … I mean, very low profile. In fact, they depicted similar behaviour while they were performing on stage.” She further explains why she likes Felix (AF season 2 contestant) – “He seems so open and down-to-earth in a way that I can understand. I can think of him as the boy-next-door, someone I can relate to, which is why I like him.”

In a related discussion, focus group participants also expressed their doubt about the contestants’ true character; they also voiced their discomfort about the producers’ power over editing and filming as they can manipulate how the contestants are depicted. Their opinion on this matter suggests that they are aware that the ‘drama’ shown in Diari AF is actually shaped by the producers. Although Diari AF is a reality show, the viewers are not freely positioned to choose what to look at, but their voyeuristic gaze is positioned within the narrative construction of the producers’ intention. It can be interpreted through the viewers’ responses on the ‘drama’ constructed in Diari AF. It shows that the viewers are aware that “someone is in control of this “reality”, making the narrative, choosing the shots, determining how they will be ordered” (Kolker & Kolker, 2009, p. 190). Therefore, they understand that a reality program like AF does not show reality per se, but “their reality is closely manipulated” (p. 190). KO, who had talked personally to a contestant, commented that:
Although they spend 12 hours in the house, they still didn’t know where the cameras are … the producers took this advantage to cut and combine the visual and create it as a storyline ... So, we were influenced with the story. For example Aril had been eliminated because people didn’t like him to be close to Marsha, as shown in the daily diary. Thus, all people blame him. But when I asked him whether that he has a special relationship with Marsha, and did he watch the diary after he was eliminated? He told me he watched the diary and he was surprised why the production people just showed his closeness with Marsha in the diary, although Marsha is also close with other contestants too. (KO, female, 25, Reporter)

KO’s observations here show a clear awareness of the narrative-building strategies employed by the show’s editors and producers. She hinted that producers are interested in creating a sense of drama by fashioning a coherent narrative out of the disjointed events occurring in the house. It is worth noting here that this is similar to soap opera narrative strategies, which capture and maintain viewers’ interest through ongoing ‘story lines’. This narrative strategy is also employed by Big Brother, as the show’s producer has noted (Roscoe, 2001, p. 480). In this regard, I would argue that the audience’s awareness of the ‘constructedness’ of narrative produced both a sense of pleasure and displeasure. On the one hand, the viewers might dislike the sense of being manipulated, but on the other hand, they enjoy spotting and tracking the way producers manipulate the contestants’ attitudes in Diari AF. They therefore feel smarter than the producers, as their manipulations are perceived as not as effective once identified by the viewers.
NN also had the same view about the contestants’ personalities, considering them created according to the producer’s intention:

Personally I feel it’s difficult for us to judge their personality because the things that they shown to us have already been edited. So, I don’t think, they really show the truth *(referring to their attitudes)*. Most have been edited and some are shown for intended purposes. For example, if they want to portray the image of certain participant as a pleasant contestant, then they will just show all the pleasant attitudes about him/her. So, sometimes I think the programs itself is not being fair to the contestant.

(NN, female, 51, Businesswoman)

With reference to NN’s response, it can be noted that she is aware that the footage shown on *Diari AF* is orchestrated by the producers. In fact, the producers have the power to create the personality of the contestants according to their preference. Therefore, it can be said that the producers not only positioned the ‘drama’ shown in *Diari AF*, but they also positioned the contestants’ personalities. In this respect, the producers are manipulating the spectators’ points of view and here NN is aware that the viewers are not seeing the overall picture of the contestants.

*AF* has created a new spectator position which employs the voyeuristic manner of the ‘docusoap’ format of *Big Brother*, and this has caused *AF* to be perceived as a novelty. AZ admitted that she enjoyed watching *AF* because of this novelty appeal. She explains:

*AF* is the first reality TV which records the activities/trainings of the contestants in the diary and shows it to the viewers. So, we as the viewers like to watch that kind of thing like the ‘behind-the-screen’
scenes. There’s very little Malaysian program which have these off-stage performance. (AZ, female, 30, Document Controller)

According to AK (female, 24, Bachelor’s Degree Student) AF is popular because it is different from other local reality talent contests as it has different segments under its umbrella such as Diari AF, Konsert AF, and Prelude AF which create a more immersive experience for the viewer who can become engaged with the narrative, in particular with the lives of the contestants. Witnessing the contestants’ degree of dedication to their daily training was considered important as proof of the authentic character of the contestant by viewers and these also heighten the pleasure of viewing the transformative journey from ordinariness to celebrity.

While most respondents expressed their preference for AF over other programs because it enabled them to make a holistic judgement about contestants’ performances throughout the week, in terms of their practice sessions and the contest at the end, two respondents were critical of such a process of evaluation. A1 said that some contestants tended to exaggerate the efforts they put in during the practice sessions to gain audience sympathy. AA4 also felt that contestants were pretending to be committed in their practice sessions. He said, “When they are in the daily practice session … I can say, 60 percent of their commitment is not something which is real. They are pretending to be very devoted to their task.” Notwithstanding this sceptical view, it can be seen that the hybrid format of presenting the daily routines of the participants during the contests invites viewers to make a judgement about the contestants in terms of the effort they put in.
ii. Juxtaposition of the ordinary person with the glamorous performer: Play between the public and private self

With *Diari AF*, which runs from Monday to Friday, audiences have increased access to the off-stage atmosphere and weekly lives of contestants. In *Diari AF*, the audience can witness what Roscoe (2001) called the “performance of the everyday” and “simulation of the everyday” which are the key hallmarks of many reality TV shows (p. 482). The off-stage performance heightens the narrative complexity of the journey of the contestants, as it creates tensions about how the viewers might view the contestants - between ordinary person and glamorous performer. The off-stage performance of the contestant can enhance the “quality of ordinariness” (Redden, 2008, p. 133) and the depiction of “‘ordinary’ people doing ‘ordinary’ things” (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002, p. 205) in *AF* minimises the distance between the audience and the contestants.

Within the off-stage performance, the viewers are more connected to the ordinariness of the contestants, thus making them think that “[t]hese are real and ordinary people, not professional actors, and there are therefore possibilities for identification” (Roscoe, 2001, p. 479). In this sense, the audience feels that they are not much different from the contestants, the difference in this identification process that the contestants are “just a little better looking, a little more articulate, a little luckier” (Bonner, 2003, p. 97).

Through the construction of the private self and the public self, *AF* has built a new way for viewers to perceive celebrity. Although *AF* is a singing competition, it is no

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57 Within this context, I could argue that the narrative complexity is greater in this kind of reality TV than in drama or soap opera.
longer strictly a contest for voice and talent; rather it is a competition of the production of ‘the self’. The viewers derive pleasure from this dual facility of evaluating the contestants according to their performance as in the ‘Idol’ competition format and also that of evaluating contestants on the basis of their off-stage characters as in the Big Brother format. This creates a novel means for the viewers to engage with the participants and evaluate both their attitudes and performances. MS (male, 27, Customer Service Officer), for example, stated that he likes Farah (a female contestant in AF2) because of her mature attitude, apart from her good voice. For him, Farah has both the on-stage and off-stage positive performance quality that is needed to become a celebrity.

As expressed by the viewers, the contestants’ attitude is very important for them. Although Liza (AF1 female contestant) was not good at singing, she managed to stay until the final stage mainly on the basis of being “a lovable character”, that is the acceptance of her “wider performance of the self that takes place around the moments of song—off stage rather than on stage” (Holmes, 2004b, p. 161). She portrays herself as a ‘big sister’ and being very caring to the other contestants, which could be witnessed through the Diari AF. The “lovable character” not only performs as a contestant, but also as an individual person. For example, as Lumby (2007) explains regarding viewers’ enthusiasms for Sara-Marie (Australia’s Big Brother contestant): she “was perceived as aware that a certain level of performance was involved not only in being a Big Brother housemate, but in being female …” (p. 345). In addition, “lovability” also relates to qualities of the ‘real’ and ‘ordinary’, which viewer favourite Sara-Marie has elsewhere been attributed by audiences (Roscoe, 2001, p. 479).
In *AF*, the “lovable character” get viewers’ attention, instead of lovely voice, and another respondent, SM1, from a different focus group, expressed her feelings of pleasure towards Nadia’s elimination (*AF*6 female contestant) as she said:

> For me, I feel satisfied if a contestant is being eliminated because of his attitude, for example he has a bad attitude ... that’s why, when I watch the diary ... I can know the actual attitude of the contestant ... like in *AF*6 recently, Nadia. She is good at singing, her voice is perfect, but she has such an unpleasant attitude to the show, we felt satisfied that she didn’t win! (SM1, 22, female, Radio Producer apprentice)

SM1’s response indicates that the evaluation of the *AF* singing competition has become conflated with the off-stage character, and she tend to favour the contestants based on their character and personality, regardless of talent. In the case of the viewers’ preference of personality over talent, I would argue that what is distinctive about *AF* as a reality talent contest show is not really that it is a singing contest, but that it is about how a celebrity is created, and what kind of individuals are suitable to become celebrities. Hence, there is a contradiction between what the show proposes and what the viewers prefer.

Despite the fact that the contestants’ pleasant attitudes increased the viewers’ admiration of them, the viewers also put value on their personality, but this must lie within what is an acceptable personality within the context of *adat* and Islam. NM1 (female, 22, Bachelor’s Degree Student) mentioned she appreciated that despite Mawi’s victory, he did not get carried away by his success but maintained his humble demeanour till the end. She said, “Then, when he was chosen as the winner, I feel his fans had made a wise decision. Yet, he knows how to control himself as a village boy,
and able to withstand the cultural shock.” Likewise, AZ from another group stated that Mawi was favoured by many viewers because he is concerned about *adat*. Her interpretation might be related to the Islamic principles of *halal* (permitted or permissible)\(^\text{58}\) and *haram*. She said, “In his performance, he did not allow the women contestants to touch him. This attitude makes elderly people respect him. My mother is a big fan of Mawi for this reason.” Referring to AZ’s statement, it could be interpreted that her mother favours Mawi as he can balance himself between his role as a celebrity, and his role as a Malay Muslim. ZM noted that because of Mawi’s reverence for *adat* and Islam, his sixty year old father also began to watch the program. Perhaps he can be perceived as an ideal localised form of celebrity for Malay audiences.

While there was mostly overwhelming admiration for Mawi, some respondents expressed irritation with other viewers’ fascination with him. In group discussions, a respondent from the older age group NK3 (female, 52, Housewife) interjected, “I don’t know why people like him. But, in terms of talent, he is out!” Indeed, in a report about Mawi, a local newspaper which quoted an industry insider said:

> The real artistes of the day see reality shows like Akademi Fantasia as monster makers. Some of these reality artistes can't sing, can't dance, can’t do anything ... yet they’re out there representing the industry. But it’s not their fault they are there. If you ask me to point out the best thing to happen to the industry, I would say it was Mawi. But he was also the

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\(^{58}\) In vernacular, *halal* is known as permitted/ permissible, but it is pertinent to note that *halal* actually has “somewhat greater complexity than the simple permitted/forbidden dichotomy might suggest, although *haram* finds a greater degree of diversity in its usage than does *halal*. Among the senses of *halal* are the opposites of both senses of the word *haram*: *halal* can mean ‘profane’ (in opposition to the sense of *haram* as ‘sanctify’) as well as ‘permit’ (as opposed to *haram*’s ‘forbid’). As with *haram* in the sense of ‘sanctify’, *halal* can suggest a special relationship with God that marks its opposite off as separate. The predominant meaning of the word, however, is the assertion of the lawful character of something, or, when expressed with the negative particle ‘not’, the equivalent of *haram* in the sense of “forbidden”” (Leaman, 2006, p. 239).
Although many respondents admitted that Mawi has no ostensible musical talent, they admitted that he is different from other contestants because of his personal charisma. AR (male, 22, Radio Producer) said, “I began to watch AF season 3 in order to watch Mawi as I heard people comment that Mawi has a nice voice, but does not know how to dance. That is why I want to watch it.” Furthermore, AA3 (male, 27, System Engineer) also mentions that he was prompted to watch AF season 3 because of Mawi as “Mawi has his own aura. I feel weird because he got many fans, although he has limited talent …”. From Mawi’s ardent followers to those who are more sceptical of his talent, most viewers are still fascinated by his popularity. The pleasure of watching Mawi is positioned in the play between his private self and his public self, similar to Lumby’s (2007, p. 345) analysis of Sara-Marie (as explained earlier in this section). Put simply, the core thematic interest of these shows is the performance of the self.

In contrast to Mawi, I obtained generally unfavourable responses about Faizal, the winner of AF4. Respondents ridiculed Faizal despite his victory because they perceived that he did not have the aura of a star like Mawi. WW (female, 24, Master’s Degree Student) unequivocally stated that “Faizal’s season is the worst season I ever seen. It was ridiculous and nonsensical. Mawi’s season was the best.” According to AZ, “Malaysian people look for personality. The contestants have to know how to carry himself well. If Faizal does not know how to carry himself, people will forget him after the show ends.” When Faizal’s name was mentioned in this, and another group discussion, everybody in the group immediately began to laugh. Although these
respondents did not give any further explanation on this circumstances, it might be speculated that a possible reason for this shared response was some combination of Faizal’s unattractive and insipid personality, and his poor communication skills as noted by ZM, AA2, EA and AZ.

The way respondents answered my questions in the focus group discussion about their expectations of the quality or skills of a winner of AF, provided new insights into how new modes of spectatorship in AF have influenced the way ‘celebrity’ is viewed. The hybrid notion of AF, which allows voyeuristic access to the private lives of the contestants, has brought a new kind of expectation of celebrity.

What I felt from the focus group respondents is a sense that they have a different expectation of the AF winner, in comparison to the common expectation of what quality or skills a conventional celebrity should have. AA4, MJ and AZ, for example, stated that their expectation of an AF winner should also be based on their private self. Apart from an ability to sing, AA4, MJ (male, 24, Video Producer) and AZ also believe that the winner should have a “pleasant attitude”. MJ put even greater value on the attitude than the talent. AA4 believes the fall of many celebrities created through reality TV is caused from their bad attitudes.

Within the dual focus on the private and the public selves of the contestants, viewers not only derive pleasure from the play between the off-stage character and their on-stage talent, but it also give implication on the way viewers give support to the contestants. The play between the off-stage character and the on-stage performance has created a narrative complexity which enhances the tension between how the viewers arrive at their support of a celebrity. According to WW, she may support a
contestant on the show, but if she finds their off-stage behaviour inappropriate or offensive she would retract her support:

In the diary, we can witness their attitudes. I felt a bit annoyed, if I see there were contestants that were seducing portraying a seductive behaviour. From there, I found that some of them behave disorderly ... I also know who is good ... graceful ... I can see all sort of attitudes in the diary … we can know what kind of person they are ... whether the person is arrogant, snobbish, envious and so on, right? These kinds of attitudes will annoy me when I am watching AF. (WW, female, 24, Master’s Degree Student)

Another respondents, MS said that he watched _Diari AF_ to make sure that he voted for deserving contestants whose off-stage behaviour is as good as their on-stage performance. He will observe the contestants’ behaviour in the diary and if the contestants create conflict in the diary, for example, if he/she has a rude or lazy attitude, he would not vote for them. Similar to WW, it can be noted that MS also assess the contestants through their off-stage behaviour, which gives him an interpretation of a contestant’s true self. In addition, _AM_ voiced his growing dislike for a contestant called Heliza because she was overacting on the daily diary and not behaving genuinely if she saw the camera⁵⁹, although she had a good voice. Similarly, _AZ_ also admitted that she changed her mind about preferred contestants if they had a good voice, but did not have a pleasant attitude.

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⁵⁹ Besides the surveillance camera, there are two cameras which are purposely located in the middle of the house, and the contestants can directly interact with them. The contestants know if the camera is capturing them because it has direct communication with them. The camera can move the screen lower and raise it similar to people’s head nodding function, and can even “talk” to the viewers.
The off-stage and on-stage performance enables the viewers to witness the transformation of ordinary viewers into celebrity. On one hand, AF presents the contestants in spectacular performances with staged lighting and glamorous physical appearance, but on the other hand it also presents the same contestants as ordinary individuals in the diaries. According to AM, he took pleasure in watching the diaries because it showed the contestants as ordinary people:

It is enjoyable to witness the celebrity transformation. I can see how dowdy they are in the house. Then, when it comes to concert, we can see how they look like when they have been groomed. That is what I wanted to see. For me, that is one of the attractions that make me want to watch AF. (AM2, 30, male, Customer Service Officer)

His comment shows that he likes to see the ‘de-glamorised’ side of the contestants, which has never been shown in other programs. Not only is that novelty in itself interesting, but the fact that by juxtaposing the spectacular stage personae with the ordinary personae, a viewer like AM can create another kind of pleasure, by comparing the two personae - the transformation from an ordinary person into the glamorous look of a celebrity.

NM1 said that more than just watching the mundane routine of the participants she took pleasure in seeing the transformation of her favourite contestant. Through Diari AF, she can observe her favourite contestant learning and practicing. It can be said that for her, the enjoyment of watching her favourite contestant lies in the journey that she can witness through Diari AF, plus the intimate detail that becomes apparent to her. Hence, it can be said that through AF, the “audience experience the pleasure of
witnessing the process in which the contestants improve their skills while they progress toward success” (Jian & Liu, 2009, p. 539).

While the transformation brings pleasurable feelings to the viewers, MS, however, felt annoyed if a contestant was not serious about their given task. He explained:

I feel annoyed with the contestant if she gets a song, but she asks for a different one and she cries to get sympathy for her cause. In my opinion, she has been chosen from thousands of people who attended the AF audition, but then when it comes to an obstacle like this, she just simply gives up and reacts in this manner. (MS, male, 27, Customer Service Officer)

Through his comment, it can be interpreted that he expects contestants to try their very best to accomplish the given task without making any excuses. This suggests that the pleasure of viewing the transformation into a celebrity for MS is held together by the contestant’s unflagging dedication and struggle.

While many respondents feel that the transformation journey increases the sense of the contestants being ordinary, although they are also being portrayed within the glamorous side of the celebrity, SM1, on the other hand, has a different opinion as she no longer perceives the contestant as an ordinary person, as she stated:

In my opinion if a person has his feet in the glamorous world then he is not an ordinary person. Although he might come from the ordinary background Mawi from Felda, but once he is in this field, he is not an ordinary person anymore. Even he just enters Bintang RTM. But as though there is a border. Wow! I am glamour. So, it has been different, if
to consider as ordinary person, we might be excited to see him as an ordinary person during the audition. That is when he is an ordinary person. Then, after he becomes AF contestants, he will be a different person, not ordinary person anymore. (SM1, female, 22, Radio Producer apperentice)

From SM1’s responses, it can be interpreted that ordinariness is not a permanent quality attached to a contestant while she realized that Mawi came from an ordinary background, the transformation of this celebrity ‘wannabe’ made her feel that he can no longer be perceived as an ordinary person.

Those opinions suggest there is pleasure in watching the process of transformation of the contestants on AF. However, in the conventional singing competition, the viewers can just see the contestants competing through singing on stage, without knowing anything about the process of them becoming a celebrity. Fortunately, mixing a singing competition with the Big Brother format enables AF viewers to witness this transformation. They can observe the day-by-day training through Diari AF. In fact, the viewers can follow the journey of the contestants from when they first became AF contestants, as they can also witness the auditions. Hence, the viewers can derive a sense of how the contestants are transformed from ordinary people into celebrities.
iii. **Audience desire and celebrity aspirations**

The construction of celebrity, which can be seen through the private and public selves, can make viewers believe that it is not impossible for them to become celebrities themselves. The transformation from ordinary person to celebrity can make viewers feel that anybody can become a celebrity. Furthermore, seeing ordinary people in extraordinary settings, such as a glamorous stage with a big cheering crowd, may inspire some viewers to harbour desires of actually becoming celebrities themselves. Viewers may even fantasise about becoming celebrities, as they feel that the contestants are also just ordinary people like themselves. This creation of desire among members of the audience is because they are made to believe that such a transformation is a very real possibility. After the cult of the reality talent contest in Malaysia began, many people started to think of participating in a program like AF as a ‘passport’ to enter the glamorous world of the celebrity. Whilst most of the respondents only wish to watch reality talent contests from a distance, there were a few, for example MJ (male, 24, Video Producer) and AR who confessed that they actually attended AF auditions. Since the emergence of AF, people have witnessed the creation of many celebrities through this platform - a shortcut to becoming a singer. For AF alone, thousands of people queued to participate in the audition. AF audition participation has increased dramatically every year. From just 400 participants for the first season of AF, the participation rate increased to 8,000 people for the second season, and that number tripled for the third season to 26,000 registrations for the audition (Maliki, 2008, p. 32).
Apart from those who attended the audition, some respondents just seemed to derive enjoyment from fantasising about becoming a contestant without having any serious intention of becoming one. Even so, they still partook in the pleasure given by watching the drama of transformation unfolding in the program. When I actually raised this question to the respondents and asked them if they wanted to become a contestant and undergo this journey if given a chance, they laughed and said that they would rather watch celebrities from a distance and not become one. This can be seen from the following discussion:

MA1 I would never want to become an artist, although many of my friends have urged me to join the contest. Even some of my relatives have said to me, you can sing, why don’t you enter AF?

Interviewer Why don’t you want to enter the contest? Don’t you feel any interest given that lots of people have encouraged you and shown faith in your talent.

MA1 No ... I don’t want it ... no more comments ... I really don’t want ... it is difficult ... maybe because we are aware of the lives that artists lead nowadays.

Interviewer How about you guys? Don’t you want to be like them? You can be glamorous and can get prizes like car, house et cetera …

MA1 We can acquire all those things without becoming a singer.

SM(a) I want the car ... but maybe I prefer to get it in a different way (laugh).
Once we enter the competition, we will automatically be perceived as being glamorous although we may not personally feel that way or want to be glamorous. People will watch us, follow all our moves and our lives will not be like that of ordinary people any more.

Even if we make a simple mistake, it will become controversial, and will be reported in newspapers. Private photographs that we take for our personal use may end up in various magazines and tabloids.

As a student, it will disrupt my studies, right?

Yes, that’s true. There are a lot of things that we need to think about if we want to become a singer or celebrity!

This discussion indicates that they comprehend the allures and difficulties of a celebrity lifestyle. They are not interested in entering the glamorous lifestyle of the celebrity, because they prefer private lives as ordinary people. Whilst some of these respondents might show their interest in material possessions, as they seemed interested in the prize offered through the reality shows, but they prefer to get it through their own efforts instead of participating in reality shows.

Whilst some of the respondents only wish to watch reality talent contests from a distance, there are some who fantasise about becoming celebrities themselves, as stated by MY1 and MM1:

Honestly, I feel that I want to perform like them. Females might not have the same feeling like me. Although I never
dream to become like them, I felt wanting to perform when I watched they performed at the concert.

MM1: I want to be glamorous like them. The winner got Honda … That is what makes me feel excited … We want prizes too… *(laughing).*

These opinions indicate that they enjoy experiencing “his or her fantasies vicariously through other people” (Burns, 2009, p. 44). Their fantasies are more towards the “fantasies [they] wish to experience” (2009, p. 44). MY1’s response suggests that his excitement about becoming a celebrity is because of the magnificent spectacle that is created by AF. AF has succeeded in creating the spectacle that looks very glamorous compared to other reality shows. Apart from the performance, lighting, sound system, and stage appearance also play important roles in creating a spectacle. When the viewers see ordinary people in a celebrity role, performing in extraordinary surroundings, it can give them the desire to also perform on stage, as expressed by MY1. The spectacle created by AF gives the viewers a sense of wonder and happiness. Through the glamorous stage sets, the beautiful outfits and the cheering of the huge crowd MY1 wants to be part of it and to perform on stage like the contestants. His statement, “Although I never dream to become like them, I felt wanting to perform when I watched they performed at the concert” shows that he wants to perform not because of his dream to become a singer or celebrity, but probably because of the amazing spectacle created through the concert. MM1, on the other hand, was more excited about the luxurious lifestyle of celebrities. His interest is in the material possessions that are part of the lives of the ‘rich and famous’. It can be interpreted that consumer culture plays important roles here as Featherstone (2007) explains, “the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery
and particular sites of consumption which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasures” (p. 13).

The enjoyment of celebrity transformation also occurs at another level. The contestants not only follow the creation of a celebrity out of a participant, but the transformation of an ordinary person in terms of a makeover of style. Sometimes the viewers may not be attracted to the style of AF contestants because they just see them wearing ordinary and unglamorous clothes during their daily activities in the Diari AF. Although they are dressed in glamorous and beautiful outfits during the concert, the appearance and style of participants is not obvious as their style is always changing, according to their performance and song. Therefore, the contestants do not create their own trademark style while they are in the ‘academy’. From all the respondents in all the groups, there were only a few respondents who mentioned that their style (i.e. appearance and attire) has been influenced by the reality talent contest contestants. For example, an informant shared a story about how her brother became fascinated with the style of the runner-up of OIAM:

My brother sometimes wants to be like Tomok (laugh). He copies Tomok’s hairstyle. Then, I asked him, from who do you copy this style? He said that he imitates Tomok’s style. Then, I asked him why does he imitate Tomok’s hairstyle? He told me that Tomok has shown improvement with a good voice, no more vocal problems. Now, his hair is stylish and he is now more handsome. The influence is visible to teenagers, right? They like to imitate things like that. It has great influence to teenagers. If they see the artist is great, and glamour, they
also want to become like them. But, it is okay to follow. It is just as a trade mark ... (SM1, 22, female, Radio Producer apprentice)

This situation is quite different from those of the AF contestants, as Tomok was known as a singer before he entered the OIAM show. He was famous for quite a while a few years ago, but then suddenly vanished from the contemporary music scene. Recently, he made a comeback by participating in OIAM. Because of the celebrity status he had achieved before the show, viewers like SM1’s brother still remember him. But the comparisons made by SM1’s brother show that he also likes the new and improved look that Tomok has adopted.

When the respondents were asked whether the contestants influence style or not, they gave quite general responses through examples of what is happening around them. MA2 (male, 20, Diploma Student) said that he might be influenced by the way they dress, for example, he is interested in the way Aril (AF7) can strike a debonair look with his well-groomed appearance and stylish clothes. Furthermore, MA2 and NK2 (female, 19, Diploma Student) felt that Mawi’s bold hairstyle drew quite a fan following.

**Meta-judge and pleasure from multiple levels of evaluation**

AF also arguably enables spectator subjectivity of what I shall call a ‘meta-judge’. In other words, AF invites the viewer to assume a position where they can engage in multiple modes of judgement, not only judging the contestants alone (which I have discussed in the previous section), but also other people involved in the program, such as the judges and host who also are not excluded from being evaluated.
i. **Interpreting and identifying with the judges**

The findings indicate that respondents are more attracted to watching the program if there is a famous celebrity involved as a judge on the panel. Every week, a celebrity is invited to become one of the judges of the *Konsert AF*, together with two resident judges. Normally, *AF* chooses well-known singers, actors or people involved in the music industry, like music composers or lyric writers. MS, for example, said that he looked forward to seeing who the invited judges on the *AF* weekly concert would be. For him, the selection of the invited judges was an important drawcard in terms of repeated viewing of the program.

Apart from the celebrity status of the judges, their credibility was also an important factor in attracting viewers to watch, as they felt that a reality talent contest with talented judges can produce talented contestants. Viewers like AA5 (female, 23, Bachelor’s Degree Student) develop a preference for programs when they feel that the judges on the panel possess proficiency in evaluating performances and guiding contestants. She said, “*OIAM* has incredible judges. They give positive comments to the contestants. A judge like Syafinaz Selamat (vocal trainer, and singer) deserves to be a judge as she has knowledge in singing and she is a lecturer in the field.” AM expressed his admiration for Paul Moss (a New Zealand-born, General Manager of Media Prima, producer and song writer), a judge of *OIAM* saying, “Paul Moss makes the contestants perform seriously and that is the result for the success of *OIAM*. As we know, Paul Moss is very fussy and strict.” Similarly, AA5 shares this opinion of the *OIAM* judges.
Furthermore, viewers also drew pleasure from the critique and commentary of the judges. In addition, AM made the point that his favourite part of the program was the segment where Fauziah Ahmad Daud or famously known as Ogy (a famous actress in Malaysia who became a resident judge on AF for season 5) made the following comments:

In AF season 5 and 6, I always waited for Ogy’s comments, as I like to hear her illuminating comments. I want to know what she will criticize on the contestants’ performance, whether it is harsh or not. That is what I always waited to see. The judges’ critics are one of AF’s elements that I like to watch. (AM2, male, 30, Customer Service Officer)

MF (male, 29, Sales Officer) enjoyed the evaluation process the most admitting that “I like to watch judges’ critics, rather than the performance. I do not even pay much attention to the performance. But when it comes to judges’ critique I am all ears and watch with full concentration.” For many respondents, the judges’ critique section is important because it provides the opportunity to compare their own opinion with the experts’ comments. MA2 said that he enjoyed watching the criticism part to see if his opinion varied from the judges’ comments. ZM, on the other hand, is very concerned about the accuracy of the evaluations made by the judges. Viewers like KO and NM2 were annoyed with the judges if they made comments that ran counter to their own opinions or if they misjudged the performances. She says:

I will feel angry if the judges give comments that are not parallel with the performance, especially for the contestants that I favour. I think the performance is good enough, but the judges still give disappointing comments. (NM2, female, 32, Agricultural Officer)
Overall, it can be concluded that the judges play important roles not only in attracting viewers, but they also open up a range of ‘interpretative pleasure’ for the audience. In this sense, the presence of the judges gives the viewers the pleasure of forming certain judgements of the judges.

ii. Interpreting and identifying with the host

Although $AF$ is a reality talent contest format, the viewers, however, do not only evaluate the contestants per se, but they also make a judgement of the host. The fieldwork for this study revealed an overwhelming response from participants who expressed their preference for $AF$ because of the host. For them, Aznil, the host of $AF$, with his amiable persona and quirky antics, was one of the major attractions of the show. Most informants across all age groups derived pleasure from watching Aznil’s amusing behaviour. His hosting of $AF$ was appreciated as it was always lively and electrifying. AZ states Aznil’s unpredictable and comic routines were the major pleasure of the show for her. Similarly, MA1 recalled how Aznil’s humorous behaviour provided him with a pleasurable watching experience:

Aznil has lots of attitude in $AF$ ... that is why it is fun to watch Akademi Fantasia that time ... and if I am not mistaken, the best Aznil’s action was during $AF3$, during Akma’s ($AF3$ female contestant) performance. Aznil duplicate Ramlah Ram’s (the original singer of the song sung by Akma) pose in a humorous way. That is interesting to watch. So, apart of seeing the singing performance, we also want to see something comical like that. With those kind of entertainment plus the singing performance, make us feel excited and it is not boring to watch. If it is a show that the
host is just talk, the jury just condemned, what for? It does not attract us to watch. So these things attracted me to watch. (MA1, 24, male, Radio Producer)

MA1’s response suggests that the host’s method of presenting the program is a crucial point of attraction for viewers, as they do not only want to watch the singing performance (which can potentially become monotonous), but also they want to enjoy watching the unexpected behaviour of the host in between the singing performances.

According to the respondents, Aznil is very proficient in manoeuvring the emotions of an audience. He can joke, but at the same time he is very professional. His jokes were perceived as appropriate for a local audience, and for a family show. Many respondents contrasted Aznil with the current host at the time they were interviewed, AC Mizal (the AF host for seasons 6 and 7), who they thought was a poor substitute for Aznil. They felt that AC Mizal was quite superficial in his comments and he did not have the ability to connect with the audience. One respondent even said that his interest in watching AF flagged because of the change of its host:

Aznil is very different to AC. I think one of the reasons why AF is not having a big fan now because of the exchanged host. One of the main (emphasis) attractions in AF is Aznil itself. How professional he is to attract viewers, and how he delivers the weekly concert and everything. He’s amazingly talented in that … so, to be honest; I dislike watching AF now, one of its reasons is because of the host. (NA1, male, 28, Microchips Engineer)

Apart from AF, the respondents also evaluated the hosts of other reality programs such as Bintang RTM. MZ (male, 27, Engineer), SM2 (female, 34, Lecturer) and KH
(female, 44, Housewife) said that they were not attracted to watching Bintang RTM because it did not have a good host. According to NM1, the presentation of the program was slow as the host conducted the proceedings following a very strict ‘protocol’ (emphasis on the original word used by the respondent). With the word ‘protocol’ the respondent seemed to indicate that she found the presentation rule-bound and formal. This ‘protocol’ element in an entertainment program normally results in less excitement for the viewers. In reality TV genre, the host should employ a different mode of address to give excitement to the viewers, for example – “employing a mode of address in which the programme host speaks directly to viewers as if he or she knows us and gives us a participatory role …” (Cavender, 2004, p. 155).

In general, I would argue that Aznil played the roles of performer and mediator in AF. He can be regarded as a performer as he presents his role in a very entertaining manner, going beyond the ordinary host’s role. He also played the role of mediator between the audience and the contestants, as well as between the audience and the judges. In this context, “the host serves as the means by which the audience is included in the program” (Marshall, 1997, p. 123). Aznil’s positions as a good performer and a good mediator are interrelated, as the performance of a good host is a matter of efficiently dispensing the functions of conducting the program and doing so in an interesting and engaging manner.

**Emotional rhythms of a hybrid text**

This section will discuss how AF orchestrates its narrative through the employment of dramatic conventions that enhance the emotional rhythms of the show and which are a
cornerstone of viewers’ pleasure. I will elaborate this argument by locating two aspects of this arrangement of emotional rhythms in dramatic conventions borrowed from soap operas. Firstly, the program is structured on a dramatic narrative base that is interspersed with surprise events, a cliff-hanger storytelling mode synonymous with soap operas. Secondly, the program also uses the skills of a host to calibrate a melodramatic narrative that incites emotional responses from the viewers.

To begin with, *Diari AF* shares a similar narrative structure with soap opera, as it melds the narrative surrounding the ups and downs of the lives of the contestants. Then, the climax of the narrative takes place in the live concert where these contestants are judged after their transformation. As I discussed in chapter three, while sharing the melodramatic narrative form of soap operas, in contrast to scripted and fictional soap dramas, *Diari AF* is unscripted and has an element of unpredictability. Although *AF* is a singing competition, it is also full of drama which heightens the emotional impact of the show. Because of the audience’s penchant for overtly melodramatic content, *AF* has consistently been the most popular reality TV talent contest in the country. Research participants describe this quality of the show as having the ability to evoke emotions for the viewers. SS2 labelled this ability of *AF* as the main attraction of the program and said that “people began to watch *AF* because it succeeded in making people cry.” In fact, Astro’s Malay program head, Zainir Aminullah, reported in the local newspaper that the emotional feeling constructed by the show has made *AF* one of the most enjoyable shows in the Malay language (Samat, 2003a).
i. ‘Surprise’ moments in the show

Although *AF* follows a standard narrative structure, with the performance of the contestants, followed by the judges’ comments and elimination at the end of the show in order to keep viewers’ interest, the producers will ensure that the content of each weekly *Konsert AF* is different. Apart from the narrative structure, surprise elements are introduced by the producers in every episode to ensure that the standardised fare is able to retain an element of unpredictability that will draw viewers in week after week. The audiences tune in every week to what is otherwise a repetitive turn of incidents, with the knowledge that there will be new surprises in every episode. Although the curiosity to deduce the surprises in each episode is itself a reason for the viewer to tune in, they know that these ‘surprises’ are going to be manageable diversions and they do not “expect the unexpected” (Haralovich & Trosset, 2004, p. 76). From the findings, it seems fair to conclude that *AF* would perhaps not be as popular without its memorable and melodramatic ‘surprise’ element. In fact, for many viewers, *AF* is regarded as synonymous with ‘surprises’.

An example of a melodramatic surprise is the bringing of the families of the contestants to the studio and the enacting of a family reunion. The program tries to overlay the family reunion with as much emotion as possible by using dramatic background music and close-up camera shots. Brimming over with emotion, the contestants look sad; some even weep. Not only the contestants, but the studio audience also feels the poignancy of the moment; any spectator who seems to be moved by the emotional reunion and has tears in their eyes will be captured by the camera and this heightens the emotional feelings for the home viewers.
This reunion plays on the notion that contestants confined to the AF house would intensely miss their family. In Diari AF, these contestants are frequently seen crying and not able to concentrate on their daily practice because of their isolation. Isma (a female contestant of AF7) had her children brought on stage and her relief at that moment was clearly designed to manufacture a major melodramatic moment for the audience. Witnessing family unity ‘live’ on stage makes the audience feel empathy for the contestants for the sacrifices they made by leaving their families in order to pursue their dreams.

However, some viewers lost their taste for such melodramatic family reunions staged repeatedly from AF1 to AF7 (which is up to the time when fieldwork for this study was conducted). AA6 said that there was no element of surprise in these family reunions any more, as they are predictable and boring because of the repetition each season. AA2 from another group said that she had become cynical of the family reunion and the producers’ motives:

Don’t you see, they arranged a family reunion for Mas when she was nearly dropped? They (the production team) brought her children on stage in order to generate sympathy. The audiences will not be easily cheated by such devious strategies now. (AA2, female, 36, Assistant Registrar)

One particular ‘surprise’ scene appeared to touch many viewers. Contestants’ parents were invited to get onto the stage together with the contestants at the time of Aznil’s special performance. At that time, Aznil sang a popular song called ‘Ayah dan Ibu’ (Father and Mother), which created more sad feelings in the scene. Apart from seeing the contestants hugging their parents, the most touching part in this scene was seeing
Aswad alone on the stage which created a mystery for the viewers. Soon after Aznil finished singing, he announced that Aswad was an orphan. The viewers were roused into feelings of sympathy for Aswad. Many viewers cite this scene as one of the most memorable events from AF. AA4 explains, “I was so moved by the whole scene. The song sang by Aznil and the camerawork was amazing in creating the sombre scene. My heart went out to Aswad”. AM also admitted that he cried in that scene, which he also said was the most memorable part of all the AF seasons.

However, the data also revealed some cynical reactions to the adulation for the emotional melodrama that was played out on the stage. MY1 said that such emotional manipulation was used by the AF producers as a strategy to lure viewers. He said, “Although AF succeeds to create sad feelings to the viewers’ feeling through this scene, but they (Astro) did it just to fulfil their importance.” Other respondents took issue with the fact that Astro manipulated Aswad’s personal background to produce an emotional spectacle. AA6 (female, 45, Housewife), and RJ (female, 43, Bank Executive), said that while they could not deny that this scene made them sad, they felt that it was inappropriate and unfair. AA6 commented:

I was quite angry because they shouldn’t do that ... they should think, how we would feel if we are in Aswad’s place? I think, if we are at Aswad’s place, we will feel very sad and shed in tears. Although Aswad is a man, but still he will feel the same feeling. Not only that, this situation also can make Aswad lose focus to his performance. They shouldn’t exploit Aswad’s feeling like that. (AA6, female, 45, Housewife)
Through this explanation, it is obvious that for some viewers there were clearly limits in terms of the degree to which they thought the show should manipulate emotional highs and lows for the audience’s pleasure.

In the focus group discussion, I also asked how the viewers coped with the melodramatic narrative mode of the program that is expressed through the dramatic surprise scenes and emotional elimination scenes. MA5 (male, 30, Engineer) replied that the emotions aroused by $AF$ were transitory and shifting, and lasted for only a brief span of time and changed as soon as the program took on a different dramatic tone. He said,

> The emotions we feel when we watch $AF$ is not the same as we watch movies ... we just feel it at the time we watch it ... and it does not last long, if people cry when the program turns sad, they will immediately forget the sadness and laugh when it turns funny ... in comparison to movies where we will still have the feeling although we have finish watching it ... (MA5, male, 30, Engineer)

MA5’s comments are quite insightful in explicating the nature of dramatic narrative used in $AF$. Movies tend to develop a singular dramatic tone throughout or at least pursue one dramatic tone in some depth for one phase of the film and then shift to another. In contrast, programs like $AF$ shift from one dramatic mode to another quite quickly to create an emotional rollercoaster for the viewers. Moreover, given the quick shifts in the tone, the program condenses the narrative into a melodramatic form in order to induce the maximum emotional response from the viewer. The format contains everything, from emotional involvement to enjoyment that succeeds in “giving us all the drama, tears, pleasure, and pain we can stand” (Fairchild, 2007, p. 170)
356). *AF* blends a myriad of dramatic forms of drama, conflict, suspense and happiness in a melodramatic mixture that can take the audience on an emotional rollercoaster where they are laughing one minute, crying the next, similar to the nature of the soap opera genre. The emotional rollercoaster created in *AF* is not only for emotionally engage, but also literally engage. The way narratives had been constructed is to make the viewers to stay at the channel until the end of the program. This will encourage active consumption among the viewers, and eventually to draw in advertisers.

Apart from surprise events orchestrated for the contestants, there are also surprises relating to the program itself. For example, in one instance, rumours were spread that Aznil would end his position as *AF* host after *AF5*. However, this rumour was never confirmed by Aznil or Astro, until it was revealed through a ‘surprise’ announcement at an *Konsert AF*. Viewers were really shocked when Aznil made the announcement and he was given an emotional farewell as all the contestants sang together and dedicated it to Aznil. AA2 mentioned this scene and the sadness and excitement she felt at the time. She said, “At that time I began thinking of how *AF* would be without Aznil.”

ii. **Melodramatic elimination and the skill of the host in managing the emotional experience**

Just like most reality talent contests, the elimination part is also one of the most emotionally melodramatic parts of the entire program. According to Redden (2008), the emotional poignancy of the elimination part is “heightened by the dramatic tearful rituals of ‘selecting out’” (p. 137).
The melodramatic presentation of the elimination ritual raises the stakes for the emotional investment that the viewers put into their preferred contestants. Wahida stated that “I felt very sad when my favourite contestant had been eliminated. Why my favourite contestant been eliminated?” While a viewer’s continuing support for a contestant may have incited her dissatisfaction about his elimination, the melodramatic presentation of the segment may have fuelled this further. Similarly, SM3 (female, 24, Customer Service Officer), a respondent from another group, confessed the same feeling as WO as she also felt sadder when her favourite contestant was being evicted and raised the same question of “why he/she has being eliminated.” In addition, the ability of the melodramatic elimination segment to heighten the viewer’s feelings about their contestants also made viewers happy when contestants they did not like were eliminated. YM said, “I felt very happy when the contestant that I don’t like had been eliminated. For example, when Rini had been eliminated, I felt very grateful.”

In contrast, the elimination ritual on other reality talent contests may not result in tearful contestants on screen because it is not orchestrated through a melodramatic emotional arrangement that seeks to move viewers to tears. With the suspense of the elimination, the emotional farewell of the eliminated contestant, the tearful faces of the members of the studio audience and the feelings of solidarity at the end of the elimination part, make this the most melodramatic part of AF. In fact, this benchmark has made AF different from other local reality talent shows:

I think the dramatic elimination part is one of the most important things in AF. The way Aznil brings up the elimination stage is so sad ... that portrays how good he is, and how good the program is. But, if the
elimination is boring, and does not move people, then AF is just similar to other reality programs. There’s no different at all. It is because the elimination part is the uniqueness of AF. (NA1, male, 28, Microchips Engineer)

From my focus group discussion, it is apparent that the dramatic nature of the elimination segment matters to them. In fact, AA4 notes that “the emotional element in the elimination part is one of the main attractions in AF.” This melodramatic tone of the elimination is heightened if the host is skilful with his commentary and manoeuvres audience emotions throughout the whole process. ZM was also impressed with the way Aznil conducted the elimination scene. He stated that “Aznil has an extraordinary ability, as he can create an emotional feeling to the audience.” On one hand, it can be said that Aznil’s persona influences the viewers to watch AF, but on the other hand, it is the dramatic nature that he brought to the elimination which created a sense of viewers’ identification with him. It is clear from these responses the importance that the viewers attribute to the host; they expect him to create the emotional engagement and excitement of the program. This is in contrast to other reality TV shows where the host stands by as a passive observer, appears at the end of a segment and remains “relatively silent” during the program (DeRose, Fürsich, and Haskins, 2003, p. 176).

Since the audience acquired a taste for Aznil’s melodramatic elimination rounds, they also drew comparisons between him and AC Mizal (the host for seasons 6 and 7). In this respect, many of the respondents related their displeasure with AC Mizal’s period on the show, as he was not able to conduct the program with as much flair as Aznil.

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60 This also ties in with the previous section about the capacity of the viewers as meta-judge, constantly evaluating and critiquing the host’s ability.
For instance, JS (female, 24, Master’s Degree Student) stated that “for me, one of the excitement is the host, Aznil. He is more proficient to attract audience’s emotion, whilst AC Mizal is plain. He did not fully immerse in the elimination part.” Similarly, NN (from the 35 years old and above age group) stated that:

AC Mizal’s style of presenting the elimination part was not able to move the audiences. For example, when he announced the name of the contestant to be eliminated, you felt nothing. You don’t really feel the ambience, as the way he carries out that entire role quite monotonously.

(NN, female, 51, Businesswoman)

NN’s opinion relates to AC Mizal’s style of delivery which was not able to stir audiences into an emotional fervour. These respondents are critical of AC Mizal because he could not accomplish the trademark melodramatic elimination round which had become synonymous with AF from its first season. AZ also stated that:

It is the dramatic elimination part which people wait to watch, because AF has set the benchmark - it is something that involved emotion. So, when the host had been changed, it decreased the people’s interest to watch as they no longer can relate with the program as the current host cannot maintain the emotional trademark. (AZ, 30, Document Controller)

MA2 states that he was attracted to watching AF because of the way Aznil carried out the elimination. He explains that:

The ways Aznil carry out the eviction part, as he expressed it in a dramatic way, and the way he announced the eliminated contestant, make me feel sad. But, during AC Mizal’s time, the feeling is not the
same; he failed to maintain the dramatic situation. We become bored to wait till he announced who will be eliminated, compared to Aznil, he carried out the poignant feeling very well, as he also has the sad feeling. In fact, he sometimes cannot hide his feeling, as he also shed in tears!

(MA2, male, 20, Diploma Student)

According to MA2’s statement, it can be interpreted that Aznil succeeded in delivering the elimination in such a dramatic way as he himself had a strong relationship with the contestants, as he witnessed their ups and downs in the daily diary when he became the host of Diari AF for each season. The respondents seemed to correlate the host’s style of presentation with his sense of emotional rapport with the contestants as well. They seemed to think that Aznil was not just a good speaker or host but was genuinely empathetic to the contestants in contrast to AC Mizal. The ability of the host to communicate such a sense of genuine empathy also draws the viewer into the emotional drama, which would otherwise seem shallow and fake to them.

While viewers took pleasure from the melodramatic feelings of the elimination segment, there were also viewers who disliked the dramatic version of this part. MO (male, 32, Arabic Language Tutor), for example, asks, “Why we have to cry? If they lose, then why we have to cry for them? Like me, I don’t have that kind of emotional feeling. For me, whatever happened to the contestants, whether they win or lose, they never affected me.” In addition, MM1 also dislikes the melodramatic feeling in the elimination part as he states, “I dislike the elimination part the most. I feel that the elimination part, especially for AF1 until AF5, which were conducted by Aznil was
just wasting our time.” These responses suggest a relationship between gender and genre as melodrama is often identified with a ‘feminised audience’.

The melodramatic modes of address in AF also have been perceived by viewers as a gendered program suitable for women. Many respondents stated that their male friends or family members were not interested in watching AF. MZ, for example, mentioned that his male friends did not watch AF as they feel that AF is meant for women, as it involved emotional feelings and a lot of weeping. AA4 also said that his father and his uncles dislike AF, because an entertainment program like AF is not their ‘cup of tea’. His male friends found that AF is unpleasant to watch as “they feel AF contestants are fake and they were merely pretending to be good, on camera.” AM (female, 23, Diploma Student) also stated that her brother dislikes watching AF because he is not interested in an entertainment program that involves singing. AM continued, “He loves to watch action movies, rather than something like AF.” AA1 confessed that his male friends were bored with singing competition programs, and they had seen enough of such programs. The time schedule of AF clashing with football programs also irritated some male viewers. AA1 stated that, “My male friends love to watch football match on TV. But by the time they want to watch it, their younger brothers or sisters will watch AF. That’s makes them feel angry.” While some of the reasons given by the respondents’ male friends and family members for disliking AF are not directly associated with its melodramatic aspects, those reasons do, however, suggest that males do not position themselves within the same structures of narrative pleasure that female members of the audience might.

This chapter has analysed the textual pleasures of AF, as articulated by audience members. It reveals a strong element of that pleasure in AF is provided in terms of
various spectator positions as well as the orchestration of the melodramatic rhythms of the show. In the next chapter, I will analyse the audience’s interpretation of AF in relation to its cultural representations of ‘Malayness’ and its indigenisation of the global popular ‘Idol’ format.
CHAPTER 5
NEGOTIATING MALAY IDENTITY IN AKADEMI FANTASIA

AF is a somewhat paradoxical media object: it is a product of global consumerist popular culture that also incorporates local cultural elements to posit itself as an expression of indigenised modernity. As a consequence, it has frequently been singled out in relation to complex debates around notions of local identity and foreign cultural influence as delineated in chapter one. This chapter turns to an examination of audience perspectives on these issues in order to examine how viewers make sense of the program and perceive the interplay of local cultural elements within a global popular cultural format. It begins with an overview of two key theoretical notions from cultural studies – ‘identification and distancing’ and ‘banal nationalism’ – that are argued to be useful in explaining the manner in which Malay audiences negotiate this fundamental paradox.

Following this theoretical contextualisation, the chapter presents feedback from respondents showing how viewers articulate notions of Malay cultural identity and views of belonging on AF. Specifically, I highlight how audiences negotiate issues of local cultural norms and popular tastes in the dress worn by the contestants and the behaviour of the judges on the panel. The last section concentrates on instances where respondents adopted a position of distancing with regard to dramatised conflicts in the Diari AF, and physical contact between contestants, by completely rejecting such behaviours as being contrary to Islamic and Malay cultural values.
Negotiating cultural values: Banal nationalism and identification/distancing

It is necessary for an adapted format like AF to incorporate “specific social characteristics” (Fung, 2009, p. 182) of the cultural location into its content in order to adequately engage a local audience. As Moran (2009) puts it, the localisation process must occur “in such a way to seem local or national in origin” (p. 151). Here, it is pertinent to note that the viewers I spoke to in the focus groups do not compare AF with La Academia (the original Mexican show) or any other imported programs, nor do they voice disapproval of the idea of ‘glocalised’ programs although most of them knew that AF is an adapted version of La Academia. Instead, they praised AF for its success in localising La Academia to suit acceptable norms of local culture and adapting the format in a manner that was able to effectively erase any cultural traces of its Mexican origins.

Personally I feel the TV station has been successful. AF can be valued as a local program because it has the value of local culture. Moreover, I could not see any Mexican influence in the program. For example, the host and the contestants are locals who clearly observed local customs at most times. Also, the program did not contain any linguistic or cultural forms borrowed from another country. (KA, male, 60, Retiree)

Although this shows viewer acceptance of AF, the question is how viewers derive this sense of ‘localness’ from a program like AF that straddles global/local cultural orientations. Is it merely through being able to see local performers on a stage that the sense of ‘localness’ is satisfied? How do viewers discern AF as a localised program when it uses the standard routines of any global reality talent show? What are the criteria by which they judge this notion of ‘localness’?
In my fieldwork, I encouraged discussions around this main topic by asking the respondents to give their opinion on how they thought AF had succeeded in localising the program. Analysing their feedback about their perceptions of AF and the elements that constituted its ‘localness’, I found ‘banal nationalism’ and ‘identification/distancing’ as apt concepts to theorise Malay viewer response to AF.

According to Chua (2008),

[If] the audience accedes, consciously or otherwise, to the subject position offered by the drama script, he/she would be identifying with the character and action on screen; conversely, where one resists the subject position offered, one would be distancing oneself from the character and the action on screen. Obviously, the watching/reading of a TV drama involves both processes. Alternating moments of identification and distancing, where and when the on screen characters are ‘like me/us’ or ‘unlike me/us’, are generated during real-time watching. (p. 79)

While Chua (2008) relates the framework of identification and distancing with transnational consumption of TV drama, it is also useful for understanding viewer negotiation of reality TV programs. Signs of ‘local-ness’ give the viewer the reassurance of familiarity and a sense of ownership of the program evoking a sense of identification whereas elements of ‘foreignness’ that do not sit well with their socio-cultural dispositions provoke viewers to distance themselves from the content. At times, although elements of ‘foreignness’ do not evoke a sense of identification, they may arouse a sense of pleasure for viewers, as Chua (2008) found among his East
Asian audiences who derived pleasure from the “‘exoticism’ of the foreign” on American soaps (p. 84).

But the identification and distancing process in watching an imported program is not as complicated, because the ‘not us’ is clearly recognisable through foreign locations or contestants/actors and it “allows the audience to distance themselves from the on-screen events, characters, attitudes and behaviours” (Chua, 2008, p. 79). An adapted program, however, is hybridised and localised, and the traces of foreign cultural values in the program are not obvious for people to locate and distance themselves from. Furthermore, the program contains local people, local judges, and a local host, whom the viewers see as being local but in a form that is intrinsically governed by fundamental elements of global popular culture. It is difficult to clearly enunciate what ‘local’ or ‘foreign’ is in localised programs since the images and identities on the screen inhabit this murky space between local/global and they sometimes look ‘like us’ but at other times ‘not us’. Therefore, the process of identification for ‘like us’ and distancing from ‘not like us’ is arguably more complex for a locally adapted format like AF.

While the identification and distancing model retains its usefulness as a framework, in the case of a program like AF in a location like Malaysia, it needs to be supplemented by a qualification about the notion of the ‘values’ guiding viewers. That is, the values of local/foreign are not given or easily recognisable for the viewers. Therefore we must think of them as not being some pre-existent elements within the text of the program, but as values that are adjudicated, articulated and constructed by the viewers in the process of watching the program.
With this point in mind, while examining the process of identification/distancing of Malay audiences we also need to be aware of how viewers adjudicate local and foreign elements and use them as categories to guide their response to the program. Furthermore, in examining their acceptance or rejection of the program, we can also understand how hegemonic norms of Islam and Malay *adat* exercise their influence on people’s attitudes. Elements that are accepted as being appropriate to these local cultural norms are also privileged as being permissible for identification and enjoyment, showing that viewer response reflects “the ways that pleasure can conform to or conflict with dominant standards of judgement” (Bignell, 2004, p. 284).

With reference to the performance of ‘localness’ in the show, the concept of banal nationalism coined by Michael Billig (1995) is useful for analysing a cultural text like *AF*. Billig (1995) directs attention to the unnoticed and neglected background processes of everyday culture that help construct national identity rather than focussing on those that are more obviously performed. For example, Billig (1995) notes that banal nationalism is not about the enthusiastic waving of the national flag at public ceremonies, but it is the flag that hangs unnoticed in the background. *AF* does not necessarily advertise politicised nationalist rhetoric as its main theme, but as a pop culture artefact circulating in the Malay public domain it makes a combination of subtle and unsubtle, conscious and unconscious links to Malay national and cultural identity that are embedded in the larger consciousness of the viewing public. The show has made obvious gestures to national identity in past seasons through a national day special show. But apart from these explicit moments of articulation of national identity, Malaysian national identity is being continually presented and performed in the background of this reality talent contest as banal but vital traces of the dense relation between popular culture and the national, religious and ethnic Malay identity.
Malay identity and banal nationalism in AF

i. Preserving tradition in a popular cultural form: Malay songs in AF

This first section closely considers the musical genres of songs sung by the contestants. When respondents were asked about elements that they considered local in AF, they usually referred to the performance of traditional Malay songs. While AF tries to demonstrate local cultural values through inclusion of these types of songs in Konsert AF, it runs the risk of appearing tokenistic because such performances are limited and only run for the shortest period of time. For example, out of all the songs sung by the contestants each week, there is usually just one traditional Malaysian song sung per show. In the later seasons of AF6 and AF7, even this was reduced and traditional Malay songs were only reserved for a particular week when all the contestants had to sing an authentic traditional song.

Having ended that routine of one traditional Malay song per week, the current AF, however, makes other gestures to local cultural forms. For example, in week eight of AF7, the contestants were asked to perform a musical drama based on popular local themes taking some cues from folk Malay musical theatre. The contestants performed three musical theatres – Puteri Gunung Ledang (Ledang Mountains’ Princess) (PGL) based on the story of an epic warrior of local history derived from folk culture, P. Ramlee61 based on the life of an iconic Malay film actor was a nod to modern Malay pop culture and Impak Maksima (Maximum Impact) concentrated more on modern youth life. For the two musical theatres PGL and P. Ramlee, four participants performed songs wearing traditional and classical Malay outfits in accordance with

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61 P. Ramlee was an actor, singer, song writer, and film director who became an iconic hero of the Malaysian film and music industry.
the storyline of the drama. Even the host of the program wore the period costume of a warrior.

While the respondents privileged traditional Malay songs as an element showing the ‘localness’ of AF, there were a variety of responses touching upon its relevance and merit. It could be argued that the pleasure of watching contestants perform Malay songs is somewhat different from other genres. Responses to traditional Malay songs revolve around an appeal to sentimental values specifically for older viewers who feel greater emotional connection. NJ (female, 50, Bank Officer) and ZM (male, 41, School Teacher) especially pointed out that they both enjoyed watching Mawi (AF3 winner) sing ‘Seroja’ a popular Malay song in the 1980s. For these older respondents, Mawi brought back sentimental memories. Indeed, this performance influenced NJ to vote for Mawi. These responses indicate that Malay songs in particular provide opportunities for pleasurable nostalgic remembrances.

Some viewers actively stated their dislike for these kinds of songs and other respondents rated other music genres over traditional Malay songs. For instance, a few respondents like SS1 (female, 25, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student) and AZ (female, 30, Document Controller) were not interested in watching certain Konsert AF when the theme for the week concentrated on traditional Malay songs. SS1 was more interested in listening to pop or rock songs. Out of all the younger respondents, MA1 (male, 24, Radio Producer) was the only contestant who took pleasure in watching traditional Malay songs. He said, “It is nice to see the backup dancers dancing traditional Malay dance like zapin, inang, and joget dance in the background while the contestants are singing. These things make me feel that AF still preserves local culture in the program.”
Of those respondents who showed concern about the incorporation of Malay songs in the show, many bemoaned its lack not on the basis of their preference for the genre but out of a sense of responsibility to traditional Malay songs which they perceive as being a symbol of authentic local culture. This group of respondents felt that the traditional Malay song should be maintained in the concert in order to preserve and promote local identity:

I think AF should retain traditional Malay songs in its concert, at least one song for each week. AF can be a source to promote our local traditional music. Now Konsert AF can be accessed by audiences across the world through YouTube. Who knows some foreigners might watch AF and learn something about our traditional music. (MA6, male, 31, Businessman)

Although AF tries to inculcate a sense of localness by incorporating traditional Malay music, mainstream popular songs with a ‘pop’ and ‘rock’ musical influence and Western performance style and appearance, are the staple of the program. Apart from Malay pop songs, AF also incorporates songs of diverse cultural influences. Every week one of the contestants is given an English song to sing. At some concerts, they are also given a ‘bonus’ song, from a selection of Malay, English and Bollywood or Hindustani song genres, which they sing together in a group.\(^\text{62}\)

While they did not voice their disappointment with foreign songs, they objected if they found the behaviour of AF contestants too Westernised. According to ZM, such showmanship “goes against the grain of local cultural values”. AA2 (female, 36, 62

\(^{62}\) The contestants were not permitted to choose their own song, but had to sing whatever song was selected for them by the producers and the trainers. However, the format underwent some changes in season five, when the contestants were given a list from which they were free to choose any song.
Assistant Registrar), in the same group, expressed her discomfort with Hairina Abdul Halim’s (known as Mama Rina, a 45 year-old female contestant) performance as she stated, “There was a time when she performed a *Metallica* song and she jumped on the stage (laughs). It is inappropriate for a woman of that age to behave like that.” These responses show that viewers like it when the contestants can perform English songs well, yet they find it unacceptable for contestants to perform in a Western style. In contrast to those responses, there are articles by bloggers that praised Mama Rina’s performance, as it was good and enjoyable to watch. Indeed, one of the bloggers commented that Mama Rina’s performance was the best performance for that particular week.

But while some musical genres may seem quite local, such as the analogous ‘pop music’ presented in the Arabic programs *Star Academy* and *Al Wadi* which Lynch (2005) argues is still extremely ‘Arab’ (p. 35), one must bear in mind that any kind of indigenous popular music is also a product of popular media and not ‘authentic’ folk culture, for example, *Bollywood* music in India. This tendency of using global or globally-inspired local pop music is common in format adaptations in the Asian region – the *Indonesian Idol* program also uses either Western songs or Western-influenced local pop genres rather than embracing its local music such as “dangdut” songs (Coutas, 2006). A respondent in his comment made an unconscious reference to this global nature of Malay pop music:

> Lately, there have been remarkably few traditional Malay songs in *AF* compared to earlier seasons. Earlier, there would always be a contestant singing a traditional Malay song every week. I think *AF* has lost its Malay identity now. Although they still sing Malay songs, the melody is
just like a foreign song, it is not authentically Malay. (AM, male, 30, Customer Service Officer)

This response shows that viewers conceive the ‘traditional’ as authentic markers of the ‘local’ which should not be hybridised. Audiences themselves often conceive the ‘local’ in quite limited, non-hybridised terms. In fact, they privilege it as something from the past that needs preservation. While viewers derive pleasure from popular music whether Western, Bollywood, Indonesian or Malaysian that comprise the mainstay of AF, they also position the somewhat one-off tokenistic performance of traditional Malay songs as laudable and essential, stressing that AF must preserve local culture through such performances.

Findings revealed that viewers on the whole had no issues with the incorporation of English-language songs, but a distinction is made in terms of the actual language of the non-musical elements of the show. Programs like Gangstarz and American Idol were not as pleasurable to SS1 as she noted, “We use and understand Malay language, rather than English. That is why I like to watch local reality shows, rather than American Idol and those from foreign countries.” While the respondents never related AF with language difficulties as it uses the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) as its medium, other programs such as Gangstarz were criticised by a respondent on this basis. The respondent said that she did not enjoy Gangstarz because of the language barrier:

Maybe some people enjoy watching it because they perceive Gangstarz as something different. But, for me it is boring because I cannot understand the song because it is a foreign song and I cannot understand the language. For example, when the Thai group performed, I couldn’t
understand the song as they sang in Thai language. Even if these groups from other countries have a nice voice, I still couldn’t enjoy their performance completely because of the language barrier. (WW, female, 24, Masters’ Degree Student)

Such responses suggest that the use of English or other foreign languages brought difficulties for viewers to engage with the song and the overall content. The local language, on the other hand, being easily understood gives the viewers significant pleasure. Therefore, it can be said that “language can also often be as much a barrier as it is a key of understanding” (Kilborn, 1993, p. 642).

ii. **AF as a platform for regional belonging**

As a reality talent format with a system of active participation, AF has also been co-opted by viewers in not only supporting specific contestants but expressing regional identities and a sense of belonging by supporting contestants from their state of origin. AF has become a platform through which regional differences might be expressed within a broader framework of national unity and fraternity. Apart from the talent, personal background and character of the contestants, audiences also tend to reserve their support for contestants belonging to their region. Since ethnicity is almost an irrelevant factor in AF, as it is targeted at a Malay audience and rarely includes contestants from other ethnic groups, regional identity has emerged as the significant criterion of audience support for the Malay audiences. This has also been strategically used by the program. It uses region of origin as a significant differentiator to portray the identities of contestants. For example, in the very first introductory session of the contestants in Tirai AF as well as the weekly Konsert AF,
the contestants introduced themselves by mentioning their names, personal tagline and state of origin.

Regional identities are also highlighted when contestants sing an authentic traditional folk song from their region. For instance, Marsha (AF3 contestant), from Sabah in the Eastern Peninsular, was given to sing a traditional Sabah song called ‘Sayang Kinabalu’ (Kinabalu Affection), and Faizal (AF4 winner), a contestant from Terengganu, was repeatedly asked by the host to sing a traditional Terengganu folk song almost every week. Although viewers were not so familiar with Terengganu folk songs, he managed to have an impact on the audience and the song he sang was subsequently remembered fondly by some of the respondents. KA and NK2 (female, 19, Diploma Student) from the focus group mentioned this in the discussions and NK2 could even remember the title of the song despite the time lapse.

There is an interesting point to be noted here with reference to this play of regional identities in the show. It could be argued that it is the identity of the peripheral, less-developed states that receive more attention and contestants from those regions were pressed for ‘authentic’ folk performances of their regions, such as the emphasis on Sabah and Terengganu in the examples given above. This has many implications for how AF relates to the notion of Malay cultural and national identity.

Firstly, it has been observed that it is audiences in the peripheral or less developed regions who seem to invest a lot of emotional support in AF by seeing it as a tactical opportunity for their local people to participate on a national stage. For example, 3,800 settlers from the economically underdeveloped Felda Taib Andak supported Mawi by putting up “a giant PVC poster of Mawi at the entrance of the estate”
(Nadzmi, 2005). Such a strong sense of belonging was also noted especially among people from the Eastern Peninsular of Malaysia, namely Sabah and Sarawak. In fact, KA, a respondent from an older focus group, felt that Astro’s production team selects more contestants from Sarawak and Sabah, as they are aware that these two places provide more SMS votes compared to other states. He said, “Maybe Lotter (AF4 male contestant from Sabah) is not that good, neither is Velvet (AF6 female contestant from Sabah). But they are given the opportunity to become AF contestants for that reason.” Indeed, from the second season onwards, all subsequent AF seasons have included contestants from Sabah and Sarawak. In contrast, in an economically developed state like Selangor, respondents noted that support for AF contestants was flagging. ZM noted, “I’m not sure about the condition here (Selangor). During Bob’s season (AF1), I got lots of mobile messages asking me to vote for Bob. But lately, during Hafiz’s season (AF7), I did not receive such SMSs anymore. It has become more neutral now … meaning that the sense of state-belonging has lessened.”

In addition, we could argue that the performance of the more exotic forms of folk culture from the peripheral regions removed from the mainstream urbanised locations, are emphasised in the program as authentic traditions of Malay culture. Apart from selectively presenting these exoticised presentations of still extant folk cultures, these peripheral regions with their less urbanised or developed status also hold resonance because Malay identity, as many scholars have noted, is rooted in kampung life (as discussed in chapter 1).

Apart from the performances, regional differences are also continuously being emphasised in the concert normally through jokes and other humorous references. For example, in one episode of Konsert AF, Aznil, the former host, spoke in the
Terengganu dialect with Faizal, and used the Sabahan dialect when he spoke with Lotter. Another AF8 contestant, Shahir, was even teased by the host about his experiences of travelling on a motorbike to his hometown of Perak. In AF8, Adira (a Sabahan contestant) was asked by the host about her achievements in the regional Sabah competition. The host also asked her if she had tried a popular dish from Sabah, and Adira proudly shared information about the dish. Through such casual conversations with a humorous touch, the host plays up regional identities in the show as a point of interest. It also gives the show an added sense of familiarity with a diverse ‘localness’.

These playful performances of regional identities are not a dividing factor. The show’s special emphasis on regional identities from the peripheries are not only seriously taken up by audiences as a means of presenting difference within the nation on non-ethnic lines, but often act as vehicles through which the mainstream image of an authentic, folk and kampung culture can be once more mobilised.

**Negotiating AF as an indigenised Malay cultural form**

i. **Negotiating fashion: Global tastes and local cultural norms**

This section will discuss the use of fashion as a point of cultural negotiation for AF audiences in response to the program’s interplay of ethnic, national and global elements in creating a sense of localised modernity. According to Russell and Puto (1999), fashion or dress style can act as an important visual symbol of cultural identity in television shows (p. 403). As an entertainment show, AF rarely uses Malay dress unless the contestants are given a traditional song to sing. This usage of
traditional dress is, however, comparatively higher in AF than any other local reality talent show, given that AF is targeted at a Malay audience. For example, every Friday, all female contestants wear the baju kurung (traditional female Malay dress), and male contestants wear the baju melayu (traditional male Malay dress), as the males perform Friday prayers at the mosque.

While viewers privileged national or ethnic dress as an important symbol of cultural values, they had no expectations that a purely commercial entertainment program like AF would be a showcase of the nation’s cultural heritage. The responses obtained from the focus group discussions showed that viewers appreciated the need for AF contestants to wear Malay traditional dress for traditional songs but did not put too much focus on it. Rather, the dress of the contestants was mostly judged from the perspective of whether the modern outfits satisfied Malay and Islamic norms of decency or if the dress employed for a particular sequence was aesthetically pleasing and relevant to the theme. Therefore, issues of dress on the show were governed by viewer apprehensions about cultural values as well as aesthetic taste. Given these two main imperatives, I have classified the feedback into three main findings. The first group of responses pertain to the criticism of revealing clothes following the Islamic mandate for decent clothing. Secondly, viewers praised the Islamicised image of a tudung-clad contestant as a modern yet ‘decent’ figure. Thirdly, they analysed the dresses according to aesthetic values in popular fashion and relevance to the musical theme, thus showing their literacy in global pop culture and tastes.

The views of the respondents were consistently tempered by concerns about the display of fashions that could run contrary to local Malay or Islamic values of decency of dress. Fashion can be perceived as opposing Malay and Islamic values if
the attire exposes any part of the body, such as armpits, bare shoulders, back, and chest, which have been declared by Malaysian censorship as not permissible to be portrayed to the public (Kraidy, 2005a, p. 80). Some respondents brought up the case of revealing clothes worn by the head or principal of the singing academy of AF7 as it created a certain degree of discomfort for them. SM (female, 34, Lecturer) said that the principal’s dress was ‘too Westernised’. EA (female, 36, Lecturer) said that her fashion style did not sit comfortably with ‘local values’. AA4 (male, 35, Lecturer) stated, “Female contestants who wear skirts and shoulder-off tops do not portray ‘Malay culture’.”

Respondents also said that fashion could be indigenised to fit Malay cultural and Islamic values. AK (female, 24, Bachelor’s Degree Student) said that one may dress in fashionable clothes to look attractive but this must be done without transgressing local norms of decency of dress. As an example, she pointed out that AF showed the mini skirt style in a modest manner by incorporating leggings. Other respondents agreed with her that this has allowed Western fashion to work alongside the modesty of Malay culture. It is considered indecent for a Malay woman to wear a skirt that exposes her knees and legs, but the idea of wearing leggings underneath the skirt has made the wearing of a skirt even a mini-skirt quite acceptable. The respondents also seem to relate the style of the outfits to gender. For them, the outfits worn by female contestants appeared more Westernised than those worn by male contestants. MA1 even felt that the influence of Western dress could be kept under control if the number of female contestants was reduced, and he gave the example of Gangstarz, which has more males in the competition.
However, the criticism of clothing styles on AF in terms of their suitability was comparably muted in comparison to other local reality talent contests, such as MyStarz LG, and OIAM. MA1 felt that outfits worn by AF contestants still reflected ‘Eastern values’ while other programs, such as MyStarz LG, adopted a more Western style. Similarly, WW believed that “the style of MyStarz LG is not appropriate to our culture.” She further related this situation to the race of the contestants saying that MyStarz LG was more Westernised because there were more non-Malays especially Chinese Malaysians taking part. She argued that if Malay contestants dominated the show, the outfits would have been more decent; but with non-Malay contestants, the image consultant is free to choose more Westernised outfits. Agreeing with her statements, SN (female, 23, Master’s Degree Student) pointed out Easter, a Sabahan contestant and a finalist in the OIAM, to make this connection between ethnicity and dress, saying:

At the time when Easter sang Rihanna’s song, her strapless dress looked so uncomfortable. While singing she was constantly pulling the dress up before she spun around as it was loose. It was really annoying. It is very unsuitable in our Eastern culture, right? (SN, female, 23, Master’s Degree Student)

Of all the contestants in season 4, Heliza was praised by the respondents for her dress style. She was notable as the only female contestant who wore a tudung with an outfit conforming to the Islamic religion (e.g. a long dress) and her Malay Muslim image was admired by Muslim viewers, especially women. However, the dress and tudung worn by the contestants was trendy and fashionable and seemed to have been carefully put together with professional help. RM (female, 43, Bank Executive) and
KH (female, 44, Housewife) had a lengthy discussion about Heliza’s outfit and her tudung style. They appreciated the stylish Islamic style portrayed by Heliza as a symbol of a modern, fashionable but decent Malay Muslim woman. In fact, she was not only appreciated for her modernised Islamic image but viewer support swayed in Heliza’s favour to the extent that even her unconventional performances were accepted by viewers given their overall positive perception of her image as a decent Malay woman. AA6 (female, 45, Housewife) stated that “Heliza can sing any type of song chosen for her. Even if she sings a rock song, she still wears an outfit that does not expose her body. She still can be accepted within Malay community because she portrays Malay culture.”

It is actually uncommon in a country like Malaysia with an Islamic background to see a prominent tudung-clad female in the world of entertainment and celebrity. In fact, AF was one of the first singing competitions to select a tudung-clad contestant. Given the audience admiration for Heliza, AF has continued this trend and since AF4 there has always been a tudung-clad female in its line-up of contestants. In fact, in the recent years, certainly since Heliza’a appearance on AF, many more tudung-clad females have appeared in the media and show business in Malaysia.

While most respondents were appreciative of Heliza and the trend of female tudung-clad contestants in AF, some others expressed negative opinions. For example, some viewers noted that while a woman may dress appropriately, it does not necessarily mean that she will behave properly at all times. An article in a local newspaper criticised the performance of a tudung clad contestant saying that while she may have the image of a decent Muslim woman, her boisterous behaviour such as jumping vigorously on stage, did not actually conform to Islamic norms (Amin, 2007).
Apart from such apprehensions about cultural norms, respondents also adjudicated the dress worn by contestants according to aesthetic values and their tastes in pop culture. Of course, they were mindful that the dress subscribed to notions of decency, as outlined in the last section, but they also wanted the contestants to wear clothes that were up-to-date with fashion trends and also suitable for the theme of the song. This shows their literacy of global pop culture trends and willingness to participate in that culture.

There were a number of respondents who expressed their concern about the suitability of the outfit to the type of song sung by the contestants. For example, AA4 commented, “It is not suitable for contestants singing a rock song or hip hop song to wear traditional clothes like ‘baju melayu’ (traditional Malay clothes for male).” AM disliked a rock performance by Lufya (a female contestant in AF6) because he felt that her hairstyle, her dress and boots did not give her the image of a rockstar. He added, “If I was in Lufya’s position I wouldn’t want to give the performance unless the fashion consultant changed the attire.” Apart from this viewer, AF judges also criticised Lufya for not dressing up to match her performance. This shows that viewers and judges alike were not only literate in global popular culture trends but taking pleasure in showing their discerning tastes.

This issue even became a topic in the local newspaper, where Lufya countered her criticism saying, “The clothes I wore during the rock performance were really beautiful, but maybe people have different opinions about it” (Mohamed, 2008). Many other AF ‘fashion disasters’ were also widely reported in the local newspapers. The AF3 final concert, for example, was criticised extensively in Malay Mail (cf. Kadir, 2005), because of the unpleasant outfit designed for the finalists in the contest.
Kadir (2005) was outspoken in his sardonic criticism of Mawi’s (AF3 winner) outfit, saying it was not suitable for a performer like him but “better on a Klingon officer in Star Trek.”

The respondents also demonstrated a strong concern about the attractiveness of the clothes especially relating to the ‘up-to-date-ness’ with current fashion trends. For example MM2 (male, 19, Diploma Student) and MM3 (male, 20, Diploma Student) admitted that the attractiveness of the dress increased their interest in the program. Some viewers noted that they did not watch other local reality talent contests, such as Bintang RTM and MyStarz LG, just because they felt that the fashion on those shows was not ‘attractive’ enough. Bintang RTM, produced by RTM (a national television station) is very strict about observing censorship rules with high considerations about dress code, but its lack of ‘fashion sense’ repelled audiences. RM made this comparison between the fashion on Bintang RTM and AF saying “Fashion on AF program is up to date. It is the fashion icon for teenagers, young adults and yuppies … You won’t see such fashion on RTM.” Inappropriateness to local context is also judged in terms of such considerations of taste. For example, the blazers worn by Bintang RTM contestants was sarcastically mentioned by the informants as the sign of a stuffy old-fashioned competition. The informants said:

    MA1  Bintang RTM is more formal. All the contestants were made to wear blazer although it looks very weird.

    SS1  (laughs) Hey, the singers in U.S. wear blazers too. Participants in American Idol wear blazers, right? But it’s acceptable because of their cold weather.
Here the respondents seem to ridicule the use of blazers in the contest as a sign of an awkward style seeking to emulate a global image but failing to do so.

To conclude, fashion in *AF* is adjudicated from the imperatives of decency stipulated by cultural norms as well as aesthetic tastes. This section illustrates that the viewers’ negotiation of the indigenisation of fashion in *AF* is located within a complex process of identification/distancing with regards to cultural elements overlapping boundaries of global, local, race, gender and religion. From these findings, it can be concluded that Malay viewers’ readings of *AF* demonstrates that *AF* creates fashion as a hybrid cultural element, which cannot be completely viewed as something completely Malay, Malaysian or global.

**ii. Good and bad ways of being a judge: Cultural norms and appropriate judging behaviour**

Viewers adjudicated the behaviour of the judges and their critiques of the contestants in terms of appropriateness to cultural norms as well as personal opinions on what made good criticism. The respondents evaluated judges according to the relevance of the criticism and the manner in which it was delivered. In particular, they privileged restrained and courteous criticism as representative of Malayhood, criticising any unsavoury behaviour as being a result of foreign specifically Western cultural influence.

Respondents felt that judges must observe polite and courteous behaviour while delivering their judgments. They must be careful with their language in order to ensure that while giving a fair assessment of the performance they do not over-
criticise the contestants which could upset or demoralise the contestants. For them
politeness is an essential part of Malay cultural values. NM1 (female, 22, Bachelor’s
Degree Student) said that she felt uneasy when she heard harsh comments from the
judges because she feared that this could bring disgrace to the contestants. NJ and RM
(female, 43, Bank Executive) disliked Ogy (an actress who became a resident critic in
an early AF season) because they felt that she over-criticised the contestants. The
older group, in particular, seemed very concerned about the behaviour of the judges,
even extending the discussion to judges from other local reality talent contests such as
Malaysian Idol and Gangstarz. For example, RM disliked Malaysian Idol’s judges
because she felt that they never gave positive or supportive comments and their harsh
critiques were not appropriate since they could demoralise the contestant. Another
respondent from the same group, KH (female, 44, Housewife), further argued, “Those
judges should be given guidelines, so that their critique is more decent and polite.”

Some other respondents picked up on this topic to extend the discussion by not just
arguing for politeness but linking it to cultural factors. For instance, NM3 (female, 34,
Lecturer) and SM3 (female, 24, Customer Service Officer), were not comfortable
with the judges’ comments as they thought it was too harsh, blunt, and not suitable for
the local culture. According to NM3 “Now the judges have started to become quite
outspoken. Actually, in Malay culture, they cannot be so blunt in their comments. It
seems that they are following Western culture.” In the same manner, SM3 also said,
“I feel that the judges in AF try to emulate Western culture. They make annoying
criticism using rude, blunt words. It is opposed to our culture, which is really
particular about courtesy and politeness.”
While this general consensus about the inappropriateness of harsh criticism prevailed, some respondents in an afterthought added that they were also dissatisfied with judges who were just nice and polite but had no substance to their comments. Following the global format of having a panel composed of some ‘nasty’ and some ‘nice’ judges (Coutas, 2006, p. 378), AF has Adlin Aman Ramli (an actor and host who became a resident critic of AF) as the ‘bad’ judge known for giving harsh criticism, while the other two judges are more neutral, positive and encouraging in order to balance Adlin’s comments. Some viewers voiced their dislike for the ‘nice’ judges who gave encouraging but vapid critiques with no substance. For instance, MM1 (male, 26, Newsreader/Assistant Editor) said, “I mostly do not agree with the comments of the other judges. Their comments do not focus on the performance. Even if the contestant could not sing the song well, they would say it was a good performance (laughing).”

Picking up on this topic about Adlin as a ‘nasty’ judge, many respondents said that while they prefer the judges to be courteous and polite, they appreciated Adlin as a judge because he gave harsh, but succinct and relevant comments. AA4 said, “Although some people feel that his comments are too harsh, for me they are still decent and polite compared to the Western ones.” Even if Adlin’s attitude sometimes transgressed local norms of courtesy and politeness, they felt that Adlin did not set out to deliberately undermine the contestants. His harsh comments were relevant to the performance and beneficial for the contestants. ZM added, “I like his comments but he has to control his language from being too harsh. However, his criticism is honest and it is good to be sincere with the contestants. He gave relevant and unbiased criticisms whether it was a good or a bad performance.”
Adlin’s persona can be equated with the figure of Simon Cowell, the ‘nasty’ judge on *American Idol*, who is renowned globally as a harsh but fair critic, fitting the role of the “perfect judgmental father” (Kolker & Kolker, 2009, p. 191). Simon Cowell was also directly mentioned by the respondents in the focus group discussions. MZ (male, 27, Engineer) said that he watched *American Idol* just because of Simon’s criticisms. He felt that “Simon’s comments are harsh but sincere … from his heart. He criticises all the things that need to be criticised. He doesn’t hide anything.” AA5 (female, 23, Bachelor’s Degree Student) said that she liked to watch *American Idol* and *OIAM* because, “Paul Moss, one of the judges of *OIAM*, has the same character as Simon Cowell. They are both good in judging the contestants and they are qualified to be the judges. And these two judges are the main reason I follow both programs.” This comparison with Simon Cowell shows that viewers are using an international figure as a standard identificatory model for making sense of local judges. While they may hold some innate appreciation for critics who were ‘harsh but correct’, their support for such ‘nasty judges’ is also compounded by their knowledge of a figure like Simon Cowell. The fascination with either Simon Cowell or Paul Moss shows that these viewers are fascinated with Western judges’ attitudes. In this sense, they are attracted to “indigenized (Asianized) West”, instead of the ‘tradition’ of local culture (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 106).

While Adlin seemed to receive overwhelming support from most respondents, which was quite surprising given the general emphasis on Malay adat and social etiquette, some other judges who gave harsh but irrelevant comments were squarely criticised by the respondents. Respondents felt most irritated with judges who gave harsh comments without appropriate assessment of the performance. For instance, MO (male, 32, Arabic Language Tutor) felt annoyed with a judge on *Gangstarz* because
“The judge’s comments in *Gangstarz* irritated me. He gives outspoken comments but they are always inappropriate for the performance. It makes me wonder how someone like him has become a judge when he cannot even give correct comments.” AA6 (female, 45, Housewife) stated that she disagreed with Kudsia Kahar’s (a resident judge for *AF* season 1 until 3) critiques because she was biased and gave inaccurate comments. According to AA6, “She gives good comments to anyone who sings a *Bollywood* song, as she likes that kind of song. But if the students sing a song that she dislikes, she will criticise them no matter how well they performed.” Moreover, AA6 said that she was also annoyed with Kudsia’s fast changing attitudes, “She is very emotional, she can easily get angry with the contestants. Sometimes she even weeps seeing contestants that she favour being eliminated.”

**Distancing from inappropriate elements of *AF***

1. **Voyeurism, dramatised conflict and emotionalism in *Diari AF***

In *Diari AF*, contestants were shown to be freely mingling with each other during their breaks, mealtime or even the practice sessions. An element of the show which provoked Malay viewers was the free intermingling of the contestants of both sexes. In a similar case, audiences in Arab countries also voiced a lot of concern regarding *Al-Ra’is* (an adapted version of *Big Brother*), which showed unmarried men and women staying together in a house, creating the possibility of flirtation, even physical contact between them, which is strictly forbidden in Islam (Kraidy, 2005b, p. 16). In contrast, the female and male contestants in *AF* were staying in different houses after their daily training sessions due to Islamic concern (as discussed in chapter 3).
Because of the sensitivity of Islam and Malay cultural values about moral decency and privacy, the producers also ensure that the camera surveillance was not set up in the private spaces in the house, for example, the bedroom or bathroom. This cultural restriction makes *AF* different from *Big Brother*, although they share many elements of the same format. *Big Brother* captures every single detail of the housemates, even in private spaces like the bedroom, as “the webcams produced hazy and unfocused images of the private spaces of bedrooms and bathrooms, which emphasized the sense of gaining access to the forbidden” (Tincknell, 2002, p. 204). In *Diari AF* while the viewers are provided ‘behind the scenes’ sections or a peek into the ‘private lives’ of the contestants, this is strictly limited to training sessions or daily routines, and not to private activities of the contestants in their bedrooms.

While the show has already undertaken such precautionary measures to ensure that the content shown on *AF* is acceptable to Malay viewers, the respondents pointed out certain elements in *Diari AF* that they still found morally dubious or offensive. Adopting a position of distancing, respondents expressed their disapproval in different manners, sometimes in a tone of ridicule and sometimes one of serious critique.

Voyeuristic pleasure in programs like *Big Brother* is attributed to salacious gossip, dramatic conflicts, conspiracies and plotting occurring in the house between contestants. In contrast, *AF* viewers tend to dislike the rare instances of conflict shown in the training sessions on *Diari AF*. The argument between Mas (*AF*2 female contestant) and the principal, for example, created discomfort for many viewers. Many of the participants in my study commented that such emotional conflicts should not be shown on the program and the producers should concentrate on the contestants’ training activities and not on such issues. They said that they watched *Diari AF* to get
to know the personality of the contestants, evaluate their progress in the house, and how they spend their time in the house, but disliked such conflicts.

RM They should show more of the training classes rather than other things. In particular, they shouldn’t show scenes where contestants behave inappropriately. This could decrease votes for certain contestants even if they have a good voice.

AA6 There was one scene where Akim (AF7 male contestant) quarrelled with Hafiz (AF7 male contestant). I think they should not have shown that scene and the other one in AF1 where Nana was scolded by one of the trainers.

RM They shouldn’t have shown the scene where the principal got angry with Mas in AF2 and tossed his pen at Mas. Since the contestants know that it would be broadcast on TV, it could affect their self-esteem and demoralise them.

These comments clearly indicate that they are very sensitive towards any representations that may negatively impact the contestants. While scholars have found that most viewers in other countries enjoy watching people experiencing bad luck or facing bad situations in reality TV programs (Hall, 2006; Hill, 2007; Lundy et al., 2008), Malay viewers tend to distance themselves from such scenes. Hill (2002) found that 68 per cent of the respondents watching Big Brother enjoyed watching a group conflict happening between the housemates, and is rated as the “second most popular content in BB” (p. 333). Following the conventions of the global format, the producers may have allowed these scenes from Diari AF to be broadcast, but such displays of anger and conflict offended these Malay viewers.
The show requires contestants to inhabit the same house for weeks, which encourages emotional ties to grow between them, hence encouraging potentially emotional moments during the elimination part of the show. AA2 said, “Maybe they have developed close relationships with each other because they have lived together. This could have provoked such sentimental outbursts of tears when one of them leaves at the elimination rounds.” NM2 (female, 32, Agricultural Officer) and AA5 believe that it is the melodramatic nature of the format which tends to make the people in the show forget that they may be doing something contrary to Malay norms and Islamic principles. The respondents take issue with the emotional intimacy between the contestants, which is part of the melodramatic nature of this genre ridiculing the contestants for their overt sentimentality, as seen in this discussion (from the 35 years old and above group) below:

RM  I feel annoyed during the elimination part …
NJ  I feel annoyed too.
AA6  Yes. I agree … the one who had been eliminated was not crying, but other contestants were crying … it makes me feel irritated.
NJ  They were over acting!

This discussion shows that the respondents are not comfortable with the overtly emotional farewells given by the contestants to their eliminated friends.

ii. Physical contact and dramatic intimacy

One contentious issue in AF that the respondents discussed and criticised extensively was physical contact between contestants of the opposite sex. While there are certain elements that can be controlled by the producers, there are also some elements that are
beyond their control in a ‘live’ filming environment in a reality TV format. A natural reaction such as hugging an eliminated contestant, in the emotional spur of the moment, is hard to control by the producers in a ‘live’ concert like AF. Although it is common for the participants of many forms of reality TV programs to express their emotional feelings through intimate physical contact, for example, hugging and kissing, it was on AF that Malaysian viewers witnessed such emotional expression in a ‘live’ TV show for the first time. As such this behaviour is prohibited in the Islamic religion and respondents in the older group express their concerns on these incidents:

KH  They cried and even hugged the eliminated contestant. Once a male contestant hugged the female trainer. Why do they need to hug each other?

AA6  Yes I really dislike that.

RM  During the elimination part for early AF seasons, there were contestants who kissed other contestants on the cheek. For me, it is not suitable to our culture and religion.

NJ  Didn’t the hugging scene create some controversy?

AA6  Yes. In the first season.

RM  But, we hardly saw people hugging the eliminated contestant from the second season onwards.

AA6  Yes, they have prohibited it ever since. In season one there was a scene where a contestant even hugged the leg of an eliminated contestant. (Everybody laughs)

KH  Oh my God!
The above discussion illustrates that intimate physical contact between male and female participants is not only rejected but considered offensive by respondents. In fact, such scenes during the elimination rounds in the earlier seasons of AF stirred controversy and moral panic throughout the country (as explained in the introduction chapter). As a response to public criticisms, the producer of AF3 appears to have restricted the possibility of bodily contact during the emotional elimination round by separating female and male contestants and making them stand on opposite sides of the stage. Hence, physical contact had been reduced, such actions were stopped and the contestants only shake hands with the eliminated contestant. Although physical contact between the contestants has been restricted, AA2 still felt annoyed because, “AF still has scenes where eliminated contestants still hug their trainers like ‘cikgu’ (teacher) Siti Hajar, and ‘cikgu’ Fatimah. Maybe the trainers consider them as their own children, but it is still forbidden in Islam.” AZ (female, 30, Document Controller), a respondent from another focus group, also said, “Although the trainers may regard a contestant as their son or daughter, they cannot become intimate with each other because they are not ‘mukhrim’” (an Islamic term for female and male who have family connections or are from the same blood).

Even a public display of intimacy between legitimate married couples is also seen as being indecent and showy. In AF7, a contestant Isma was given a surprise when her husband, also a singer, was invited to sing a duet with her on stage. While she was singing, her husband suddenly appeared on stage and sang with her and they hugged each other intimately in the spur of the moment. Although it was planned as part of the surprise element of family reunions by the production team, this was considered

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63 The family reunion is also discussed in chapter four, but from the perspective of a melodramatic sense. Here it must be added that most family reunions have a child/parent focus, therefore, this husband/wife reunion could have caused discomfort to viewers.
inappropriate by the audiences. Indeed, one of the invited judges, Adibah Noor (a popular singer and actress), looked uncomfortable when this happened and directly addressed her concern to Isma saying, “In terms of performance, I found it too romantic. I think, when you are in public, you have to take care about how much you show. Normally, we Malaysians don’t like to see such intimate caresses and passionate hugs in public” (translation mine). This scene was also widely criticised by viewers on YouTube and some even wrote letters to the editor of a local newspaper. A respondent, ZM (from the group 35 years old and above), ridiculed Isma saying she consciously took advantage of the reunion to hug her husband on stage in front of the entire nation. This shows that viewers are acutely apprehensive about physical contact.

But while physical contact was perceived as something uncommon and offensive by this older group, a few younger viewers (from the 18 to 25 year-old group), however, did not really think of this as a major issue. MY1 (male, 26, Research Assistant), for instance, felt that physical intimacy between male and female friends happened in real life and MA2 (male, 20, Diploma Student) was also not offended by it. However, putting aside their personal opinions on the matter, they were aware that most Malays, especially rural and older people, would be gravely offended by it. MM1 said, “People in the rural areas must be shocked by these scenes and so must be all older people.”

This chapter has shown how Malay viewers negotiate the cultural aspects of AF. As a locally adapted global format, AF not only contains local cultural traces, but is actually underscored by aesthetic imperatives of a global popular culture format which has been indigenised to suit local culture. In this sense, AF has created a site
for complex modes of negotiation for local audiences. In the next chapter I will explore the different types of audiences and their different levels of engagement with the program.
CHAPTER 6
DEFINING THE AUDIENCE: FANS AND FOLLOWERS

This chapter seeks to analyse AF audiences to classify different categories of viewership according to their modes of engagement and viewing practices. Given the shift in the broadcasting industry’s conception of audience with the advent of reality TV and its innovations, as outlined in chapter two, it is important to examine how local viewers make sense of the new modes of engagement and interactive viewing practices involved in AF. The chapter not only concentrates on findings from the focus group discussions, but also takes into consideration observations from the fieldwork conducted at three Konsert AF of AF7 aired in 2009. It will use the distinction between fans and other viewers proposed by audience-studies scholars to categorise viewers. Using those categories, the chapter will highlight differences in the modes of engagement of different types of viewers as well as their perceptions of what constitutes a fan or a non-fan. It will also explain the types of pleasure obtained by different kinds of viewers through their varying levels of engagement and ‘investments’ in AF.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. Firstly, I explore the distinctions between fans and non-fans proposed by leading scholars in the field of audience and fan studies. This discussion is followed by feedback from respondents about how they categorise themselves as viewers, and what constitutes a fan or a non-fan in their perceptions. Most of the respondents in the focus group discussions categorised themselves as casual viewers, but some of them displayed fan-like attributes, thus

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64 I attended three AF concerts namely the eighth, ninth and tenth (final) concert. In these concerts, I was able to conduct informal interviews with studio audiences, the majority of whom were fans and contestants’ family members.
blurring the boundaries between the two categories. Secondly, I highlight issues relating to the general viewing practices of audiences in terms of the factors that got them interested in AF in the first place and how they watch the show. Finally, I will discuss viewer engagement with modes of active involvement brought about by AF in Malaysia, namely the voting system, viewer interactivity on multi-media platforms and the option of attending ‘live’ concerts in the studio. Since these activities are mostly associated with fans, this discussion mainly draws on the brief conversations with self-declared fans during the fieldwork at AF concerts along with some responses from the focus groups.

**Characterising Audiences**

**i. Defining fans and non-fans**

What is at stake in characterising viewers of AF by using the terminology of ‘fans’ and ‘non-fans’? The focus group participants in this study were recruited not specifically according to their degree of interest and involvement in the program, but on the condition that they were watching or had watched AF in the past. As the study progressed, it turned out that almost all of the focus group participants did not classify themselves as fans. However, a significant number of self-identified ‘fans’ were clearly at the AF concert and there was an opportunity to informally talk to them. These encounters with a range of different viewers enabled me to realise the importance of recognising the diversity of audiences and their practices. It also prompted me to critically examine the relevance of audience descriptors coined by media studies scholars and the viewers themselves.
A brief survey of television audience studies reveals the role of these distinctions and the prevalence of fan/non-fan binary oppositions. Recent media and cultural studies work on fans and fandom has gained prominence due to developments in convergent media technologies that have been used widely as publication and distribution outlets for fan production. This prominence of fan studies poses a question about how those types of studies distinguish between ‘fans’ and ‘non-fans’?

Harrington and Bielby (1995) use ‘viewers’ to designate ‘non-fans’, but they also note that the distinction between fans and ‘viewers’ is not clear-cut (p. 112). They also note that this acceptance of ambiguity between the two categories is the implicit position taken by a number of other key scholars (e.g. Fiske, 1992; Grossberg 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992). Likewise Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) in their study of science fiction audience use the term ‘followers’ to describe non-fans, but also concede that the boundary between the two “remains fluid and somewhat arbitrary” (p. 23).

Nevertheless, Tulloch & Jenkins (1995) still try to delineate broad differences between followers and fans. For them, most crucially, fans are “active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretive institution”, but ‘followers’, although they watch the same show regularly, have “no larger social identity on the basis of this consumption” (p. 23). Therefore, fans are known for creating a larger participatory culture from which they develop social activities and identities. In this manner, “[b]oth academic and popular discourse adopt labels for fans – ‘Trekkies’, “Beastie Girls”, “Deadheads” – that identify them through their association with

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65 It is appropriate here to situate my own positioning in relation to AF within the discussion of fans-followers. Drawing from Jenkins term ‘acafan’ (Jenkins, 2011), I had describe my own relation to the show as that of an ‘acafollower’. Although I have followed AF since its first season, I haven't had a favourite contestant or that degree of emotional involvement and investment that fans, or ‘acafans’, exhibit.
particular programs or stars” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 36). Similarly, AF fans have also
developed a social identity by calling themselves penyokong (supporter) or
‘fanatics’.66

Apart from ‘active participation’, Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) argue that the difference
between ‘fans’ and ‘followers’ can also be seen in the ability of the fans to clearly
articulate what they found enjoyable in terms of watching the program. In their study
of viewers of Doctor Who, they found that the ‘followers’ in their research could not
identify the reason why they enjoyed watching the program (p. 94). Thus, they argue
that followers “had few of the fans’ cultural competences to explain the show and
their liking of it” (p. 94). At the same time, Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) also assert
that the ‘memory’ of the ‘followers’ is not as remarkable as those of the fans (p. 94).

Another important criterion distinguishing fans and followers is the frequency and
regularity of their viewing patterns. For a fan, “a missed episode means a loss of
information shared by others, making it harder to participate in discussions of the
program and weakening their mastery over the series” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 58). In this
regard, Sandvoss (2005) has also noted that “[t]he consumption practices of fans is
indeed more structured than those of other [viewers]” (p. 18).

In what other ways might fandom differentiate itself as a form of audience
engagement? According to Jenkins (1992), a key difference is manifest in “the
intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement” (p. 56). For him, fans
operate within a “particular mode of reception” that involves a high quotient of
emotional and intellectual involvement of fans. He says:

66 Both are common terms for fans in Malaysia.
Fans viewers watch television texts with close and undivided attention, a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance. They view them multiple times … to scrutinize meaningful details and to bring more and more of series narrative under their control. They translate the reception process into social interaction with other fans. (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 277-278)

For this study I will employ the terminology of ‘fans’ and ‘followers’ coined by Tulloch and Jenkins (1995), since they provide a clear set of distinctions that can be employed, as starting points at least, to analyse AF audiences. Their framework will be used to examine and categorise AF audiences, by highlighting differences in the modes of engagement as well as investigating audience perceptions about what constitutes a fan or a non-fan. While using their framework to understand AF audiences, I will also identify points where the boundaries between ‘fans’ and ‘followers’ are blurred or the categories seemed unsuitable for the task of differentiating AF audiences.

ii. Participants’ categorisation of audiences

This section moves on from scholarly debates to examine how respondents conceptualise ‘fans’ and ‘non-fans’. Before respondents were approached to participate in the focus group, they were required to answer a short questionnaire. One question asked them to pick a category out of three – casual viewers, regular viewers…

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At the focus group discussion, the respondents were not aware of the term ‘followers’ and it was not introduced to them by me. However, following the Tulloch and Jenkins’s (1995) term, I will consider the self-identified respondents of ‘ordinary viewers’ or ‘regular viewers’ as ‘followers’. However, I will also sometimes use the term non-fans to generalise the non-fans within a wider context of audiences.
or fans\textsuperscript{68} – to describe their mode of viewership. Most of the respondents identified themselves as casual viewers, rather than regular viewers and fans, and only four respondents identified themselves as fans. This surprised me as I found that some ‘followers’ who participated in the focus groups did clearly possess competencies for explaining the pleasures of \textit{AF} and also demonstrated a remarkable ability to recall many details about the format, content and people featured in the show. This raised questions about the disconnect between self-identity as viewer and actual consumption patterns, their reticence in identifying themselves as fans, the expectations of respondents in what is involved in being a fan and the usefulness of audience descriptors coined by scholars, all of which I will be touching upon as the chapter progresses.

The reluctance to identify themselves as fans is probably due to the long history of negative depictions of fandom (cf. Sandvoss, 2003, p. 16), which could also be seen in the way my respondents often used the term ‘fanatics’ to distance themselves from fans. The respondents in the focus group often used the term ‘fanatics’ to denote two things – as an interchangeable label for ‘fans’ and also as a term denoting the extreme passion of some \textit{AF} viewers.\textsuperscript{69}

The respondents were asked for any specific reasons why many of them perceived themselves as ‘casual viewers’, instead of regular viewers and fans. In discussion, the respondents explained the rationale of their self-categorisation by elaborating their viewing patterns and motivations for watching it. While most of the focus group participants did not classify themselves as fans or even anything akin to ‘followers’,

\textsuperscript{68} These categories were partly inspired by Nabi et al. (2003) who use the distinction of casual/regular viewer distinction to focus on viewers’ uses and gratification needs.

\textsuperscript{69} The English word ‘fanatics’ was the actual term used by the respondents.
the self-identified ‘fans’ that I met at the AF concert certainly placed themselves in the category of ‘fans’ identified within the scholarly literature discussed in the previous section. Key factors included viewing patterns, degree of involvement with the show and engagement with other related activities of the program.

While AZ (female, 30, Document Controller), MS (male, 27, Customer Service Officer), NJ (female, 50, Bank Officer), and MA3 (male, 22, Diploma Student), perceived themselves as fans, only AZ and MS displayed behaviour attributed to fans as they showed a high emotional/intellectual involvement with AF. NJ, on the other hand, did not show much intellectual and emotional involvement. Similarly, I could not pinpoint any specific reason to demonstrate MA3’s status as a fan, and even on revisiting the transcript, I found that he did not have an intellectual/emotional involvement with AF. He did not even cite any activities that showed a fan-like consumption pattern. His responses echoed that of other casual viewers, and the overall attitude he displayed during the interview was quite unenthusiastic and muted.

Many of the viewers define a fan as somebody who actively and eagerly participates in activities related to AF. A respondent, SS2 (female, 29, Engineer) believed that fans are viewers who are too obsessed with contestants. She said that they would usually download and watch the contestants’ performances on YouTube if they missed an episode. MA5 (male, 30, Engineer) in the same group perceived a fan to be someone who actively participated in online activities like joining fan-clubs and commenting on forums. NK (female, 34, Lecturer), on the other hand, relates a fan by their consumption of merchandise, as she stated, “If someone is an AF fanatic, they will buy any product related to AF. But an ordinary viewer like me will not follow AF to that level.”
The level and type of viewers’ interest in the program was another key point around which the respondents assessed the fan/non-fan division. SS1 (female, 25, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student) and ZM (male, 41, School Teacher), for instance, said that they were not fans because they have a low interest in AF. SS1 said that she was not really interested in watching AF and ZM said that he was not generally interested in music or music-related programs. He added that he only watched AF if his daughter had already switched it on, but when alone he would watch whatever was on and not go searching for it. On the other hand, MJ (male, 24, Video Producer) said that AF fans were people who tended to get more influenced by the program. Some other viewers agreed with this perception, particularly referring to the negative influences that fans can draw from their excessive interest in the program. As MS said, “I don’t think it is nice if fans become obsessed with their favourite contestants. They become willing to do anything for them, for example, Zahid’s fans quarrelled with Farah’s fans on the online forum.”

AA4 (male, 35, Lecturer) brought up another interesting point to identify a fan. According to him, a fan can be identified through his/her persistent introduction of AF related discussion in everyday conversations. He explained:

At my office, there was a female colleague of about 55 years old, who is an AF fanatic, especially during Mawi’s time. She is a lecturer but she even uses Mawi (AF3 winner) as an example when she is teaching. One time she baked some cookies and brought them to office; she had named her biscuits after Mawi. She gets very angry when people criticise Mawi. Because of her obsession with Mawi we usually tease her and so AF has
now become a topic of conversation in the office. (AA4, male, 35, Lecturer)

Furthermore, other respondents thought that fans were viewers who displayed obsession towards a particular contestant. MS, for instance, gave example of Zahid’s (AF2 winner) fans, saying, “Zahid’s fans will buy anything orange in colour which is Zahid’s favourite colour. What’s more absurd is that Mawi’s fans will always mention “world” (Mawi’s tagline) everywhere they go.” MS feels that this kind of behaviour amongst fans is inappropriate; it is okay to practice the tagline in an appropriate space, for example at the concert or at the fans’ convention, but not in other everyday spaces.

Moreover, there were a few respondents who categorised themselves as casual/regular viewers at the stage of answering the questionnaire, but in the ensuing focus group discussion, they either manifested fan-like attitudes or changed their position and declared themselves to be fans. MY1 (male, 26, Research Assistant) from the 18 to 26 year-old group, for example, stated, “I don’t want to be a hypocrite – I think I am a fanatic.” This declaration indicates that he felt more secure to identify himself as a fan in a collective social context of the focus group discussion, but may have felt it risky to make the same declaration in an individual context of the survey. MY1’s case reflects Harrington & Bielby’s (1995) assertion that “most fans’ identities are more privatized” (pp. 98-99) and fans will mostly be willing to identify themselves only if “they know they’ll be supported by others” (cf. Jenkins, 1992, p. 75). The discovery of other fans generates a sense of pleasure for a new fan triggering a recognition that he/she is not “alone” in their attraction to the program (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23).
Like MY1, a few other respondents in the same group also began to identify themselves as AF fans as they evaluated their viewing practices. But they also noted that their attitudes could shift in different seasons, as the response below shows:

I think I can sometimes become fanatic, but sometimes not … It changes with different seasons. For example in AF season 3, I became quite a fanatic, but in some other seasons, I didn’t even have any interest in watching AF. (YM, female, 24, Journalist)

Apart from changing interests in AF, shifting viewing attitudes was also related to changes in personal lifestyle. KO, for example, said:

It depends on whether I have free time or not. When I was a student, I always watched it, especially when it was aired during the semester break. But now, I’m working, and I don’t really have time to watch AF. That’s why I didn’t perceive myself as a fan any more. (KO, female, 25, Reporter)

Other participants, in this and other focus group discussions did not change their position and maintained their earlier statement of being non-fans. These respondents, however, displayed fan-like attributes during the focus group discussion. KA (male, 60, retiree), for example, had earlier listed himself as a casual viewer but in the discussion he said that he watched AF without fail, and continued, “If I do not watch AF, I feel like I’m missing something.” In addition, SM1 (female, 22, Radio Producer) and MA1 (male, 24, Radio Producer) gave the most remarkable responses reflecting a kind of intellectual involvement described by Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) in their study of fans. Although the respondents did not perceive themselves as fans, they could recall every single detail from each AF concert, signalling a sort of
intellectual involvement with AF in spite of their refusal to identify themselves as fans. For example, SM1 could even imitate Adlin’s (AF resident judge) style of talking, who used a lot of hand gestures to stress his points while critiquing contestants. Her routine astonished everybody in the group and led to much laughter. AM2 (male, 30, Customer Service Officer), likewise, could still remember the ‘tagline’ of many contestants including those from the earliest seasons, suggesting his depth of memory and degree of knowledge of the show.

Understanding viewing patterns of AF audiences

i. Different motivations of audience formation

Before discussing broader viewing patterns, it is useful to map out the different viewing motivations for the AF audience. This section discusses the various reasons given by viewers about how, more specifically, they started watching AF.

Many of the participants in the focus group pointed to particular elements in the show as the reason for their interest and preference for AF. Those who categorised themselves as casual/regular viewers said that they would watch the show religiously if they developed an interest in a particular contestant. According to AA2 (female, 36, Assistant Registrar), she would not miss watching AF when Mawi was competing. Similarly, ZM also stated, “I watched AF the most during Mawi’s time. Even my father, who was not interested in watching AF in the earlier seasons, spent quite a bit of his time watching AF because he liked Mawi.” SM1 also expressed the same opinion about another contestant saying, “I did not miss watching AF6 because of
Stacy. She was my favourite contestant of all time. If I missed an episode of *AF6* by chance, I made sure that I watched the repeat telecast.”

On the other hand, MA1, and SM3 (female, 24, Customer Service Officer) said that instead of a particular contestant *per se*, their interests and desires for involvement in a particular season of *AF* was determined by the talent in the overall line-up of contestants for the season. MA1, for example, would watch the first few episodes in order to survey the contestants and determine whether it was worthwhile to follow the program for the whole season. Likewise, NA1 (male, 28, Microchips Engineer) also said, “If the contestants’ performance for the first few weeks turn out to be boring, I would not follow that particular season till the end. That is why I didn’t watch *AF4*.”

Some of the respondents said that they started watching *AF* as they were impelled by other family members with whom they had to share the television set. After watching *AF* for some time, they slowly started to develop a liking for the program. ZM explained that “I was actually not really interested in watching *AF*, but was influenced by my kids, especially my daughter, who was really interested in *AF*.“ Similarly, SS1, from another group stated:

I started to watch *AF* when I was at home during weekends. People at home would switch to (*Astro*) to watch *AF* and I could not watch any other program. My niece was extremely devoted to *AF* and had her own favourite contestant for each season. At first, I watched *AF* as I did not have any other choice, but soon after, I began enjoying it and continued to watch it in the second and third seasons. (SS1, female, 25, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student)
It can be seen that the social dimension of watching *AF* together as a group can draw in reluctant or new viewers and also facilitate conversations between family members. In this regard, *AF* becomes somewhat of a collective leisure activity. While Jenkins (1992) has described how “group viewing situations” (p. 76) can facilitate greater viewing pleasure he refers to situations where fans purposely gather together in a group; here *AF* has incidentally brought viewers together but served a similar purpose.

As discussed in chapter two the advent of the reality format was accompanied with a shift in the TV industry’s conception of the audience and the means it devised to engage viewers. Seeking to attract the increasingly savvy viewer and capitalising on profit-making capabilities of the new technological innovations like SMS, the reality format has introduced the system of voting. In regard to this, the viewer adopts the position of a meta-judge, who is not only a passive viewer watching the narrative unfold on TV but is invited to actively engage in critique and deliberate over deserving winners and vote for their favoured contestant. This facilitates conversations among the family members who exchange views while watching the program, consequently heightening their viewing pleasure, as evident from the following responses:

I always discuss *AF* with my family members, especially my children.

We enjoy guessing the outcome of the show, who is going to be kicked out tonight, and who is going to win. In fact, sometimes we bet with the children for fun. (NN, female, 51, Businesswoman)

I normally watch *AF* with my niece and my sister. We become the jury (*everybody laughs*). We even criticise the contestants more harshly than
the judges on AF. We not only watch the show on TV, but also chitchat with each other. Only AF can create this kind of a warm environment.

We just keep silent when we watch other programs. (SS1, female, 25, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student)

These ‘followers’ seem to derive pleasure from gossiping about the program, that Ang (1985) has found in her study of women viewers of the soap opera Dallas. Such social interactions may occur with other genres of TV programs as viewers discuss the narrative or a scene, depending on the proclivities of the viewer and the context of viewing. But it may be argued that given the construction of the viewer as a meta-judge, the invitations to adjudicate the performances presented in the show may provoke more conversations in a collective viewing context than a program where viewers were just watching a narrative unfold. In addition, the demographic targeted by soap operas is mostly composed of housewives who watch the soaps alone in the daytime when the family is out of house, who may not get the chance or have the intention to talk about their favourite soaps with other viewers. In contrast, AF as a genre that is generally accepted to cater to young people as well as all family members, especially during primetime is generally viewed in a group context, thus enabling such conversations between viewers. Thus, it could be surmised that reality TV as a format is conducive to viewer interactions and conversations. Many of the respondents also said that they sometimes continued discussing the program after they finished watching it.

In addition, some viewers said that they began watching AF because it enabled them to participate in social interactions in their daily life. SS1 said that she began watching
AF to figure out why her friends were so enthusiastic about AF and always kept talking about it. She said:

They kept talking about ‘orange’, and at that time I could not participate in their discussion, as I did not know what they were talking about. After watching AF, I understood that the colour orange represented the contestant Zahid.\(^{(SS1, \text{female, 25, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student})}\)

Besides SS1, many other respondents cited a feeling of being left out in conversations as the main reason why they began watching AF. These responses show that the need for cultivating cultural competency to interact with other people can become a motivation for watching AF:

If we are in a group and we don’t watch AF, we will be like a lone wolf. Everybody talks about AF nowadays as everybody has ASTRO at home now. So, if I do not want to be left out from a discussion, I need to watch AF. (WW, female, 24, Master’s Degree Student)

Thus, it is clear that the interest in discussing the program is no longer an activity restricted to ‘fans’, who have traditionally been seen as the only viewers having “intense interaction” after watching their favourite show (Jenkins, p. 52). ‘Followers’ also enjoy the show’s role as ‘currency’ enabling social interactions. These ‘followers’ seek to acquire just enough knowledge about the program so that they are not left out of discussions. On the other hand, while fans of science fiction, for instance, usually ‘rewrite’ their own narrative in the form of novels and music videos

\(^{(70)}\)Zahid was being associated with orange colour because he was known as a Holland football team fan.
(Jenkins, 1992), AF’s fans and followers do not ‘rewrite’ the narrative, but accept the program as it is and simply discuss the show in verbal conversations.

A respondent, AA6 (female, 45, Housewife), gave a different reason for her growing interest in AF. She started to watch AF after Rosma (a female contestant in AF1), who was generally perceived as a talented contestant, was eliminated quite early. This sparked a lot of discussion about Rosma in the newspapers and made AA6 curious about AF. This example highlights another innovation brought about by reality TV in the broadcasting industry. News about conventional genres like soap operas would not be discussed as news, given its fictional nature. However, the investment of the viewers in the ‘real’ lives of these contestants has allowed reporters to treat it as factual news. In this regard, AF can be regarded as a “event TV ... television that attracts huge audiences and becomes part of the popular discourse of everyday life” (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 11). In addition, the celebrity culture of the reality genre, circulating spectacular and controversial images of contestants in all forms of media, attracts viewers who may have been ignorant of the show before that.

To conclude, these viewers are not fans but they develop a level of emotional investment in AF, which motivates them to watch AF. This may be due to their interest in the content of the program like a specific contestant or the larger social situations like wanting to develop cultural competency related to AF. In particular, motivations relating to these larger social situations can be traced to the TV industry’s innovation with the reality format, as a genre that is inherently oriented towards provoking audience opinion and as a product of ‘event TV’ that pervades popular discourse even in news.
ii. Viewing patterns

The findings revealed that the respondents in the focus group examined their viewing patterns as the key determinant of their status as a fan or follower. In their study of reality TV audiences, Nabi et al. (2003) categorise audiences into casual viewers and regular viewers, where they find that regular viewers are impelled to watch for entertainment needs while casual viewers watch the shows just to alleviate boredom (p. 325). In this section, I will discuss responses from my focus group informants about how they watch AF.

The regularity with which audiences follow the program is one of the key criteria identified by scholars in distinguishing fans and ordinary viewers. Sandvoss (2005) associates “emotional investment” with viewing patterns, and states that it is indicated by “regular, repeated consumption, regardless of who its reader is and regardless of the possible implications of this affection” (p. 7).

Some informants said that the frequency of their viewing patterns changed according to their lifestyle, but unlike fans they did not mind missing AF. Of these respondents (18 to 26 years-old), many were students living in hostels who could not watch AF as regularly as they wanted because of their busy schedule or the lack of a satellite connection in their hostels. FA (female, 21, Bachelor Degree Student), for example, stated that she was an eager follower of the program from season 1 to 3 but could not watch the program after moving to a hostel. Similarly, NM1 (female, 22, Bachelor Degree Student) also did not watch AF when she was in a hostel but started to watch AF at home during her semester break. These examples indicate that these followers have a lesser degree of emotional involvement as they only watch AF when they have
the opportunity and they do not structure their life around the program. In contrast, Hassan Basri (2004) has noted, that there were some fan-families who go to some lengths in planning their lifestyles and routines to fit the timings of the show (p. 199).

Apart from regularity, another dimension of viewing pattern is the level of attention with which audiences watch programs. Fans ensure that they fully devote their time and attention to watch the program undisturbed by “unplugging the telephone or putting the kids to bed to ensure that they will not be interrupted” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 58). In my findings, most of the respondents did not watch the program with undivided attention – they did not sit in front of the TV from the beginning to the end or suspend all other activities. Some of the viewers explained that they needed to do the household chores while watching AF. EA (female, 35, Lecturer), for example, stated that she did not watch AF with full attention but did her household chores while watching the program. Similarly, AA6 from another group also added:

I do not sit in front of the TV the entire time while watching AF. I watch for a while and then I do the household chores. Sometimes I watch AF while I fold clothes or heat and serve meals. If a contestant sings one of my favourite songs, then I sit down and watch it properly. (AA6, female, Housewife)

ZM, a male respondent, also watched AF without giving his full attention although he did not do any household chores. He said, “I sit in front of TV and give it undivided attention just during the elimination part in AF concert, whereas I watch the performances on and off.” Similarly, YM, a respondent from the 18 to 26 year-old group also said, “I only watch the contestants I like. If it is a contestant I don’t like, I
do not pay much attention. I might go to the toilet for a while. Then, if I see a favoured contestant, I will sit down in front of the TV again.”

These followers’ responses suggest that they do not watch AF with “rapt attention” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 58) like fans, and do not mind missing some parts of the program. In contrast, AZ, a respondent from the 27 to 35 year-old group, a self-categorised fan, watched AF differently from other respondents as she took pleasure in watching the program from the beginning to the end:

I enjoy watching AF as a whole. I want to watch everything … I like to watch the judges’ critique and observe the contestants’ attire and choreography. Moreover, I find the emotions and attitudes of the host or the studio audience interesting to watch. You can say that I like to watch AF from many perspectives. (AZ, female, 30, Document Controller)

AZ’s description of her viewing practice resonates with the ‘mode of reception’ associated with science fiction fans (Jenkins, 1992, p. 72), who are interested in all aspects of the show and take pleasure in scrutinising its different elements and watch the program from the beginning till the end. Her attitude is similar to Jenkins’s (1992) analysis of Star Trek fans who scrutinised almost every aspect of the program, ranging from continuity linkage to facial expression (p. 72).

From the findings, it is also evident that the ‘followers’ do not watch the program again after seeing it once, either on the repeat telecast of AF or on Internet portals like YouTube. Some viewers such as MZ (male, 27, Engineer) and SS2 (27 to 35 year-old group), could not understand why someone would take the trouble to go to YouTube to watch the same program again. On the other hand, SM1 said that she sometimes
watched the performance again on YouTube, not because she liked the performance, but she found it pleasurable to scrutinise the voice quality of the contestants. She said, “If a contestant’s voice does not sound good in a performance, I watch it again in order to reconfirm whether that was so.” Showing a fan-like attitude, SM1, repeatedly watches the preferred scene to gain a “better sense” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 72) and bring “more and more of the series narrative under [her] control” (p. 76).

NM2 (female, 32, Agricultural Officer) observed that she enjoyed watching AF at a ‘mamak’ restaurant (coffee stall) on a wide screen TV:

My friends and I like to go to the ‘mamak’ restaurant and watch AF on the big screen. Normally, the restaurants’ owner will turn on the AF concert without any special request from the patrons. While watching, I like to observe the people at the restaurant, their behaviours and expressions during the show. (NM2, female, 32, Agricultural Officer)

Although her viewing practice is slightly eccentric, it also points to the prevalence of group viewing situations among AF viewers and the possible pleasures in addition to that of merely watching the program, that may arise from such scenarios. She finds the group watching scenario enjoyable as she can observe how viewers at the restaurant react to the show, for example, observing their behavioural responses towards the contestants. In fact, the sense of pleasure that NM2 derived from watching AF at the ‘mamak’ restaurant is even comparable to the enjoyment of watching a ‘live’ performance at the concert as a spectator in a crowd.⁷¹

⁷¹ NM2 has now purchased two Astro connections, one at her home, and another one at her village home, so that she could still watch AF in case she had to spend her Saturday nights in the village.
In short, while fans have been associated with greater emotional involvement with the program, undertaking activities like voting, and joining fan-clubs, it is worth noting that in their nominal viewing practices of just watching the program at home, ‘followers’ also manifest emotional involvement with the program in their own manner although, this may be lesser in degree and intensity than fans.

**Modes of active engagement and AF viewers**

i. **Voting system**

The rituals of fans and their activities has been a part of many television shows; however, the reality TV program is composed of formats with various media platforms which enable a particular kind of active engagement for viewers (Roscoe, 2001, p. 483)\(^2\). The voting system is widely known as one of the unique and most important features of reality talent contests. It can be seen as one of the most significant innovations to have happened in the TV industry as part of its strategy to accommodate technological innovations, increase revenue-generating potential, and attract fragmented audiences, as I outlined in chapter two. As I also noted, the voting system has introduced a new conception of the audience as a savvy, easily distracted audience who must be attracted by modes of interactivity not given in conventional TV programs. While chapter two explains the reasons behind the implementation of the voting system, this section draws on the responses of the viewers about their involvement with this new mode of engagement. Undoubtedly, AF has built a successful format where viewers are clearly engaged and inspired, based on the

\(^2\) Roscoe (2001) notes that *Big Brother* enables active involvement for viewers “through the site at Dreamworld, through *Big Brother* online, and through telephone voting” (p. 483).
dramatic ratings increase, and the level of participation in voting (for example, in
2003, people texted 5 million votes for AF season 1, and the number of votes
increased to 15 million votes for AF season 2) (New Straits Times, 16 August 2004, p.
10; Utusan Malaysia, 28 September 2005, n. pag).^73

Throughout the focus group discussions and fieldwork at the AF concerts, I found that
while voting is popular among fans, it is not important for ordinary viewers. In fact, I
have found that the degree of viewer involvement with the voting system is the most
remarkable and useful yardstick of differentiating between fans and followers.

Respondents such as AA1 (male, 20, Administration Assistant), AA6, AA4, and NK1
(female, 19, Diploma Student), who categorised themselves as casual and regular
viewers, stated that they do not involve themselves in voting. While they may develop
a preference for a favourite contestant, they did not go to the extent of voting for them
since they considered voting a waste of money. For instance, AA6 said, “I like
Amelia (AF3 second runner up) the most, but I didn’t vote for her.” Similarly, Juliza
had a favourite contestant whom she followed with great interest, but she said that she
did not vote for the contestant as she did not have a higher degree of obsession
towards the contestant as those fans. She just took pleasure in watching the
contestant’s progress without showing overt support in the form of voting. SM1 and
WW said that they would be willing to vote only if the contestants were their friends
or relatives.

In contrast, throughout the informal interview with the fans and family members at
the concert, I noted that they were really keen to vote and were willing to spend quite

^73 Despite the conventional mobile SMS votes, Astro also introduced fixed line voting as well for Astro
subscribers. The viewers can press the ‘R’ button from the remote control to vote.
a substantial amount of money on voting to ensure that their favourite contestants got through. A fan of Hafiz (AF7 winner), Yusri, spent about RM300 (about AUD$100) every week to vote for Hafiz. His wife, who also attended the concert with him, admitted that she spent RM200 to vote for Hafiz every week. A male finalist’s (AF7 finalist contestant) aunt mentioned that she and her family spent RM500 per week to vote for him. MS, a self-categorised fan (from the 27 to 35 year-old group) voted for his favourite contestants almost every season. He said:

Looking back, I sent many votes for Hafiz (AF7). I also spent a lot for Farah (AF2), Lotter (AF4), and Zila (AF4). The most I spent was for Nadia … So far, I think I have spent about RM300 in total on voting.

(MS, male, 27, Customer Service Officer)

These fans’ willingness to spend a significant amount of money on voting reveals their inculcation within consumer culture via AF. An ‘Idol’ format like AF “encourages the audience to vote with a promise of future reward in the form of their favourite [contestants] …” potentially becoming stars at the end of the program (Bell, 2010, pp. 190-191). In this context, AF “is ideally situated to blur the lines between participatory citizenship and commodity consumer” (p. 190). By sending votes, these fans think that they are practising democratic participation, while the commodity operations of voting are downplayed. Bell (2010) emphasis this by saying, “the version of participatory democracy presented by [Idol-like format] is only illusory” (p. 189).

These particular commercial aspects of AF intensified further when favourite contestants had not performed well or received unfavourable comments from the judges – in these instances fans voted more. Such unflagging devotion of fans shows
that the “imperative to care” (Cowell, 2003, p. 3) has developed amongst them to the extent that they continue voting for their favourite contestants in any situation, even when they have under-performed. In this context, the unflagging responses of the fans could also mean that they mobilised their dreams and hopes through their chosen contestants through whom audiences “may experience a projected fulfilment of their own dreams” (Jian & Liu, 2009, p. 537). Showing such an “imperative to care” they may strategise their votes to ensure that their favoured contestant wins. MS, the self-declared fan from the focus group, said:

I will watch Diari AF every week. For me, Mondays’ diary is the most important because on that day contestants are given their particular song. Then, once I’ve got that info, I will SMS other fans about it. When we get to know that the current percentage of our contestant is not high for the week, we will begin to vote again. It is pleasurable for us to vote together frantically to make sure that we beat other fans. Other fans even ask me to not eat my dinner and vote before the time runs out. (MS, male, 27, Customer Service Officer)

While fans would religiously vote every week and normally send many votes at a time, there were a few ‘followers’ who voted for a favourite contestant but only sporadically. MA5 favoured Mawi from AF3 but just voted three times for him. NM2, a self-declared casual viewer just sent one vote, believing that one vote from her could make a difference:

I feel satisfied if the contestant I voted for wins. I feel like my vote has been worth it, although I may have just contributed two or three votes. But even one vote can make a difference to the total number of votes. I
know it is a small difference but you never know. One vote could make the contestant win. (NM2, female, 32, Agricultural Officer)

Apart from these sporadic voters, some followers said that they also voted once in a while not for their favourite contestants but for other reasons. For example, EM (female, 26, Administration Assistant) mentioned that she just voted once because she wanted Mila (AF5) to win, “I just voted once for Mila because I really wanted her to win. If she won, she would have been the first woman to win AF, right?” Some of the followers may have voted for a contestant at a point in time, but to fulfil the request of family members who may not be technology-savvy. SN (female, 23, Master’s Degree Student) for instance, voted for Mawi because of her mother and brother, although she was not a fan of his. She said, “People surrounding me influenced me to vote for Mawi, especially my mother and brother … Although I voted for him, I did not waste my money because I asked them to reimburse me.” On the other hand, NK3 said that while she did not vote herself, but she asked her children to vote for her favourite contestant.

While some viewers feel that even some votes could help a contestant get through, Helmi, on the other hand, felt that his votes would not matter at all as fans who voted consistently would overrule sporadic support from a casual viewer like him. In this case, ZM, a respondent from the 36 year-old and above group, gave the example of a contestant called Yazid who managed to procure a place in the finals because of the consistent support from a strong and active fan-base, although he was not liked by the majority of the audience. He said, “Yazid does not know how to sing. He doesn’t have the whole package to become a singer. But he is still there, because of the fans that voted for him.” These two responses show the ups and downs of the participatory
culture that reality TV has introduced in Malaysia, showing that “[the] promise of participation helps build fan investments, but it may also lead to misunderstandings and disappointments as viewers feel that their votes have not been counted” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 347).

From all these responses, it is evident that the ‘followers’ do not put much effort in voting. It could be said that their enjoyment was not really embedded in the voting aspect of the program, which has been seen as one of the most important modes of active involvement for viewers. Only fans and the contestants’ family members and relatives seem to engage in such activities. Voting can be seen as a useful benchmark for distinguishing fans and ‘followers’. However, it is worth noting two significant exceptions to this generalisation. Firstly, as I have already pointed out, the followers may sometimes vote once in a while for specific reasons. Secondly, I must also add that there were respondents who shared some similar ‘emotional/intellectual involvement’ as fans in their viewing pattern, but did not particularly like the voting aspect of the program.

In addition, the voting system was often treated with scepticism by respondents in the focus group, and some of them did not agree with the voting system as a method of determining the winner. Many respondents in my focus group discussion expressed their disappointment about the criterion by which the public chooses the winner in the voting system. They argued that viewers in Malaysia vote for contestants on the basis of their looks and not talent which should be the real determinant of the winner:

I found out that contestants with a good voice but without an attractive face will normally be dropped quite early by the viewers. Only good-
looking contestants continue to stay on the show. For me, this is a biased
decision. (MJ, male, 24, Video Producer)

I feel that, the obese contestant, should have stayed because he had a
vibrant voice. He was also very determined as he tried his best to dance
even when it was difficult for him. But, viewers eliminated him because
of his looks. (AR, male, 22, Radio Producer)

Furthermore, some of these respondents added that viewers in Malaysia were not
mature enough to exercise such skills of judgment. A few respondents even compared
local viewers with their perceptions of American viewers. According to WW, in
contrast to AF, most American Idol contestants were accepted and supported by the
community as long as they had a nice voice even if some of them were not attractive
in appearance. Similarly, MA1 in the same group asserted that Malaysia has limited
singers with powerful voices, but in Western countries they have lots of singers with
good voice quality. The respondents showed appreciation for American audiences for
their perceived interest in voice quality and even disapproved of local audiences for
adopting a shallow attitude privileging appearance.

Apart from this discontent over viewer bias towards more attractive contestants,
which influences the votes in turn, many respondents expressed scepticism over the
voting system as a whole. NN from the 36 year-old and above group felt that the
voting system is just the tactic of the television station to make a profit and take
advantage of the audience especially the youngsters. She said:

The disadvantage of voting system is that they make use of all these
youngsters to send SMS votes. When they vote, they sometimes spend
hundreds and thousands of ringgits. And now they have also opened up voting on landline phones, which of course, as you know, will cause problems for their parents. (NN, female, 51, Businesswoman)

This same respondent also expressed uncertainty about whether the winners chosen by viewers via the SMS voting system would have the ability to perform and compete with other talented singers in the professional music industry. She argued:

I think the SMS voting system for public is not a good practice, as these people do not really have a good knowledge of music, but they vote for someone because of his/her popularity. So when these winners are out in the market, they don’t really deliver the standard of singing required which then jeopardises the music industry. I think such winners will not be able to compete in the music industry. (NN, female, 51, Businesswoman)

Another respondent from the 18 to 26 year-old group asserts that professional judges on the program who have credibility in the media industry should also have a hand in the decision-making process. If the decision is just left to the audiences, then their judgement will more related to physical appeal rather than talent:

I don’t agree with the SMS voting system … because of this SMS system we sometimes have a singer who is not qualified ... they just have glamour and beauty ... I think the decision should at least depend 50 percent on the professional judges and 50 percent on the viewers’ votes. (SS1, female, Communication Tutor/Master’s Degree Student)
Elimination of certain contestants, perceived as being more deserving by viewers, has also ignited discussions in the external media about the voting system. A local newspaper reported that people were disappointed with the judging system which was seen as being unwise, unprofessional and unfair (Tengku Bidin, 2007). This disappointment started in AF1, during the removal of Rosma, a female contestant in AF1, who was generally perceived to be the best female singer of the season, and it became a central issue in the local newspaper coverage. For example, Utusan Malaysia reported that Rosma’s elimination created a panic in the TV broadcasting industry (translation mine) (Tengku Bidin, 2003).

Apart from this criticism of the SMS voting system, ‘AF Masuk’ (AF In) system was also heavily criticised by the respondents. In the ‘AF Masuk’ system, viewers can vote for an eliminated contestant and the contestant with the highest vote can participate in the finale and compete with the finalists. A local newspaper reported that viewers were taken aback by this new system when it was first introduced (Samat, 2004b). In the article, Astro’s programming head Zainir Aminullah tries to argue for the system saying, “[t]he ‘wildcard’ segment is genuine and it has always been part of the show. It was a matter of time before we incorporated it into the show.” But in my focus group discussion, I found widespread disapproval of the ‘AF Masuk’ system amongst informants who thought it to be nothing more than a gimmick for Astro to make more profit. They argued that Astro conveniently implemented the ‘AF Masuk’ system to bring back an eliminated contestant they favoured. SS2, a respondent from the 27 to 35 year-old group, even speculated that Aril’s (AF7) elimination was intentionally planned by Astro; she said, “I knew well in advance that he was purposely being eliminated, because then they can hold ‘AF Masuk’ to bring him back. My prediction
tuned out to be true.” This case of Aril’s elimination and subsequent re-nomination through the ‘AF Masuk’ was discussed by another viewer, AA2, who said:

It seems that they (Astro) intentionally eliminated him, just to see audience reaction. But, when they found that the SMS voting did not grow, they announced ‘AF Masuk’. It is more about income generation for the promoters. But, sometimes, as viewers, we feel unhappy with this system. (AA2, female, 36, Assistant Registrar)

AA2 not only rejects the voting system, but she also goes further by claiming that it is Astro’s intention to generate income by taking the opportunity of Aril’s popularity. Besides generating income, this drawcard also can be regarded as Astro’s strategy for gaining more audience. ‘AF Masuk’ system is actually serve as a deliberate ploy to hold viewers and increase debate about AF. As Turner (2010) observes more broadly, “the greater the notoriety, …, the higher the ratings” (p. 39). He further explains that “the producers tend to point to the level of public concern as a vindication of their decision to make their ‘contribution to public debate’” (p. 39). Hence, it can be said that AF’s producers succeeded in stirring public debate through the ‘AF Masuk’ system.

ii. Interactivity, and transmedia nature

As a reality talent contest, AF not only enables the viewers to choose their favourite contestants, but also allows the viewers to create a greater sense of involvement through multiple media platforms. In this case, AF offers various platforms for the audience to participate, such as a chat room offered by Astro@15 channel (one of the

Aril had a big fan-base compared to other eliminated contestants. Aril’s fans even had the largest banner for the final concert.
Astro channels, where the viewers can interact with other fans, and get involved with other online activities such as downloading music and pictures of the contestants. This section discusses how fans and ‘followers’ perceive or engage with $AF$ through the various media platform activities.

While interactive engagement has predominantly been seen as a fan activity, in this research I argue that it is not only restricted to fans. Findings show that respondents from my focus group discussion, who mostly identified themselves as casual viewers, also get involved with such activities, although it must be noted here that their involvement is somewhat minimal and muted compared to fans.

The findings reveal that while followers may occasionally indulge in repeated viewing by downloading content from the Internet, it is not for the purpose of “expanding control” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 71) like fans but just to watch a particular segment or performance they enjoyed rather than the whole narrative of the show. Some of the respondents downloaded the song performed by the contestants they liked in mp3 form. AA2, a perceived casual viewer, for example, really liked to hear the songs sung by Mawi, and she downloaded that song and listened to it quite often. On the other hand, AR had downloaded a scene from $AF$ for a different purpose. He downloaded a scene where Aznil (the former host in $AF4$) sang a melodramatic song entitled ‘Ayah dan Ibu’ (Father and Mother) which he found very emotional. He said, “I was living in UK at the time, and the song really touched me at the time, as it was Eid and I was away from home. I showed the clips to my friends and we cried while watching it.” The emotional feeling that the respondent experienced can be

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75 Jenkins (1992) has explained how fans use videotapes for repeated viewing to “expand control over the program” (p. 71). In the contemporary era, YouTube and ‘mp3’ can be seen as the new platforms for such activities.
interpreted to be not simply about being away from their parents, but also about being away from their homeland.

While boundaries between fans and followers overlap here as followers go online to download content, we can see that followers are only interested if they like a particular performance whereas fans reveal a certain level of commitment in their support for their favoured contestants which remains consistent. The respondents also added that they do not download the pictures of AF contestants as wallpapers on their computer screens like fans. As MM4 (male, 21, Diploma Student) and NM1 noted such activities like downloading wallpapers is something of a ‘fanatical activity’ reserved for fans obsessed with certain contestants.

Some general AF viewers even created their own websites and blogs dedicated to AF and since the beginning of the program there have been more than 4000 websites of these kinds (Hassan Basri, 2004, p. 198). AZ, a self-declared fan stated that she enjoyed discussing AF on online forums. Even some ‘followers’ like SS3 (male, 27, Information Technology Officer) also went on online forums. He said, “Through online discussions, I can share my opinion. You will find topics on all the new interesting issues in reality TV.” Similarly, another casual viewer, AR also admitted that he sometimes participated in online discussion. He said, “I commented in YouTube on the clips of AF contestants’ performance, even some direct comments criticising their voice. Since it is online and I can retain my anonymity, I was not worried about giving such a harsh comment.” However, most other general AF viewers only limited their online activity to participation in the AF official chat room Astro@15.
The transmedia production and interactivity enables audiences to carry on conversations outside the limited purview of their physical locale or social circle. This innovation to capitalise on media technologies by the broadcasting industry has not only expanded the possibilities of engagement with the main program but also created channels that encourage more and more users to adopt fan-like behaviours. From Roscoe’s (2004b) research on *Big Brother Australia*, she concludes that the website plays a role in sustaining the interest of the audience (p. 367). Such interactive and participatory space which Roscoe (2004b) called “multi-platform events” have fuelled the capacity and desire of the audiences for “the idea of being a fan” (p. 366).

iii. *AF* concert involvement

In the fieldwork at the *AF* concerts filmed in the studio, I found that the studio audience was mostly composed of fans and family members, and not followers. Observations and informal interviews with the studio audience were beneficial for this study in providing insights into *AF* fans to make up for the lack of fans at the focus group discussions.

In terms of their social background, the studio audience was predominantly Malay and most of them were women from different age groups. In addition, there were children attending the concert with their parents. They came 2–3 hours earlier and patiently waited outside the studio. Some even had a ‘picnic’ outside the hall while they waited. The fans seemed eager to express their support for their contestants. Most of the fans came with banners; some were handmade, and some were machine

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76 Besides the fans, there were also some followers at the concerts. These people did not wear the colour-coded t-shirts or hold banners. Their main reason for attending the concert was to entertain themselves on a Saturday night-out with family members and friends, and most of them had only come for the first time.
printed. In the concert, each fan-group formed a tightly-knit unit, staying within their own group and chit-chatting with each other. Wearing specially made, colour-coded T-shirts with the contestant’s name and picture, these viewers exuded a great sense of enthusiasm and support for their contestants. At the time of the eighth concert (the first concert I attended), there were six contestants remaining in the show. They were Isma, Aisyah and Claudia representing the female contestants and Akim, Hafiz, and Yazid representing the male contestants. Among these contestants, Aisyah and Claudia’s fans were not as loud as their other counterparts. Akim’s supporters wore black shirts, Yazid’s fans wore blue shirts, Isma’s supporters’ wore green shirts, and Hafiz’s supporters’ wore white shirts. Hafiz’s supporters were even wearing afro wigs to imitate his hairstyle. Their carefully coordinated outfits can be seen as a ritual of social identification as well as a ‘sign’ of their emotional involvement with the contestant. Through the colour-coded T-shirt, placard, and groupings according to the fans group gives the interpretation that there are ‘multiple fan communities’ of AF (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 23). According to Tulloch and Jenkins (1995), these “multiple fan communities [are] drawn to [a particular program] for different reasons and adopt different reading formations for their reception” (p. 23). In the AF case, multiple fan communities were not drawn to AF because of different reasons, but drawn to AF for the same reason - to support their favourite contestant. Thus, fan communities were built surrounding their preferred contestants. The AF fan communities were separated according to the fan clubs. It is worth noting here that some of the fan clubs are not only active during AF season, but also active after the program has finished, as they organized many events activities for the fans, which sometimes also involved the contestants. These fans even continue to follow their

77 These colour-coded T-shirts are specially made and designed by the hard core fans and family members, and the T-shirt can be purchased from the fan club.
favourite contestants in their careers after the show. Mawi, the winner of AF3 season, for example, always got support from his fans, at various competitions\textsuperscript{78} especially if the award was being evaluated via the SMS voting system.

At the final concert, the fans’ identification with the contestants intensifies, as this is the last time that they can show support for their favourite contestants. Apart from wearing colour coded t-shirts, they also wore tags representing the favourite contestants that they support. This time, Akim’s fans were wearing cowboy hats and Hafiz’s fans were still wearing the afro wigs.

Before the concert started, I had an informal interview with some of the studio audience in order to find out more about them and their favourite contestants. Through the informal interview, I also met the family members of some of the contestants. For example, I got to know one of the male finalist’s family members such as uncle, aunty, and his sisters. They were willing to have a short chat with me and I got to know about him and his family background. I also spoke to a female fan, the founder of a finalist’s fan club and she explained how she set up the fan club since the curtain-raiser segment of the season in Tirai AF even before the first concert had started. She and the fan club came to the concert every week to support their favourite finalist. She stated that she has been attending AF concerts since AF3. Similarly, the parents of the male finalist also attended the AF concert every week, in order to support their son. In fact, I found that many of the fans and family members came every week to support their contestants.

\textsuperscript{78} Mawi was named Popular Male Singer in Anugerah Bintang Popular Berita Harian (ABPBH) (Most Popular Artist Award, organized annually by local newspaper Berita Harian) for four years in a row from 2006 until 2009. In fact, in 2006, he won three awards altogether in ABPBH, as he was named Most Popular Artiste, Popular Male Artiste and Popular New Male Artiste (Taib, 2006, p. 12).
Throughout my informal interview with the fans and family members, I kept hearing from them that the enjoyment of watching the performances ‘live’ was more electrifying and enjoyable than watching it at home on television. The male finalist’s aunty and uncle said that attending the concert was more enjoyable because they could really observe how the contestants performed in the midst of all the excitement in the studio. They said that they could also look at all the processes that go into making the program, while at home what they see on the screen is restricted by editing and selective camera angles.

Other than that, fans’ enjoyment at the AF concert also can be referred to their willingness to attend the concert although they were not staying in Selangor (the place/state where the AF concert was conducted). I was surprised when I found out that many of them were willing to travel to Selangor, purposely to attend the concert. Three female fans that I had informally interviewed came all the way from East coast of Peninsular Malaysia just to attend the AF concert and to support their favourite contestant, Hafiz (AF7 contestant who originated from East coast Peninsular Malaysia). Furthermore, there was also a female fan who attended the concert every week, although she lives in Johor (situated in south of Peninsular Malaysia). She came with banners every time and applauded crazily for her favourite contestant. During the eighth concert, I sat next to her, and through my observation, it was obvious that she is very fanatical towards her favourite contestant, Yazid, as she raised banners and shouted crazily for Yazid, every time he appeared on stage. Apart from her, most of the fans also showed their enjoyment by raising banners when their favourite contestants were singing and sometimes gave a standing ovation after the performance.
In contrast to the enthusiasm of the fans at the studio, my focus group respondents were not eager to attend the concert. SS2, MA2 and JS (female, 24, Master’s Degree Student) argued that it was more comfortable and relaxing to watch at home rather than with a crowd at the concert. SS1 said, “I prefer to watch on television. There is no need for me to face the trouble of finding parking space if I chose to watch at the concert. I find it strange that those people take so much trouble to go to the concert.” WW prefers to watch it on TV because she “can watch it more clearly on TV, rather than watching it at the concert.” MA1 shared his experience of attending the ‘live’ concert and said that it is more enjoyable to watch it at home:

I think watching the concert on television is more enjoyable than the concert itself. Of course at the concert, we say - Wow! Very enjoyable … but we sit so far away from the stage. Seriously, we couldn’t see anything and had to focus our vision on the plasma TV in the studio. So we ended up watching it on a TV screen at the concert. So I think why not watch it on TV in the comfort of your own home. (MA1, male, 24, Radio Producer)

Many respondents like SS2, AA5 and MF also said that they would only be interested in going to the concert if they were fans or family members of the contestant. Some other respondents like AK (female, 25, Bachelor Degree Student) felt that there was no need for a non-fan like her to take the trouble of going to the studio concert because she was not obsessed with AF or any of the contestants. Indeed, MM3 (male, 20, Diploma Student) remarked that it was only the fans who went to the concert. Most of these self-declared ‘followers’ like MM4, AM (female, 23, Diploma Student), and AA5 had a perception that studio audiences were just made up of
contestants’ family members and fans. But one self-declared fan in the focus group, MS, disliked the idea of going to the concert. He was not bothered about attending the concert although he had a strong emotional involvement with AF in other ways (as discussed earlier in the previous sections). He said, “I think attending the concert is an unnecessary hassle. I don’t like things that take too much trouble. I like easy and simple things. So, I prefer watching AF at home. I don’t need to queue to watch the concert.” On the other hand, there are also some of the self-declared casual/regular viewers said that they would enjoy watching ‘live’ AF performances in the studio because of a sense of proximity to the real scene of action. KO, and MM1 (male, 26, Newsreader/Assistant Editor), for instance, enjoy watching AF by attending the concert, as can be viewed from their discussion below:

KO I would prefer to watch it at the concert because it is more enjoyable.

MM1 Watching the concert ‘live’ would make me feel closer to the contestants, as I can look at the contestants up close.

In contrast, AM from another 18 to 26 year-old group asserted that he liked going to the concert because he was interested in the production aspects of the program to see how a ‘live’ TV show like AF concert is conducted. Furthermore, he was also interested in knowing what happened throughout the concert, the aspects that differentiate between the visualisation on TV and the actual filming in the studio.

At the focus group discussions, a respondent, NH (female, 19, Diploma Student) made an interesting point comparing fan culture at the ‘live’ concerts in Malaysia with international programs. She said that in international reality talent shows, fans supported every contestant at the concert, whereas in Malaysia they just supported
their own favourite contestant. Hence, the international fans would not be seen as separated with other fans. In fact, they do not portray themselves within some sort of co-ordination like the colour-coded t-shirt signified by AF fan-groups in Malaysia.

To conclude, the framework of fan/follower binary has been helpful in delineating AF audiences in terms of their engagement with the program, whether it be general viewing practices or specific modes of active involvement. However, I would also like to reiterate some limitations of this framework that were observed during this particular study with reference to AF audiences.

While the followers in this study do not share fan-like ‘modes of reception’ such as repeated viewing, fan-club and uninterrupted viewing sessions, they also display some level of emotional involvement, thus subverting the clear binary drawn by scholar like Jenkins between fans and followers. In addition, the viewers in the focus group that I regarded as followers, clearly possessed ‘cultural competencies’ and ‘intellectual involvement’ that Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) only reserves for fans – they could explain the pleasures of AF and also demonstrated a remarkable ability to recall many details about the format, content and people featured in the show. On the other hand, with regards to fans I found that not all of them necessarily expressed an affinity for activities expected of fans such as participating in fan clubs, arranged or participated in conventions with their fan clubs, attending AF concert and participating in the online forum.

While I have not conducted an extensive ethnographic study of fan activities in Malaysia, I think the issues brought up by my observations and informal interviews with the fans at the AF concerts are a strong indication of the activities fans undertake
in Malaysia. Of course, I cannot claim to have mapped all spheres of activities of AF fans because of my limited fieldwork at the AF concerts and the lack of fan respondents in the focus group.

In addition, I must also note the relevance of criteria of fan-like activities set up by scholars like Jenkins (1992) and its applicability to AF fans. Since their framework is influenced by their cultural context and personal interest in science-fiction fans (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991), they highlight activities like fanzines, dress-ups etc which are not applicable to AF audiences. It can perhaps be argued that activities of AF fans are not so much an array of impulsive grassroots activities planned by fans on their own, but more prescribed and facilitated by the producers. This constitutes a huge difference between AF fans and science fiction fans (cf.: Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991). Hence, AF fans do not really suit the definition of “textual poachers”, studied by a few media scholars (De Certeau, 1988; Jenkins, 1992).

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79 Therefore, I chose three specific sites of active involvement for fans including voting, interactive transmedia production and attending the AF concert, all of which are activities facilitated by the producers.
CONCLUSION

This study of *Akademi Fantasia* originally began with the somewhat narrow aim of explaining the reason for its popularity amongst Malay audiences. But in the early stages of the study, while reading scholarly literature around the subject, conducting ethnographic research and thinking about the problem, it became obvious that the study needed to adopt a broader approach to understand the cultural phenomenon of *AF*. The feedback from the respondents in the field also suggested that the popularity of *AF* amongst viewers was not merely a result of the textual content of the program, but was also rooted in its articulations of Malay identity and new modes of audience engagement. Consequently, this study was motivated by the aim of developing a holistic yet audience-focused understanding of *AF* — in terms of the significance of this localised popular cultural form in the contemporary socio-cultural environment of Malaysia, and its emergence in the wider industrial context of the global reality TV trend, and the textual content of the genre.

Apart from extrapolating the wider cultural significance, industrial background and textual content as the contextual background for *AF*, this study also conducted ethnographic research amongst *AF* viewers, which was presented in the second part of the study. Given the limited nature of ethnographic research around reality TV, which has been mostly approached through textual and production analytical lenses, the audience research component of this study seeks to pay equal attention to viewer reception and engagement with *AF* as much as the context that shapes it.

While the first chapter of this thesis sketched the cultural significance of *AF* by situating it as a popular cultural form imbricated in the socio-political context of a
modernising economy in Malaysia, chapter five followed up on these questions of how audiences responded to AF’s cultural imaginary of indigenised modernity. The tracing of the socio-political context allowed insights into the role of popular culture as a vehicle of consumerist capitalist modernity in Malaysia, particularly highlighting the role of these localised adaptations of global formats like AF as a platform for cultural articulations of a contemporaneous indigenised modernity. These localised adaptations, however, are fraught with contradictions in that they purportedly integrate local elements, but as Iwabuchi has argued, remain imbricated in many ways in a U.S.-led cultural imaginary. As a product of a homogeneous consumerist global modernity, the question arises of how audiences respond to AF’s attempts to integrate local cultural elements within a consumerist mass media format marked by voyeuristic viewing modes and contemporary celebrity culture. Chapter five provided an analysis of audience feedback with regard to their engagement with cultural values depicted in the show, using banal nationalism and identification/distancing as the two theoretical concepts to explain their seemingly contradictory responses. Banal nationalism captures the general thrust of the feedback from respondents. Frequently audiences privilege an essentialist notion of Malayhood as a moral/cultural high-ground and valorise AF as a platform for local talent, positively appraising its tokenistic performances of ‘Malayness’. Identification/distancing turned out to be an apt theoretical model to explain viewer negotiation of the melange of local and foreign cultural elements in a spectacularised commodified popular culture artefact. While the respondents expressed identification with the overall format of AF as a cultural platform presenting indigenised pop culture, they sometimes argued about the limits of the program’s cultural boundaries. Although local authorities have outrightly rejected AF for ‘aping’ the West and promoting ‘dubious moral values’, the viewers,
however, are more moderate and conciliatory in their reception of AF. While they may find some elements like physical contact between male and female contestants offensive, they nevertheless have not rejected the program’s cultural orientations completely, but have voiced their concerns while continuing to watch and find pleasure in the program. At the same time, the producers have also taken note of viewer concerns and have taken care to filter inappropriate elements like physical contact and intimacy in the later seasons. In this sense, viewers seem to adopt a path of cautious negotiation rather than outright rejection. The larger interrelated theme joining chapter one and five is thus a specifically culturally-oriented interrogation of AF – in terms of its status as a ‘glocalised’ media text hybridising local cultural elements in a global format and the audience response to such a form within their socio-cultural orientations.

The second broad perspective taken by this thesis is oriented towards understating what could be called the industrial aspects of AF. This relates to situating the rise of AF at the intersection of different prerogatives driving the TV industry locally and globally. Chapter two presents a detailed overview of the industrial context – elaborating on the rise of reality TV globally against the backdrop of budgetary constraints, fragmented audiences, the development of multi-media platforms and the global format market, and the emergence of private cable channels in Malaysia. AF is certainly the product of the contradictory combination of globalising media economies with the forces of a transnational format market, the setting up of quotas for local productions, and at the same time, the local TV industry still within the control of national regulations. The shift in primetime broadcasting around the world to featuring reality TV as a genre staple is part of the larger effort by the TV industry to innovate in an increasingly challenging market of fragmented audiences spread
across countless networks and also the attrition of audiences from TV to other media of entertainment. Consequently, chapter six examines how local audiences engage with the innovations of *AF* in its attempts to integrate interactivity through the voting system and the crossover into transmedia production, and still maintain a sense of ‘liveness’ through the performance parts of the show.

Thirdly, the fan/follower concept has been helpful in delineating *AF* audiences in terms of their engagement with the program that has incorporated many of these technological innovations. While there were only a few self-confessed fans of *AF*, the study did reveal that the boundaries between fans and followers were not as clear-cut as those proposed by theorists. Firstly there were contradictions in self-categorisation and actual behaviours, as those who identified themselves as fans did not display fan-like behaviours and among the majority who slotted themselves as non-fans some were more akin to fans in their behaviour. Secondly, viewers vary in the patterns of their participation in activities like online forums or voting; a follower may sporadically spend lots of money on voting once or twice and a fan may watch the program obsessively but express dislike for other participatory activities. Most importantly the question of intellectual/emotional involvement is not solely relegated to fans as claimed by theorists, since followers also voiced such involvement even if they did not actively pursue the means of showing it through voting. This chapter provided new knowledge about the fan/follower distinction, which has predominantly been examined vis-à-vis science fiction and soap operas and not reality TV programs. This omission is quite surprising given not just the undeniable importance of reality TV in contemporary popular culture, but more importantly its audience-oriented nature as the most interactive format of TV genres.
Finally, this study also considered the textual strategies of AF examining the content of the program in terms of narrative structures, generic innovations and audience pleasures. Chapter three provided a historical overview of reality TV as a genre, the specific format of AF in terms of its program structure and most importantly the generic innovations in AF that make it a hybrid text. In terms of these generic innovations, emphasis was placed on its thematic core of presenting ordinary people on a transformative journey to becoming a celebrity; its narrative complexity fashioned through reshaping purportedly real life events within melodramatic soap narrative conventions; and the employment modes of address that invites the viewer to occupy the shifting positions of spectator, judge and voyeur. The hybridisation of AF makes it a quite unique reality show compared to other programs of its genre screening in Malaysia and internationally. As I have illustrated in chapter four, AF is an example of a successful hybrid show, using a melodramatic narrative structure from the genre of soap operas and combining it with the convention of the game show format. AF is also a mixture of sub-genres of reality format such as the on-stage performance (‘live’ performance like American Idol) with the off-stage lives of the contestants (voyeuristic like Big Brother). Chapter four tested these interpretations of the hybrid genre of the program in respect of actual AF viewers. It was discovered that viewers enjoyed the juxtaposition of ordinary person and celebrity subjectivities; they not only identify with these ordinary people but also derive pleasure from judging the ‘authentic articulation of self’ which is the parameter by which reality TV celebrities are created in place of conventional ideas of talent. The blurring lines between fact and fiction, its melodramatic presentation and sensationalistic narrative also deliver significant pleasure to viewers. Moreover, audience pleasure of watching AF is also derived from the multiple spectator positions of spectator, judge and
voyeur where they can engage in multiple modes of judgement, from judging the contestants, to judging the judges.

The longstanding nine year success of Akademi Fantasia means that it offers an exemplary site for considering how the popular Malay imagination is constructed within the media landscape. AF opened the door to reality TV in Malaysia and significantly shaped the direction of the television industry in Malaysia. Apart from reviving the local television production industry, AF also initiated new technological innovations such as SMS voting, chat room, website, and so on that created new forms of audience participation. AF is a barometer of the changes in audience preferences as well as the changing relationship between text and viewer, thus requiring an examination of audience responses to the program. As this thesis has demonstrated, AF has operated as an important site where local viewers might imagine their cultural identities and ‘Malayness’ at the same time as they participate in and enjoy the pleasures of global popular culture.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1

COMPOSITION OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PROFILE OF FOCUS GROUP’S RESPONDENTS

FOCUS GROUP A (18 to 26 years-old)    DATE: 29/5/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (6 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Informants</th>
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<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YM</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KO</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WO</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Newsreader/Assistant Editor</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Master’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FOCUS GROUP B (18 to 26 years-old)    DATE: 15/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (6 respondents)

<table>
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SN</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Master’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Radio Producer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WW</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>SM1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Radio Producer Apprentice</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Administration Assistant</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Communication Tutor/ Master’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**FOCUS GROUP C** (18 to 26 years-old)    DATE: 16/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (6 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MM2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NK1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NK2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FOCUS GROUP D** (36 years-old and above)    DATE: 18/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (3 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZM</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>School Teacher</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Assistant Registrar</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FOCUS GROUP E** (27 to 35 years-old)    DATE: 22/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (4 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>System Engineer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Microchips Engineer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**FOCUS GROUP F** (18 to 26 years-old)    DATE: 27/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (7 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NM1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AK</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Diploma Student</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
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**FOCUS GROUP G** (27 to 35 years-old)    DATE: 27/6/09    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (4 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MZ</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Sales Officer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**FOCUS GROUP H** (27 to 35 years-old)  
**DATE:** 4/7/09  
**TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS:** (4 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AM2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Customer Service Officer</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Businessman</td>
<td>Casual Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Document Controller</td>
<td>Fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Customer Service Officer</td>
<td>Fan</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**FOCUS GROUP I** (36 years-old and above)  
**DATE:** 5/7/09  
**TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS:** (5 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RM</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Bank Executive</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA6</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KH</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Regular Viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Bank Officer</td>
<td>Fan</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## PILOT TEST

**FOCUS GROUP A** (18 to 26 years-old)    DATE: 19/9/08    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (5 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree Student</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree Student</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EM</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Administration Assistant</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Administration Assistant</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Customer Service Officer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FOCUS GROUP B** (27 to 35 years-old)    DATE: 25/9/08    TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (6 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NM2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Agricultural Officer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Administration Assistant</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NM3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MO</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Arabic Language Tutor</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>IT Officer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
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</table>
### FOCUS GROUP C (18 to 26 years-old)  DATE: 9/10/08  TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (4 respondents)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Video Producer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Radio Producer</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NM4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Student</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree Student</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### FOCUS GROUP D (36 years-old and above)  DATE: 10/10/08  TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS: (3 respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Viewer Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NN</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Retiree</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NN</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Businesswoman</td>
<td>*(unknown)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Note: Participants in the pilot test were not asked to identify themselves according to the viewer types.
APPENDIX 2
EXPLORATORY SURVEY

This exploratory survey is for PhD research purposes. Please answer the following questions. All responses are completely confidential and thank you for your help and co-operation.

Viewing Habits/Patterns

1. How many hours on average do you watch local reality TV programmes weekly?
   a) 0 to 2 hours
   b) 2 to 4 hours
   c) 4 to 6 hours
   d) 6 to 8 hours
   e) More than 8 hours

2. When was the last time you watch local reality TV? (e.g. last night, yesterday, last week, etc…).
   What was the programme?
   ………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….

3. What was the first reality TV programme you remember watching?
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. With whom do you normally watch local reality TV programmes? (you can tick more than one)
   a) watch by yourself
   b) watch with family members, please specify: ………………… (e.g. sister, brother, mother, etc)
   c) watch with friends
   d) others, please specify: ………………… (e.g. neighbours, etc)

Exposure to Local Reality TV

5. Which of the following television channels do you prefer to watch reality TV on?
   (please rank 1,2,3 …etc according to your preference):
   a) RTM 1
   b) RTM 2
   c) TV3
   d) NTV7
   e) 8TV
   f) TV9
   g) Astro Ria
   h) others: please specify: …………………

6. In which language do you like to watch your favourite local reality TV programme?
   a) Malay
   b) English
   c) Both

7. Which of the following local reality talent contests did you normally watch for the last five years?
   a) Akademi Fantasia
   b) Audition
   c) Bintang RTM
   d) Blast Off
   e) Gangstarz
   f) Malaysian Idol
   g) Mentor
   h) MyStarz, LG
   i) One in a Million
   j) Project SuperStar
   k) Rock unite
   l) Who Will Win?
   m) Others: (please specify): …………………
8. Which of the following local reality talent contest have been your favourite for the last five years? (please rank 1,2,3 …etc according to your preference):
   a) Akademi Fantasia
   b) Audition
   c) Bintang RTM
   d) Blast Off
   e) Gangstarz
   f) Malaysian Idol
   g) Mentor
   h) MyStarz,LG
   i) One in a Million
   j) Project SuperStar
   k) Rock unite
   l) Who Will Win?
   m) Others:
   (please specify):…………………………..

9. From your observation, what kind of reality talent contests appeal more to Malaysian audience? (Tick in the box that indicates how strongly you feel about it)

   Very Local
   1 2 3 4 5
   International

10. Please choose which of the following local reality talent contests you think are the most local (that is, the programs that seem most uniquely Malaysian in their cultural values)?
   a) Akademi Fantasia
   b) Audition
   c) Bintang RTM
   d) Blast Off
   e) Gangstarz
   f) Malaysian Idol
   g) Mentor
   h) MyStarz,LG
   i) One in a Million
   j) Project SuperStar
   k) Rock unite
   l) Who Will Win?
   m) Others:
   (please specify):…………………………..

   Why do you think those programs more local?
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

   What are the characteristics that make it more local?
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

11. Which of the following AF programs, did you watch?
   a) Tirai Akademi Fantasia (Behind the Curtain)
   b) Prelude Akademi Fantasia
   c) Diari Akademi Fantasia (AF Diary)
   d) Konsert Akademi Fantasia (AF Concert)
   e) Imbasan AF (musim 1 – 4) (AF Glimpse), (season 1 to 4)

12. How do you seek/got information on your favourite reality TV programmes?
   a) newspaper
   b) magazine
   c) internet
   d) television
   e) radio
   f) others, please specify:……………………………………
13. Have you been to any of the live concert related to local reality talent contests?
   a) Yes ☐, please specify: (eg.: AF concert, Audition concert, Bintang RTM concert, etc)
   b) No ☐

14. Do you consider yourself as:
   a) Casual/Occasional viewers ☐
   b) Regular viewers ☐
   c) Fans ☐

**Demographic**
Name: .............................................  Age: ☐
Gender: .............................................  E-mail Add: .............................
Phone No: .............................................
Address: ........................................................................................................
(please write your address as it is important for me in order to organize the place of interview)

1. Education/qualification:
   a) SPM ☐
   b) STPM ☐
   c) Certificate ☐
   d) Diploma ☐
   e) Bachelor degree ☐
   f) Master’s Degree ☐
   g) Phd ☐
   h) others ☐
   (please specify): .............................................

2. Occupation:
   a) Student ☐ course: ............................... level: ..............................
   b) Working ☐ Please specify: ..........................
   c) Not Working ☐ Please specify: ...........................(eg: housewife, retire, etc.)

3. May I know if you would like to participate more in my research: (such as in group interview)
   ☐ Yes, I would like to participate
   ☐ No, I do not wish to participate

Thank you very much for your time and the information you have provided. Please note that the provided details are confidential and will be used for the research purposes only.
APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for making the time to come along today and willing to participate in this focus group discussion. Before we start, let me introduce myself, my name is Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen, a research student from RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. I am doing a research regarding reality TV in Malaysia contexts and would like to know your perceptions and opinion towards local reality TV programs. I would like to stress here that there is no right or wrong answer. Everybody is welcome to raise and pose any issues regarding the local reality TV.

You were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to me; you watched local reality TV program investigated by this research (i.e. Akademi Fantasia).

For your information, this discussion will be tape recorded. Please notes that your name, age, and any other personal details will not be included in the writing up of the research, so you will remain anonymous at all times. The information collected for this study will only be accessed by me and my supervisor, and will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet during the study and for five years after its completion. It will then be securely disposed of.

This focus group interview will take about one hour-and-a-half to two hours. I promise to end this discussion on time. Before we start, please fill up the PLS form, consent form and also the individual questionnaire. From the PLS, you can find out general background of this study, and the consent form is regarding the security and confidentiality of your personal details and information given by you in this focus group discussion.
Thank you very much. Now, I would like to start our session by introducing yourself (i.e. your name, age and occupation). Before we start our discussion, I would like to show a few clips from *Akademi Fantasia*.

**Pleasures of Watching AF**

1. From your exploratory survey, all of you said that your favourite program is *Akademi Fantasia*, can you explain:

   Probes: What made you to watch *AF*?
   
   : What are the features of *AF* programs do you particularly like? Why?
   
   : What is the appeal of *AF*? What do you like about *AF*? What attributes makes *AF* local talent reality contest enjoyable? What makes watching *AF* programs enjoyable?
   
   : Which part of *AF* do you like the best? (eg: elimination part, singing part, judges comment, etc.)
   
   : What are the things on *AF* that you do not like or you find not attractive to you?
   
   : Which of the related *AF* program (pre/post) do you like most: the *Tirai AF*, *Diary AF*, *AF Prelude*, *Konsert AF*? Why? What pleasures do you gain from the programs?
   
   : What do you think that makes *AF* very popular in Malaysia? Is it because it is very entertaining? In what ways *AF* is entertaining?
   
   : How do you react or express your feeling when watching those programs (eg: cry, laugh, smile, etc)? What makes you express your feelings that way?
   
   : Think back, how long have you been watching *AF*? Have you been watching *AF* since the first season? Do you watched all *AF* seasons? Which season do you like best and why?
   
   : What other local reality talent contest have you seen? Are they better or not as good as *AF*?
   
   : Which local reality talent contest that you find not entertaining?
2. Who is your favourite contestant?

Probes: What is it that you like about certain contestants? Is it because they have special talent?, or because of any other reasons? (eg.: personal/cultural/religious background, personality, or look). Or if you don’t have any favourite contestants, why is it so?

: Did you vote for your favourite contestants in AF? How did you choose to vote them? (was it based on their talent, background, personality, or look?).

: What are your expectations in terms of the quality or skills that the winner of AF should have? How about other reality talent show (eg.: American Idol, One in A Milion, Gangstarz and Mentor?)

3. What other local reality talent contest are among your favourites?

Probes: What prompted (influenced, caused, made) you to watch the programs?

: What are the features of those reality TV programs do you particularly like? Why?

4. Which reality talent contest do you like the most, the local ones, or the foreign ones? What makes watching the local ones/the foreign ones more enjoyable?

5. What are the foreign reality talent contests that you enjoy watching? Why?

6. Which other local reality talent contest that you do not enjoy?

Probes: What prompted (influenced, caused, made) you not to watch the programs?

: What are the features of the local reality talent contest do you particularly don’t like? Why?

7. Do you know any other people that do not watch AF? Why do they do not watch AF? Is there any particular reason?

Probes: What prompted (influenced, caused, made) them not to watch the programs?
What are the features of the programs that they don’t like? Please give some reasons.

**Notion of Active Audience**

How do the audience watch/read AF? How do the audience engage with AF?

1. Audience’s interpretation on localisation of cultural forms

   **Probes** : What aspects make AF looks local?  
   : What aspects makes AF looks Western or foreign?  
   : What are the differences between AF with *Malaysian Idol, Gangstarz, Mentor, Bintang RTM, Audition* and other local reality talent contest?  
   : What are the similarities between AF and *American Idol* or other foreign reality talent contest?  
   : What are the differences between AF and *American Idol* or other foreign reality talent contest?

2. Are you aware of the process of reality TV format adaptation by Malaysian television producers?

   **Probes** : Can you identify which country AF was adapted from? Can you identify other local reality talent contests that are adapted? How do you know? Why do you think it is adapted?

3. What do you think of the cultural values shown on AF?

   **Probes** : Some would argue that certain things shown on AF and a few other local reality show is not suitable to Malaysian culture. What do you think? Do the culture shown on AF are suitable for you culture? If not/yes, why?(please give examples)
What is the most unsuitable cultural value that has been portrayed in AF? Why?

Do you think that Western or foreign culture has a strong or very strong impact on talent local reality TV? Why? In what sense?

4. How did you involve/engage yourselves with AF?

Probes: Did you go and watch the ‘live’ weekly AF concert? If yes, why did you prefer to go and watch the weekly concert ‘live’, rather than watch it on TV at home? If not, why do you prefer to watch it at home? Is there any particular pleasure that you gain from watching it at home or go to the life concert?

Did you go to any other weekly concert of other reality talent contest?

Do you participate in any online activities regarding AF? (eg.: chatting, downloading songs, watching AF online)

From your questionnaire, I found that some of you considered yourself as fans, and some of you don’t. May I know why some of you think that you are part of fans and why some of you don’t think that you are part of fans?

As an AF’s fans, what activities have you participate or organized? (eg.: blogs, organize fan meetings, participate in AF tour, etc)

5. Have you ever purchased or collected any products that are related to the local reality TV programs? If yes, what kind of product do you purchase and collect? Why do you purchase and collect them? If not, why are you not interested to purchase or collect the products?/ How do you spent money related to local reality talent contest?

6. Audience’s interpretation on local reality talent contest – is it positive/negative thing?

Probes: How do you perceive local reality talent contest in general? Do they portray good or bad moral values? Does this matter as long as the show is entertaining? Why do you think it is so? Which local reality talent
contest that you think has good moral values and which one has bad influences on moral values? Why do you think it is so?

: Is there any moral, lesson, or message that you can get from these local reality talent contest, especially AF? Are they trying to tell us something?

: Do you think that people/participants attitudes and behaviour in AF or any other reality talent contest are real or not real? Why is it real or unreal? Do you believe of what have been portrayed in those reality TV?

: Do you think AF or other local reality talent contests are a good or bad entertainment? Why?

**General Viewing History and Viewing Pattern**

This section will not be discussed in the focus group discussion. However, the participant will be asked to jot down general notes on the viewing pattern before conducting the focus group session.

1. How and where do you watch AF and other local reality talent contest (eg: by yourself, with family members, friends, etc.) and separately watch?

2. Do your family members watch AF or other reality talent contest? Who (eg.: brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, niece, etc). How many people do you know who follow those programs?

3. Do you talk about AF, and other talent reality contest with other people (brothers, sisters, friends, parents, grandparents, etc.)? What do you normally talk about? How often do you normally talk about AF? (eg.:each time you watch, sometimes, rarely)

4. Some of you said that the first time you remember watching local reality TV is ___________.
   
   Probes: What prompted (influenced, caused, made) you to watch the programs?

Thank you for your participation. Is there anything missing from our conversation? Any comments?
Dear ……………………………

My name is Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen

I am undertaking a PhD by research in the school of Applied Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. The title of my research thesis is: ‘Global Goes Local: Reality TV in Malaysia’.

The purpose of my project is to identify to what extend does Malaysian reality TV have been influenced by global culture and what are the changes that have been made to meets the local culture. This research aims to identify the ways in which Malaysian reality TV participates within global television culture. More specifically, it examines how global program formats have been adapted to a local cultural context and become popular with local audiences.

The research will also provide insights into the role of television in the formation of the Malaysian cultural imagination. It will study what television industry professionals and ‘ordinary’ audiences think of locally produced reality TV (how they understand and evaluate the programs). Reality TV programs have become popular with audiences in a short time and have been a much debated topic.

This research aims to produce new knowledge about reality TV viewing and practices in Malaysia with particular emphasis on the perspective of the media professionals and audience themselves that have give new directions to the broadcasting world in Malaysia.

Why have you been approached?
You have been approach as a possible respondent in this project, as someone who watches local reality TV shows and can contribute information from the perspectives of audience. Your participation will contribute significant information to the academic knowledge about transnational cultural flows and attitudes towards format adaptation programs. The research findings also might be useful not only to the particular TV stations, but also to the Malaysian government as some of their policies which is associated to reality television content may need to be revisited.

What is expected of you and how long will it take?
The discussion will take approximately one to two hours of your time. You will be asked about your opinion on the local reality TV programs and the factors that motivate you to watch these programs. You will be asked a range of questions regarding the way you consume the local reality TV programs, opinion on the cultural aspects, and the influence that reality TV programs
have on you.

The interview will be tape recorded and you will be involved in a discussion with a few other people in a group. This focus group will involve a primary researcher and a number of study participants broadly discussing about reality TV programs. **You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and any unprocessed data may also be withdrawn.**

**Privacy and disclosure of information**
Your name, age, and any other personal details will not be included in the writing up of the research, so you will remain anonymous at all times. The information collected for this study will only be accessed by me and my supervisor (her details can be found below), and will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet during the study and for five years after its completion. It will then be securely disposed of. Reports from the research will be included as part of my PhD thesis and may contribute to academic conference presentations and publications.

Should you have any questions or concerns now or at any stage about the research you can contact me or my supervisor:

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Dr. Chris Hudson  
Senior Supervisor, School of Applied Communication, RMIT University  
Phone: (61 3) 9925 2904  
Email: chris.hudson@rmit.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen  
PhD Research Student, School of Applied Communication

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. Details of the complaints procedure are available at: [http://www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints](http://www.rmit.edu.au/rd/hrec_complaints)
APPENDIX 5

Design and Social Context Portfolio
School of Applied Communication

Kenyataan ringkas yang akan digunakan dalam kajian yang melibatkan manusia

Kepada ………………………………………………..

Selamat sejahtera. Nama saya ialah Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen.

Saya sedang mengikuti pengajian di peringkat Phd di School of Applied Communication, RMIT University, Australia. Untuk pengetahuan pihak Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan tajuk penyelidikan ini ialah “Global ke Tempatan: Realiti TV di Malaysia”.

Tujuan penyelidikan ini ialah untuk mengenalpasti sejauh mana realiti TV di Malaysia telah dipengaruhi oleh budaya global dan apakah perubahan yang telah dibuat untuk memenuhi budaya tempatan. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti bagaimanakah program realiti TV tempatan menyertai budaya televisyen global. Secara spesifiknya, kajian ini akan meninjau bagaimanakah format program TV global telah diadaptsikan kepada konteks budaya tempatan dan menjadi popular di kalangan penonton tempatan.

Kajian ini akan memberi pengetahuan tentang peranan televisyen dalam pembentukan imagi budaya tempatan. Kajian ini juga akan mengkaji apakah pandangan penonton televisyen tentang program realiti TV tempatan (bagaimana penonton menilai program tersebut). Realiti TV tempatan telah popular di kalangan penonton dalam sekelip mata dan juga sering diperdebatkan.

Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk memberikan pengetahuan mengenai penontonan realiti TV di Malaysia melalui penekanan terhadap penonton yang banyak membentuk halatju baru dalam dunia penyiaran di Malaysia.
Kenapa Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan dipilih?
Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan dipilih kerana anda merupakan seorang yang menonton program realiti TV tempatan. Penyertaan Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan akan menyumbang informasi penting dalam bidang akademik, khususnya dalam aliran budaya transnasional dan sikap terhadap program yang berasaskan format adaptasi. Dapatkann kajian ini tidak hanya berguna untuk sesetengah stesen TV, tetapi juga kerajaan Malaysia dalam menyemak semula polisi kandungan rancangan realiti TV tempatan.

Bagaimana Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan boleh membantu dan berapa lama proses ini akan mengambil masa?
Proses temuramah ini akan mengambil masa lebih kurang satu hingga dua jam. Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan akan ditanya mengenai pendapat tentang program realiti TV tempatan dan faktor-faktor yang mendorong anda untuk menonton program tersebut. Anda akan disoal pelbagai soalan mengenai cara anda melibatkan diri dalam program realiti TV, pendapat mengenai aspek budaya, dan bagaimanakah anda dipengaruhi oleh program realiti TV.

Temuramah akan direkodkan dan Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan akan menyertai sesi perbincangan bersama dengan beberapa responden lain di dalam satu kumpulan. Perbincangan kumpulan berfokus ini akan melibatkan penyelidik dan beberapa responden lain, yang akan berbincang mengenai program realiti TV tempatan. Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan boleh menggugurkan maklumat yang telah diberikan pada bila-bila masa sahaja dan setiap data yang belum diproses akan digugurkan.

Privasi dan pendedahan maklumat
Nama, umur, dan segala maklumat peribadi tidak akan dimasukkan di dalam penulisan kajian ini, oleh itu, Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan akan sentiasa dirujuk sebagai “anonymous” dan tidak akan dapat dikenalpasti. Informasi yang akan dikumpul untuk kajian ini akan hanya diakses oleh penyelidik dan penyelia sahaja (seperti nama yang tertera di bawah), dan akan disimpan dengan selamatnya dalam kabinet berkunci sepanjang pengajian dan lima tahun selepas tamat pengajian. Selepas tempoh tersebut, maklumat kemudiannya akan dihapuskan dengan selamatnya. Laporan daripada kajian ini akan dimasukkan dalam sebahagian tesis PhD penyelidik dan akan menyumbang kepada penyampaian dalam konferens dan penerbitan.
Jika Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan terdapat sebarang pertanyaan atau kemusykilan tentang kajian ini, Encik/Cik/Tuan/Puan boleh menghubungi penyelidik atau penyelia melalui:

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Yang benar,  

Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen  
Pelajar PhD, School of Applied Communication, RMIT University