

Quote by Charu Malhotra, Co-founder & Managing Director, Primus Partners

Published in The Mint
May 04, 2026 | 06:00 AM

Bigg Boss to The 50: Social reality finds new life on OTT

Social reality shows are gaining ground on streaming, with The 50 drawing 13 million viewers. Experts say the genre taps into human emotions and engages younger audiences through competitive, relatable formats, expanding beyond traditional titles.

Authored by Lata Jha



Read on: [Bigg Boss to The 50: Social reality finds new life on OTT | Charu Malhotra, Primus Partners, unscripted content cost, OTT production economics, ROI in entertainment, reality show production, cost per hour programming](#)

Article Content:

Social reality shows are gaining ground on streaming, with The 50 drawing 13 million viewers. Experts say the genre taps into human emotions and engages younger audiences through competitive, relatable formats, expanding beyond traditional titles.

Social reality is stepping out of television's shadow and into streaming's spotlight. Long synonymous with Bigg Boss, the genre—built around interpersonal dynamics within controlled settings—is seeing renewed traction as newer formats expand the category. Data from media consulting firm Ormax Media shows titles such as The 50 drawing over 13 million viewers on JioHotstar, signalling over the top (OTT) platforms are finding a scalable, sticky format beyond traditional TV.

The 50, a reality show featuring 50 celebrities competing in intense challenges and survival games, amassed an audience of over 13 million across a seven-week run on JioHotstar, consistently ranking as the second most-watched property on streaming in India, behind only the ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup.

Earlier, along with Bigg Boss (viewership of 20 million), Rise and Fall (12 million) and The Traitors (9.3 million) on Amazon MX Player and Prime Video, respectively, had featured in the list of top 50 streaming originals in India for 2025 published by Ormax.

Rather than replacing television, streaming is expanding the social reality audience, adding younger viewers and longer engagement cycles through staggered, on-demand viewing.

What drives the genre's appeal

Entertainment industry experts say social reality shows are powered by voyeurism, or the audience's interest in knowing how personalities behave when placed together in a controlled environment, with the curiosity often amplified with competitive challenges that create space for conflict and emotional exchanges.

On the newer medium of OTT, each episode offers complete viewing on its own and staggered drops sustain engagement over a long span. More importantly, the format is slowly diversifying beyond Bigg Boss.

“As audience preferences diversify, there is a clear appetite for formats that feel immediate, relatable and emotionally engaging, which is where social reality content stands out. Shows like Bigg Boss, homegrown franchises like Splitsvilla and newer titles such as The 50 tap into core human emotions such as relationships, conflict, aspiration and identity, making them highly resonant and conversation-driving, especially among younger, digital-first viewers,” a JioStar spokesperson said. The genre delivers both scale and stickiness, complementing fiction and other non-fiction by offering engagement and cultural relevance, the person added.

Deepak Dhar, founder and group chief executive of Banijay Asia and EndemolShine India that had produced both Bigg Boss and The 50 said, given the popularity of the former across languages, the company saw an opportunity and need gap for more such shows in India. “This quasi-TV format that also provides a sense of premium SVoD (subscription video-on-demand) keeps audiences invested every day,” Dhar explained.

To be sure, audiences in their 20s and 30s are seen as the target base for such shows, lured by the presence of their favourite influencers often featuring in them.

Monetisation

Nitin Burman, chief revenue officer at Balaji Telefilms said that as far as the value-proposition for platforms goes, it is easier to integrate brands in nonfiction shows and part of the cost of production and IP format licensing fees are taken care of by brand revenues. The company is producing the next season of its show Lock Up for Netflix.

“At the core of it, social reality taps into something deeply human, the instinct to know what's happening in someone else's life. Now take that same impulse, add good-looking, popular people, throw in celebrity pull, song and dance, tasks, and drama, and you've just made it more fun,” said Harikrishnan Pillai, chief executive and co-founder of TheSmallBigIdea, a digital marketing agency. The key is calibrating the content so that it doesn't feel too raw or too juvenile; get that balance right, and the audience takes care of itself, Pillai added.

Cost dynamics

To be sure, cost-wise, social reality is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, according to industry experts.

Charu Malhotra, co-founder and managing director at Primus Partners, a management

consultancy firm, said it's not as expensive as high-end scripted series with big stars and large-scale production, but it's not cheap either. Long shooting schedules, set design, like a controlled house or environment, and continuous production teams add up. However, when you look at cost per hour of content, it often works out better. You get a lot more hours of programming compared to a scripted show, which makes it attractive from a return-on-investment (RoI) perspective, Malhotra pointed out.

Nitin Gupta, chief content officer at Chaupal, a platform specializing in Punjabi, Haryanvi and Bhojpuri content, however pointed out that fiction is far more controllable in comparison: you can manage the script, budget, output, production and even artist timelines. When it comes to non-fiction categories, especially music, costs can go out of hand due to factors like artist schedules, production scale and most importantly, music rights.

"Fiction is not going anywhere and will be the primary driver. Fiction brings scale and subscriptions, while formats like music and talent shows are more seasonal and predictable," said Rajni Daswani, chief growth officer of marketing agency SoCheers. "Social reality, however, builds continuity and is the middle ground. It is definitely more efficient than high-end fiction, where cost is high. So, for OTTs, it is about impact and one strong format can deliver disproportionate engagement over time."