

Up close and personal

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Aditya Swamy

With two new shows, MTV explores the gritty stories of people willing to bare their every emotion on camera

This is the age of sin. Of lust and greed. “Virtues are out. Vices are in,” says Aditya Swamy, Channel Head of MTV India. “This...” he adds, “is the Age Of Sinnocence.”

It's a fairly cutesy title. Crafted in classic MTV style: Scandalous without being offensive. Just enough to raise eyebrows without inflaming pitchfork-wielding-mobs. MTV's mission this year is to explore this trend, the conclusion of recent research by the channel.

“MTV Youth research is constantly evolving,” says Aditya, in a telephone interview from the channel's headquarters in Mumbai. He's discussing how their annual research shapes the programming they create, since it targets their core audience and investigates what makes them tick. “We use non-traditional techniques: peer groups instead of focus groups, where people come in as friends. Online questionnaires. Video diaries: We give handy cams to kids so they can record conversations when they hang out. It helps us understand their environment.”

Two years ago, they studied the ‘State of Cool.’ Last year it was ‘Recreation Redefined’. This year's research, conducted across the country

with 2,500 participants aged between 12 and 24, showed a generation with a moral compass far removed from that of their parents and grandparents. This year the exercise studied vices and virtues across the country, and concluded that traditional vices, once frowned upon, are now driving forces among the young.

Aditya says this is the ideal environment for ‘True Life,’ a documentary-style programme exploring gritty stories of people willing to bare every emotion on camera. Although ‘True Life’, which won an Emmy in America, was conceptualised as far back as 1998, it works particularly well in India today where subjects are willing to discuss their lives and choices with complete honesty, on TV.

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India's first home-grown season of 'True Life' is called Body Talk. "It's about young people who make their bodies work for them," says Aditya, adding "In the Age Of Innocence study more than 50 per cent of the participants said they were willing to do sexual favours to get ahead. This is what we're profiling... We have everything from a guy who's sick of being picked on and turns into a steroid junkie. There's a girl doing her MBBS in Bangalore who becomes an escort to support her lifestyle. A boy who gives up his bank job to be a male stripper at parties."

Don't expect a tear-jerking sympathy fest, or moral lessons. "These are people happy with the choices they've made." Is MTV milking the most shocking stories for heightened TV drama? "Well, irreverence is part of our DNA," he says. "The next two seasons are very different. They cover people with life-threatening conditions. And then people with addictions."

Social experiment

He's also excited about their other big launch this season, which they're calling 'India's biggest online social experiment'. In keeping with the current addiction for vicarious reality television, 'MTV Crunch' is in a daily 24x7 live format, presented on three screens simultaneously: television, computers and mobile phones. "The concept is today's cities are urban jungles. Space is becoming less and less. How are people adapting?" Ten chosen couples are locked into 10 'Crunchable' rooms for four weeks, and cameras record their lives and reactions as the walls physically close in on them.

And watch out for that old classic in a new avatar: MTV Grind, adding balle balle to bikinis. Aditya chuckles, "Its Bollywood music, Bollywood remixes... the coolest pool party in the world. Better than Ibiza. All set to 'Sheila ki javani'." It's tailored for the club-hoppers of today, "The people wearing Dolce and Gabbana, but dancing to Himesh Reshammiya."

True Life premieres on April 8, and Crunch premiere in on April, 18, Grind in May. 'The Age of Innocence,' comprising the results of MTV's Youth Marketing Forum will be released in the form of a book shortly.

Keywords: [MTV India](#), [Aditya Swamy](#)