

The Impact of Reality Television Shows on Behavioural Patterns of University Music Students in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of participating in a reality television show on the behavioural patterns of university music students in Sri Lanka. As media platforms increasingly reshape the boundaries between education and entertainment, a growing number of students engage with televised reality shows, driven by aspirations of fame, exposure, monetary prizes, and career advancement. Through qualitative interviews with 30 music undergraduates who have competed in popular Sri Lankan reality shows, the research explored how such experiences reshape their academic focus, self-presentation, time management, and career goals. Findings revealed that participation often cultivates confidence, stage presence, and marketability, while simultaneously introducing challenges such as academic disengagement and emotional strain. The study highlights a significant gap between university music curricula and the industry's demands. It calls for educational reforms that incorporate performance training and media literacy, enabling students to thrive in both academic and professional artistic spheres. By bridging this gap, institutions can prepare aspiring musicians for the evolving landscape of modern performance culture.

Key words: Reality Television Shows, University Students in Music, Behavioural Patterns, Motivation

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Introduction

Reality television has grown to become one of the most significant forms of entertainment worldwide. In 2005, 'Sirasa TV' introduced reality television to Sri Lanka by launching 'Sirasa Super Star', marking a milestone in the country's television history. The program was an adaptation of 'American Idol'. The competitive television show was advertised for young adults aged between 18 and 30 to compete for monetary prizes and fame with the attractive slogan 'Who Wants to Be a Star'. Later, Derana TV, Hiru TV, Siyatha TV, and several other channels launched similar reality television programs inspired by 'Sirasa Super Star'. These competitive reality shows were designed for different age groups, including senior citizens, children, and adolescents. As a result, many students are increasingly drawn to these shows, viewing them as a fast track to success and social recognition (Abeysekara, 2025).

The widespread consumption of media, including reality television, has raised significant concerns about its impact on the academic and social development of young people. Scholars emphasize that long-term exposure to television content can shape an individual's perceptions of reality, potentially impacting their values, attitudes, and behaviour for decades (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Speck, 2008).

In the Sri Lankan context, these impacts are particularly relevant given the changing media landscape and increasing youth engagement with television and digital platforms. Research by Senevirathna et al (2023) found that heavy social media usage among Sri Lankan university students was linked to declining academic performance and reduced focus. Similarly, Suganya et al, (2020) reported that students who spent excessive time on social platforms experienced negative impacts on their educational outcomes.

These findings underscore a broader concern: that media engagement, while offering opportunities for personal growth and exposure, may also come with risks to academic stability and behavioural discipline.

Despite growing interest in the media's role in shaping youth behaviour, there remains a notable lack of scholarly research examining how direct participation in media, particularly reality television, affects university students in Sri Lanka. Existing studies have primarily focused on media consumption rather than active involvement. However, students who take part in reality shows often undergo unique experiences, including public scrutiny, intense competition, time commitments, and lifestyle changes. These factors may impact their academic engagement, learning habits, and overall behaviour in both positive and negative ways.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the academic and behavioural impacts of participating in reality television among university students in Sri Lanka. Through a qualitative approach involving interviews with students who have competed in such programs, the research aims to uncover how their involvement has impacted their educational journeys, time management, discipline, and aspirations. In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of the complex relationship between media participation and higher education in Sri Lanka.

Some Scholarly Reviews

Reality television programs, particularly talent-based competitions, have garnered significant attention among young adults, providing platforms for individuals to showcase their talents and gain public recognition.

Ngah and Vadeveloo (2012) observed that reality TV programs are perceived as more authentic than other television programs, thereby applying a more substantial impact on viewers' attitudes and values.

In the Sri Lankan context, the rise of such programs has created a space for university students to actively pursue fame, financial rewards, and personal fulfilment (Abeysekara, 2025). The intersection of media participation and academic performance has been a subject of scholarly interest. While active engagement in media can offer experiential learning opportunities, it may also pose challenges to students' academic commitments. Studies have indicated that excessive involvement in media activities can lead to decreased academic performance due to time constraints and divided attention. For instance, Silva et al. (2022) found that increased Facebook usage among Sri Lankan university students was associated with diminished academic outcomes. Similarly, Senevirathna et al. (2023) mention that students' extensive use of social media platforms negatively impacted their academic performance, primarily due to reduced study time and increased distractions.

The propagation of social media has transformed the learning landscape, offering both opportunities and challenges. Chandrasiri & Samarasinghe (2020) highlighted that while social media can enhance learning experiences when used judiciously, its overuse may adversely affect students' academic performance. Furthermore, Suganya et al. (2020) emphasized that the time spent on social media and the addictive nature of these platforms had significant negative impacts on students' academic achievements.

Reality Television Participation and Behavioural Implications

Active participation in reality television can have a profound impact on students' behaviour and learning patterns. The demands of such programs, including rigorous schedules and public scrutiny, may lead to stress, anxiety, and altered social interactions. While empirical studies specifically focusing on Sri Lankan university students are limited, insights can be drawn from related research on media engagement among university students. For example, the study by Ngah and Vadeveloo (2012) indicated that reality TV programs could impact viewers' moral judgments and value systems, suggesting potential behavioural implications for participants.

Despite the growing popularity of reality television among university students in Sri Lanka, there remains a scarcity of research examining the direct impact of active participation in such programs on students' academic behaviour and learning patterns. Most existing studies have concentrated on media consumption rather than active involvement. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive research to investigate the nuanced effects of reality television participation on the academic and behavioural outcomes of university students in the Sri Lankan context.

Thus, this study has explored the gap in existing research concerning the behavioural changes in contestants of reality television shows, as well as the motivations behind these changes, with a particular focus on university music students who have participated in such shows.

The Structure of University Music Education in Sri Lanka

There are six universities in Sri Lanka that offer degree programs in North Indian music: the University of Peradeniya, the Sri Palee Campus of the University of Colombo, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, SLTC Research University, and the University of Kelaniya. Music education at the university level began in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. Initially, until the 1990s, universities offered degrees in Fine Arts.

Since the 1990s, these programs have been restructured and are now offered as degrees in Performing Arts. However, the core objectives of these programs have remained largely the same primarily to prepare students for careers as teachers and lecturers. Until the 2000s, the curriculum focused mainly on theoretical and practical studies in classical music. Around 2010, with the growing impact of media and technology, several subjects related to these fields were introduced into the curriculum.

These additions opened up new pathways, including media and music integration, information technology, creative music production, sound engineering, and music recording software studies. Later, the internship training and planning of a musical event, known as music production, were added to the curriculum (Abeysekara, 2025). University music education curricula are structured as three- or four-year programs, in accordance with the requirements of the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF), to ensure consistency and maintain academic quality. Table No. 1 shows the sample structure of university music education.

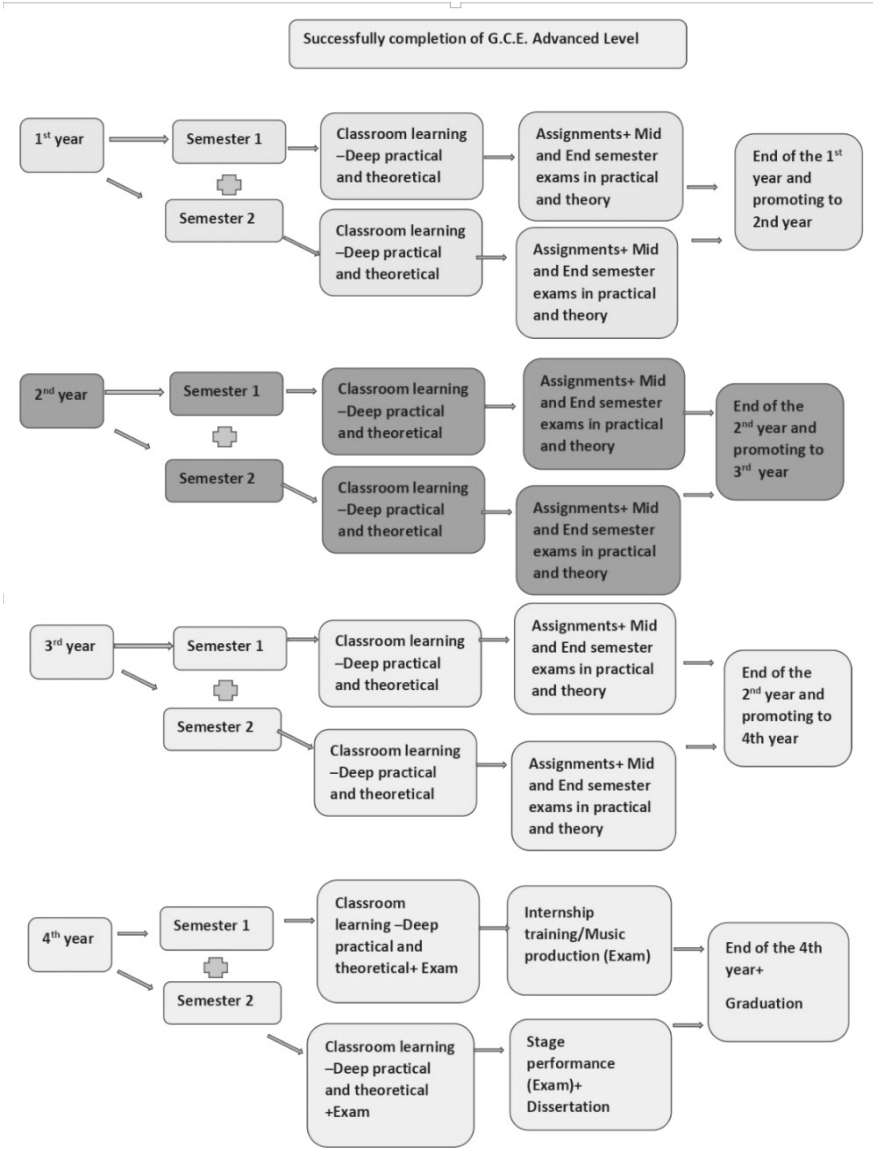


Table No. 1: The table illustrates a sample four-year university educational structure, drafted by the author for illustrative purposes.

Participation in Reality Television Shows: Steps and Their Impact on Contestants’ Behaviour and the Motivation

It was identified that the participants involved in this study had competed in *Derana Dream Star* by Derana TV, *Hiru Star* by Hiru TV, *The Voice Teens*, *The Voice Sri Lanka*, and *Sirasa Super Star* by Sirasa TV. The participants had already undergone some or all of the stages outlined in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. At each stage, they were expected to showcase their unique talents, as prioritized by the organizers, even more than by the judging or coaching panel. Specifically, participants are required to improve their performance skills, appearance, and a few other skills, in addition to their singing skills. The process of these reality television shows typically unfolds within a year, as they are organized on an annually.

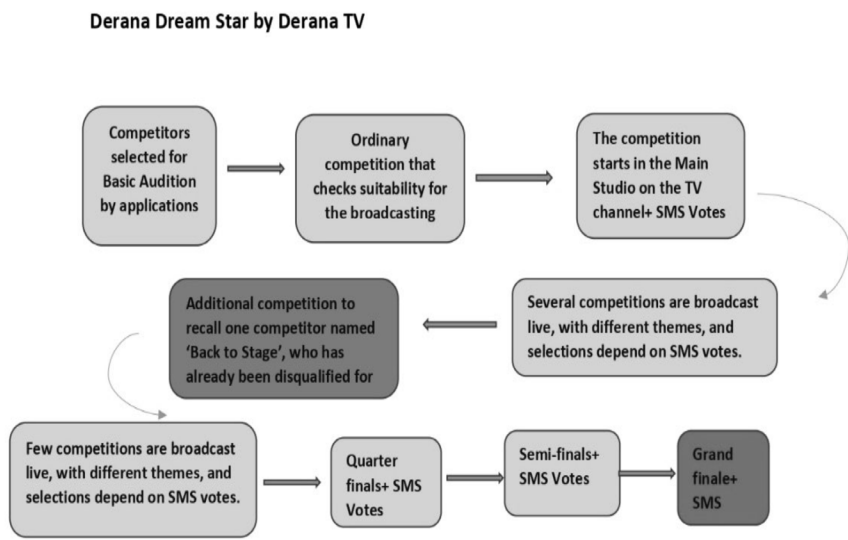


Table No. 2: shows the steps that follow for the Dream Star competition on Derana TV. Table created by the author.

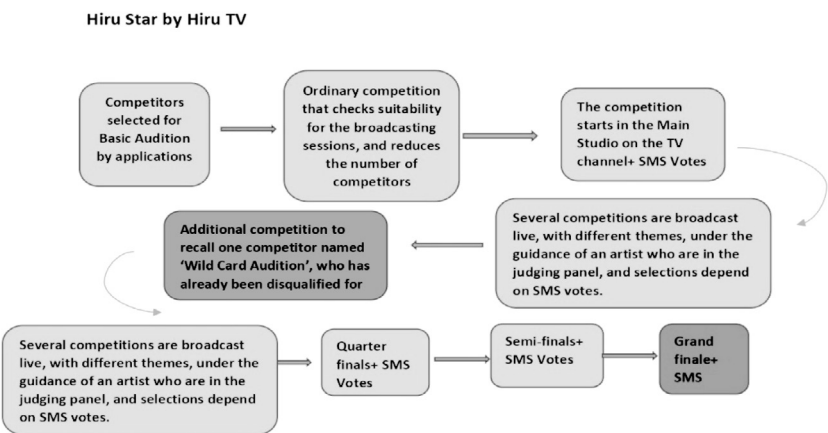


Table No. 3: shows the steps that follow for the Hiru Star competition on Hiru TV. Table created by the author.

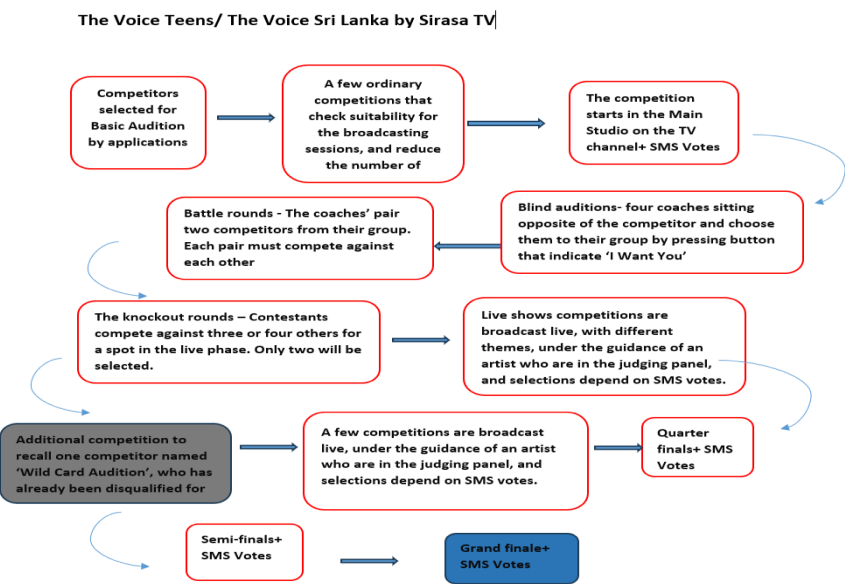


Table No. 4: shows the steps that follow for The Voice Teens/The Voice Sri Lanka by competitions on Sirasa TV. Table created by the author.

Sirasa Super Star by Sirasa TV

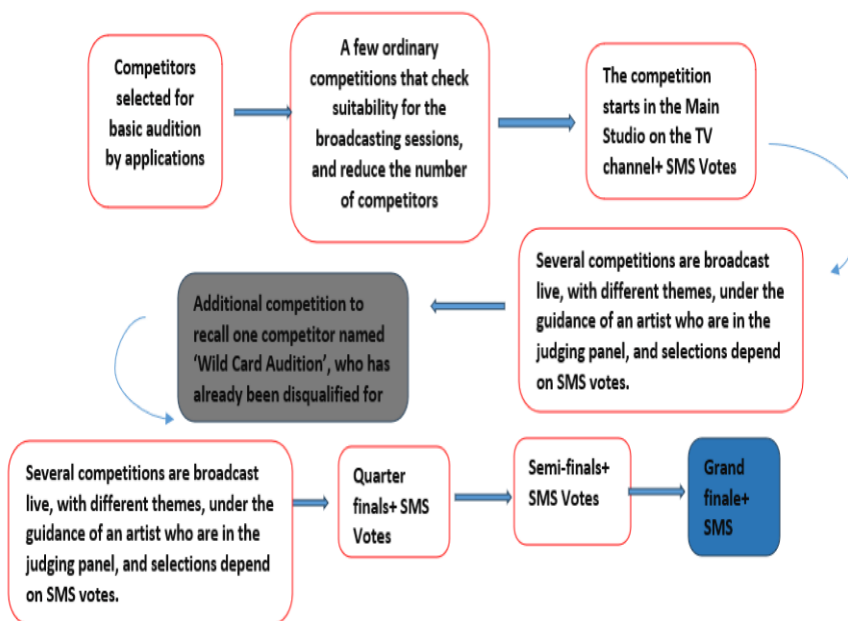


Table No. 5: shows the steps that follow for Sirasa Super Star by competitions on Sirasa TV. Table Created by the author.

The behavioural transformations observed in university students who participated in reality television shows often reflect a contrast between structured academic environments and the dynamic, commercial-driven demands of televised performance. While traditional university education emphasizes theoretical knowledge, discipline, and academic achievement, reality show experiences prioritize marketability, immediate audience engagement, and adaptability in performance.

Stage-based progression in reality shows, beginning with auditions, followed by training, public performances, and televised eliminations, exposes participants to situations that demand instant transformation in behaviour, appearance, and communication.

Each step in these competitions is designed not merely to assess talent but to shape contestants into commercially viable public figures while the television channel uplifts themselves commercially and for their publicity. Consequently, students often adapt by enhancing their outward presentation, developing social media strategies, and cultivating star-like attributes such as confidence, and on-stage charisma.

In contrast, university environments foster intellectual development but often lack the mechanisms to prepare students for high-pressure public performances or media-facing roles. As a result, many participants in this study reported that their behavioural evolution, such as improvements in grooming, time management, and communication style, was catalysed more by reality television experiences than by formal academic training.

Students' behavioural modifications, such as adopting stage-friendly fashion, learning to handle microphones and cameras, or attending beauty salons, emerged as responses to the direct demands of reality shows. These habits were rarely introduced through university curricula. Moreover, emotional regulation under pressure, public speaking, and interpersonal charm skills that enhance public performance were largely cultivated during reality show participation rather than academic instruction.

The motivation behind these changes was equally pragmatic. Participants recognized that theoretical mastery alone could not secure visibility or success in a competitive entertainment landscape. Exposure through televised platforms offered rapid social validation, fan base development, and sometimes, financial independence benefits that often took precedence over traditional academic milestones. In this way, reality shows served not only as talent showcases but also as accelerators of behavioural maturity and professional orientation.

This comparative tension between institutional education and media participation reveals a critical insight: while university training builds foundational knowledge, reality television introduces situational learning that is often more closely aligned with real-world performance contexts. Therefore, the behavioural patterns shaped by these contrasting environments reflect the dual paths students navigate academic progress on one hand, and rapid social mobility and fame on the other.

Table No. 6 shows the behavioural patterns that changed in the university students who have competed in reality television shows and the motivation behind the changes.

Behavioural Changes After Reality Show Participation	Motivations Behind the Behavioural Changes
Improved personal appearance, grooming, and fashion sense (e.g., using perfumes, dressing like stars).	To meet the expectations of show organizers and appeal to the audience, increase the chances of fame and votes.
Increased confidence and stage presence.	Exposure to large audiences and professional equipment (e.g., cameras, microphones) encouraged adaptation.

Shift from academic to performance-based aspirations.	Realization that theoretical knowledge alone isn't sufficient for a career in music to become a star.
Developed marketing and self-promotion strategies (e.g., growing social media followers).	Reality shows emphasize visibility and popularity to advance in competitions.
Greater understanding of commercialism in entertainment.	Participants observed how shows prioritize marketability, sponsors, and branding.
Adjusted communication styles (e.g., switching to Sinhala terms, half-English speaking).	Advised by organizers to behave in a culturally or commercially appropriate manner.
Learning to manage performance anxiety.	Experience in reality shows provided practical training that is not typically available in school or university settings.
Joining music bands or starting a YouTube channel after the show.	To continue leveraging the fame and build a sustainable music-related career.

Changed attitudes toward beauty and attractiveness.	Pressure to appeal to audiences and producers; belief that beauty equals votes or opportunities.
Prioritized performance skills over classical music traditions.	Entertainment value was perceived as having a more significant impact on audience engagement.

Table no 6: shows the descriptive behavioural changes and the motivation behind the behavioural changes of the participants in the study. Table created by the author.

Results

The qualitative interviews conducted with 30 university music students who had participated in Sri Lankan reality television shows such as *Sirasa Super Star*, *Hiru Star*, *Derana Dream Star*, and *The Voice Sri Lanka* revealed significant changes in their behavioural patterns and learning approaches following their participation.

Enhanced Self-Presentation: Nearly all participants reported a marked improvement in their grooming, fashion sense, and awareness of physical appearance. These changes were often driven by the desire to meet media expectations and appeal to a broader audience.

Increased Self-Confidence and Public Presence: Exposure to large-scale performances and media attention fostered stronger stage presence and public communication skills.

Shift in Career Aspirations: Many students experienced a shift from academic-oriented goals (e.g., teaching or research) to performance-based ambitions, aiming for visibility and success in the entertainment industry.

Time Management and Prioritization: Participation in these shows required manipulating academic and media responsibilities. While some students developed stronger organizational skills, others struggled with academic deadlines and attendance.

Adoption of Marketing Techniques: Students actively built their personal brands through social media, recognizing the importance of visibility, fan engagement, and digital presence in maintaining momentum after the show.

Behavioural Adjustments for Cultural Appeal: Participants modified their speech patterns, manners, and appearance to align with public expectations and cultural norms encouraged by show organizers. These changes mainly were self-reported as positive in terms of self-growth, confidence, and exposure, but several students also acknowledged academic setbacks due to reduced study time and missed lectures.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that reality television has a complex, dualistic impact on university music students. On one hand, these platforms offer invaluable exposure, enhance soft skills, and provide real-world experience in performance-based careers. On the other hand, the emphasis on fame, marketability, and instant gratification can disrupt academic discipline and long-term educational planning.

The transformations observed align with the notion of media-induced behavioural adaptation, where individuals alter their identity and actions in response to media norms and audience expectations. These students were not merely performers but were also learning to function as public personalities something their university curricula did not fully prepare them for.

One of the most prominent insights from this study is the gap between traditional academic training and the skills demanded by contemporary media landscapes. While universities emphasize theoretical knowledge and classical music traditions, reality shows demand charisma, audience engagement, and adaptability. This disconnect has led to a new form of hybrid learner one who seeks to balance institutional expectations with personal and professional growth fostered by media participation.

Furthermore, motivation played a key role in shaping behavioural shifts. Students were driven not only by the lure of fame and financial gain but also by a realization that classroom achievements alone may not ensure a viable career in music. This pragmatic shift underscores a changing value system among youth, where visibility, audience appeal, and social media traction are increasingly seen as valid indicators of success. However, the study also uncovered potential risks. Several participants admitted to experiencing burnout, academic decline, and emotional fatigue due to the pressures of competition and public scrutiny. The transition back to regular academic life was often challenging, especially for those who gained brief fame but lacked long-term career strategies.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of reality television shows on the behavioural and learning patterns of university music students in Sri Lanka. The findings revealed that active participation in such programs significantly alters students' self-perception, priorities, and engagement with academic responsibilities. While the exposure provided by these platforms enhanced students' confidence, stage presence, and public communication skills, it also introduced challenges related to time management, academic focus, and emotional well-being.

The behavioural transformations observed such as increased emphasis on personal branding, grooming, and performance-centric goals highlight the growing disconnect between traditional university music education and the demands of the contemporary entertainment industry. Students increasingly recognize that academic qualifications alone are insufficient for success in the media-driven cultural landscape. As such, they seek to complement their formal education with the experiential learning opportunities that reality shows provide.

However, the tension between institutional academic expectations and the fast-paced, image-oriented world of reality television underscores the need for educational reforms. Universities must consider integrating practical media exposure, performance training, and mental health support into music programs to prepare students for multifaceted careers in the modern music industry. Reality television serves as both an opportunity and a challenge. It empowers students to pursue broader professional ambitions but also calls for a careful balance between fame and academic fulfilment. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders in higher education and media can collaborate to support the holistic development of aspiring young musicians in Sri Lanka.

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