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Reality Television and the Art of Trivialising Work Health, Safety and Wellbeing

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Reality Television and the Art of Trivialising Work Health, Safety and Wellbeing

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Synopsis

How popular culture shapes attitudes towards workplace health, safety and wellbeing (WHSW) has received little attention in the literature. This research remedies this deficiency by examining whether some aspects of workers' HSW are trivialised (if at all) in the Australian construction and renovation reality television show, The Block. Adopting an observational approach, the entire Season 16 (2020) (n=50 episodes) was critically reviewed to assess the level of trivialisation of both identifiable hazards and low order controls. The observations focussed on workplace activities generally perceived or deemed as not high risk or not likely dangerous in the traditional WHSW sense. Nevertheless, such activities are regulated. A cultural theory of risk perception was applied to what appeared to be instances of trivialisation dissonance in relation to attitudes about certain behaviours and practices at the workplace. The following propositions were tested: (1) onsite skylarking, inattention and lax PPE usage were tolerated or downplayed in certain instances; (2) safety signage compliance was inconsistent throughout the season; (3) site untidiness and occasional hygiene issues were observed; (4) onsite consumption and promotion of alcohol appeared to be normalised; (5) antiquated gendered language or stereotyping was used; and (6) potential exposure to various psychosocial hazards was accepted or inadequately addressed on occasion. The goal of the research was to consider the observational data in a system of work setting. Three key themes emerged as a result of critically assessing the show. First, there was a perception that administrative and lower-wrung interventions were inconsistently applied

and monitored during the season. Secondly, a culture of alcohol at work was normalised. Thirdly, psychosocial hazard awareness was either inadequate or undervalued. The findings support a cultural bias argument that perceived low-risk workplace activities and unacceptable psychosocial behaviours were tolerated. The Block projected a form of dissonance that trivialises the importance of certain HSW cognitions. Findings suggest both low order interventions and emerging psychosocial risks at work are socially trivialised in popular culture. Creating awareness of these attitudes may assist agencies to understand how emerging HSW issues are perceived by the viewing audience to potentially counteract a dissonance of views about workplace culture and behaviour in popular media. To that end reality TV audiences have seen it fit to publicly call out certain HSW behaviours at this workplace. These public rebukes support some observations made in this study. The Block therefore serves a useful sociological purpose in understanding HSW cultural exchange at work, and its influence extends beyond commodifiable entertainment.

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