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Editorial

About Entertainment=Emotion

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Introduction

In 2009, from November 15 to 21, we organized a special workshop at the Centro de Ciencias de Benasque Pedro Pascual (CCBPP), some of the results of which we now share with the readers of the Journal of Media Psychology.

Far removed from the typical formats of academic meetings, the seminar sought to draw us away from our usual routines and to focus our thoughts on our subject of interest: entertainment as a media effect. The source of our inspiration was the serenity of the interminable mountains of the Spanish Pyrenees.

Objectives and Format of Entertainment=Emotion

We issued an open and international call for scholars to participate in what was dubbed “Entertainment=Emotion” (E=E). Invitations were sent both to academics and to professionals from the audiovisual industry to present works or opinions that could help shed some light on the existing relationship between the experience of entertainment and the way audiences feel emotions. In recent times that has been typified by an incessant increase in the offerings of entertainment on a global scale, and there is an urgent and unavoidable need to observe the subject from different angles. Our seminar sought to provide a platform for a better understanding of the emotional processes involved, as well as their effects, and at the same time promote a resurgence of interest in studying the subject.

However, to foster new perspectives of analysis, we felt that E=E needed to satisfy two basic premises: (1) to bring together academics from different traditions and encourage debate among them and (2) to inspire exchanges between established and emerging researchers. The meeting program ultimately reflected these requirements. E=E was endorsed by renowned and prestigious researchers who were excited by the opportunity of presenting their ideas for discussion. But it also featured emerging, yet highly talented, academics who were willing to assume the challenge of responding to (and provoking) the theoretical considerations of the former. At the same time, it provided a stage for researchers to fuel the debate by presenting their own empirical studies. Benasque was the gathering point for psychologists, communication scholars, television directors and producers, neurologists, food technologists, and even physicians.

Publications From E=E

This publication provides a record of some of the ideas that were debated over the 4 days of seclusion in the Spanish mountains. It contains the opinions, in the form of essays, of some of the academics who attended E=E. It manages to capture the essence of the issues of concern to relevant researchers in the area, and helps us to understand their motivations and foresee how their work is likely to develop in the near future.

To make the content of this publication more coherent, the essays are presented in the order in which they were publicly presented and responded to at E=E. It begins with a series of eight texts (corresponding to four sessions of debate) that honor the dynamics of the event, whereby a senior academic’s ideas were presented, and immediately afterwards discussed by a junior respondent researcher. Of course, these sessions were prepared in advance. Long before E=E, the senior academics produced the texts that were designed to initiate the debates. The organizers then forwarded these to the people who would be responsible for leading the debates – the juniors. After the seminar, all of the respective contributions were revised for inclusion in this publication.

However, apart from the aforementioned texts, this publication also includes two articles that demonstrate the relentless advance (and progression between beginnings and ends) of the science and the nexuses that inspire new objects of study. The first (by Latorre & Soto-Sanfiel) contains the initial reflections, discussed in the light of the previous texts, on a line of research that grew out of the interchange between academics from such far removed disciplines as physics and communications. The second (by Vorderer) suggests a moment of reflection, and looks back and evaluates just how far we have come with research into media entertainment and from there, predicts its future evolution.

We believe there to be something paradoxical about this publication of E=E: It feels conclusive in that it presents an eyewitness account of what recently happened at E=E, but it is really an open book that seeks to be projected in time and space. On the one hand, the content of this publication is asking to be tested and debated. In fact, each of the intellectual exercises it contains conceal suggestions that are
begging to be hunted down by entertainment researchers. But on the other hand, it is also unfinished because an understanding of its content, of the event that generated it, and of the research of entertainment and emotions, can only be achieved though the exercise of intertextuality. Anybody reading this publication might be interested to know that Inderscience has also published a special edition of the International Journal of Arts and Technology (IJART) dedicated to E=E. While this publication includes the theoretical ideas of relevant researchers in the field, the IJART publication contains a selection of empirical studies presented at E=E by emerging researchers. There can be no doubt that both publications show just how much interest the event generated in the academic community and reveal the vivacity of its object of study.

The E=E debates were initiated by Gerald C. Cupchik (University of Toronto, Canada), who proposed the discussion of “The Role of Feeling in the Entertainment=Emotion Formula.” During his distinguished career, Professor Cupchik has won numerous awards for teaching and research. A large amount of his work has been dedicated to the field of psychological aesthetics, where he has extensively investigated perception, cognition, and creativity applied to aesthetic reception. Cupchik’s studies are also important in such areas of social psychology as appraisal, reactions to emotional experiences, nonverbal communication, and critical theory. At E=E, he identified the conditions under which entertainment can evoke feelings and emotions, and from there, he proposed consideration of his reflective theory of experience based on his aesthetic model of emotion. Although Cupchik proposed this model to explain artistic reception, an increasing number of empirical studies have shown that it is also valid for explaining entertainment. According to Cupchik’s theory, feelings are the shadows of cognition and are reflected in mental or corporeal responses that are, in turn, a form of emotion. The model assumes that, when interpreting stimuli, people search for the underlying layers of meaning by recurring to aspects of their personal lives. However, according to the researcher, the profound meaning of entertainment can only be obtained through relevant occurrences that have been experienced in person or vicariously.

Cupchik's contribution was jointly responded to by Anne Bartsch (Universität Augsburg, Germany) and Mary Beth Oliver (Pennsylvania State University, USA), under the title “Making Sense of Entertainment: On the Interplay of Emotion and Cognition in Entertainment Experience.” Bartsch, who was the main author of this work, is a specialist in the study of media use, of emotional media effects, and of entertainment itself. Specifically, she has looked in depth at the concept of metamotions and their impact on such aspects as gratification, enjoyment, and appreciation. Meanwhile, Oliver is a highly productive researcher, whose prestigious scientific career has included work on the psychosocial effects of the media, the reception of entertainment, and the relationship between the media, emotion, race, and gender. The reader will find that the Bartsch–Oliver partnership also authored another study that appears in this volume in which both researchers offer a broad discussion of the concept of appreciation as a response to entertainment. However, their first participation in E=E is this response to Cupchik’s work, which led them to wonder how it is possible to associate emotions with a heuristic and superficial mode of processing information and also stimulate a more profound elaboration or reflection. After analyzing the reflective model of aesthetic experience proposed by Cupchik, and on the basis of their own work on the concept of appreciation, Bartsch and Oliver present an essay that unravels the interplay between emotion and cognition. The researchers offer a multilevel approach to processing that includes simple affect schemata along with more elaborate forms of sociomoral reasoning. According to Bartsch and Oliver, these aspects are a basic layer of emotional meaning. The researchers also discuss how research into motivated cognition could explain thought-provoking experiences of entertainment, they also defend the potential of these experiences for stimulating self-reflection and personal growth.

The second discussion at E=E was initiated by Arthur A. Raney (Florida State University, USA), whose investigations of psychological processes and effects associated with media reception are essential works of reference in his field. Although Raney has also researched sports events and fiction, his publications in the most relevant journals show that he has also prolifically dissected such concepts as morality and the enjoyment of entertainment. At the Benasque workshop, it was precisely from this perspective that he presented his essay titled “The Role of Morality in Emotional Reactions to and Enjoyment of Media Entertainment,” which is included in this publication. Raney identifies and discusses shortcomings in the research of the morality–entertainment relation, starting from the premises of the affective disposition theory (ADT), the theory that considers that enjoyment is a function of the emotional connection of the receiver with the characters who appear in a narrative. According to ADT, moral factors play a predominant role because they lead to emotional experiences and from there to enjoyment. In his essay, Raney looks in depth at the relationship between moral emotions and the reception of entertainment, and detects gaps, contradictions, and unanswered questions in the study of morality as an emotional response to entertainment.

Raney’s contribution was discussed by Tilo Hartmann (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands) in his “Not So Moral Moral Responses to Media Entertainment.” Hartmann has enjoyed an explosive academic career. In a very short time, this researcher’s work has set new standards in the study of the reception of video games (processes and effects), spatial presence, and moral disengagement. In his response to the previous essay, Hartmann agrees with Raney that there are shortcomings and discords in the study of morality and entertainment. He also claims to agree with Raney regarding the existence of dimensions of entertainment that are not directly related to the experience of moral emotions. He therefore agrees that although it might be useful for the analysis of situations in which fiction is consumed, ADT cannot be satisfactorily applied to the study of all entertainment behaviors. In this regard, Hartmann alludes to those situations in which receivers wish to enjoy pleasant recreations to get away from the daily grind. The researcher considers that if entertainment theory plays down this relevant
aspect of entertainment, it is ultimately because entertainment is still held in low esteem by its researchers. So, inspired by Raney’s essay, Hartmann questions the assumption that all entertainment is moral, defends the existence of said dynamics of recreation (vindicating their adaptive function), and demands that audiences’ enjoyment should not only be explained on the basis of morality and its associated emotions.

The third of the E=E debates was introduced by the aforementioned Mary Beth Oliver and Anne Bartsch and was titled ‘Appreciation of Entertainment: The Importance of Meaningfulness via Virtue and Wisdom.’ In this work, the two researchers present the concept of appreciation, which they define as a unique response to entertainment that is very different from enjoyment. After conceptualizing it and differentiating the questions of emotional valence, Oliver and Bartsch present different types of portrayal of entertainment that, in their opinion, provoke feelings of appreciation.

However, the researchers also maintain that appreciation, as a response, is more evident in certain forms of entertainment that focus on human virtues and inspire audiences to consider issues related with the meaning of life. Finally, Oliver and Bartsch, after considering the affective and cognitive components of appreciation, defend the idea that it is mixed affective responses that best define this experience and the sentiments it inspires, such as tenderness and awe.

The essay by the aforementioned researchers was responded to by Christoph Klimmt (Universität Mainz, Germany), a researcher who, at an astounding rate, has produced works of reference on media entertainment, video games, the processing and effects of the media, and new technologies. Klimmt’s response to Oliver and Bartsch’s essay owes its roots to his interest in research methods, and is titled ‘Media Psychology and Complex Modes of Entertainment Experiences.’ In his text, he begins by maintaining that most progress in the conceptualization of entertainment has been achieved from a typically Anglo-American approach: theoretical construction directed by empirical inquiry. However, he recognizes that, through the concept of appreciation, Oliver and Bartsch have introduced a conceptual expansion of entertainment theory that is very different from what we have seen in recent years. Therefore, after highlighting the complexity of the experience of appreciation, and analyzing the contribution made by these authors, Klimmt’s essay offers suggestions that will help expand the conceptual horizon of the complex experiences of entertainment. Many of his comments concentrate on identifying the fundamental methodological aspects that he believes the inventors of the term ‘entertainment’ have ignored. In particular, Klimmt questions whether the methods that were applied in search of progress in traditional entertainment theory were the right ones for furthering our understanding of such complex response models as appreciation.

The last of the E=E debates was initiated by Ronald Tamborini (Michigan State University, USA) and was titled ‘Moral Intuition and Media Entertainment.’ Tamborini has enjoyed a distinguished career in teaching and research. In fact, many of his works, such as that on traditional media and new manifestations, are major reference works both in the education and entertainment settings. He has recently been studying the influence of the media on social perception and morality – and the essay he presented to our event was the fruit of this research. The text is based on the idea that most studies of the relationship between morality and the media have adopted the rationalist perspective of moral psychologists. However, Tamborini feels there is a need to consider an intuitionist perspective, believing that this could help clarify both the simple and the complex processes that modulate the relationship between morality and entertainment. So, in his essay, he reviews the moral foundations theory (MFT) and the concept that moral judgement is an evaluative response that is primarily produced by intuition and, occasionally, by rational thought. Then, to illustrate the capacity of intuitive processes for predicting relationships in simple entertainment contexts, he reviews different research projects on the differences between narrative preferences. He then pauses to comment on two processes that reveal the complex emotional reactions associated with moral dilemmas. Finally, Tamborini shows how useful his model is for distinguishing between the concepts of enjoyment and appreciation.

The above work was discussed by Helena Bilandzic (Universität Augsburg, Germany), who presented ‘The Complicated Relationship Between Media and Morality: A Response to Ron Tamborini’s Model of ‘Moral Intuition and Media Entertainment’ From a Narrative Perspective.’ Bilandzic has published influential articles in some of the most renowned communication journals. Her investigations have focused on observing narrative experiences, persuasion, cultivation processes, the use of the media, and aspects of methodology. At E=E, Bilandzic discussed Tamborini’s model in depth. First of all, she recognizes that the proposal offers a wide variety of new and inspiring insights into the difficult relationship between the media and morality. She specifically considers there to be much merit behind the idea of modeling moral judgement as a result of alternative processing routes, and also acknowledges that it has many interesting potential applications. She feels that it is an excellent proposal because it brings together two different types of effect that are related with morality and that have been identified by the empirical literature (moral and ethical). Nevertheless, Bilandzic also reveals and analyzes certain shortcomings of the model that she feels should be examined prior to any future theorizations or empirical testing. In particular, Bilandzic believes that the proposal, in its current state, ignores certain aspects related with audiences’ interpretations of media content, narrative fillings-in, and the cognitive integration of differing moral examples. Bilandzic’s work carefully dissects Tamborini’s model, and the result is a revealing text that presents those with an interest in the subject with a series of highly stimulating intellectual questions.

Independent Contributions

As we said, this special edition of E=E, which includes the four core discussions presented in the previous paragraphs,
also includes the two independent texts that we shall now introduce. The first of these, by José Ignacio Latorre (Universitat de Barcelona, Spain) and María T. Soto-Sanfiel (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain), is titled "Toward a Theory of Intellectual Entertainment." As we mentioned earlier, this work is the result of a collaboration between academics from such diverse fields as communication and physics, and could therefore be considered an eclectic approach. The text seeks to draw attention to a form of entertainment that is available in the media on an everyday basis, but that has maintained a low profile: that which includes small challenges and mental exercises (e.g., chess problems). In their essay, the researchers seek to describe the set of processes related to its consumption. Latorre and Soto-Sanfiel believe that this particular form of intellectual entertainment mimics the sequence of stages, and their complex emotions, that accompany scientific discovery. In fact, they claim that there are commonalities between the process of scientific inquiry and that of solving an entertainment challenge. The researchers consequently present a holistic and multidimensional theory of intellectual entertainment and associate it to the main ideas in the field.

Finally, the last of the essays contained in this special edition is that presented by Peter Vorderer, titled "What’s Next? Remarks on the Current Vitalization of Entertainment Theory." In his essay, Vorderer analyzes the evolution of research in the area in recent years. He goes on to model the approach to entertainment today and defines this as a complex response and a two-dimensional phenomenon in which the mere search for pleasure coexists alongside a more elaborate appreciation of the content. On the basis of his background work, Vorderer proposes that there is no such thing as complete satisfaction with exposure to the media, even though the receivers consume it in the hope of fulfilling their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To complete his essay, Vorderer identifies the areas that he feels need more in-depth examination. The researcher senses the need for a better understanding of the cultural differences between responses to entertainment, and at the same time, for integrating different cultural sensitivities in the study of the phenomenon. He also believes that there is still a need for further observation of the psychological states that explain exposure to the media. Vorderer, however, concludes his work by identifying and formulating a fundamental question that has yet to be answered: Why do we all spend so much time on media entertainment? The researcher feels the answer to this question still deserves much more work and attention.

### Concluding Remarks

As can be gathered from the previous paragraphs, E=Emotion invited evaluation, reflection, and inspiration. It is therefore not only a pleasure for us to present some of its resulting publications, but is also a chance for us to feel proud of our commitment to knowledge and scientific praxis.

We, the organizers, would like to dedicate a few lines of gratitude to the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science and the Fundación Centro de Ciencias de Benasque Pedro Pascual (CCBPP) for providing the funds to organize Entertainment=Emotion. We would also like to thank Jose Ignacio Latorre, managing director of the CCBPP, for his invitation and encouragement. Also, many thanks to the staff at the center (Tracey Patterson, Anna Aranda, Claudia Rojas, David Fuentes, and Tracey Paterson) for their attentive and diligent collaboration throughout every stage of organization of E=Emotion. And a very special thank you goes to Ute Ritterfeld for her generous contributions to the design of the event. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the editors of IJART, and most particularly, to the Journal of Media Psychology, for participating in the project and helping us to provide an account of the results of our meeting, and for sharing our interest in encouraging further progress in research into entertainment and emotion.

**Date of acceptance:**

Maria T. Soto-Sanfiel is professor in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising I, of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, Spain). She received her PhD in audiovisual communication from UAB in 2000 with a dissertation on the impact of audiovisual perception of the speaker on the credibility of its voice. She specializes in audiovisual media and communication research, focusing both on effects and design-production of contents. Her current research interests include creation and reception of interactive narratives, perception of entertainment experiences (particularly intellectual), voice, and media scientific outreach. She has also produced and directed television programs. Together with her academic work, nowadays, she directs two interactive media projects related to the popularization of science (an Internet protocol TV station [IPTV] at www.inscience.tv and an IPRadio). She coorganized with Peter Vorderer the workshop "Entertainment=Emotion." Based on the results of this scientific meeting, Soto and Vorderer have coedited the present special issue and another one for the International Journal of Arts and Technology.
Peter Vorderer (PhD, Technical University of Berlin, Germany) is Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim (Germany). His previous affiliations include the University of Music and Theater in Hannover (Germany), the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California (USA), and the Free University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). He specializes in media use and media effects research with a focus on media entertainment and digital games. He has served as editor of the journals Zeitschrift fuer Medienpsychologie and Media Psychology. He coorganized “Entertainment=Emotion” with M. T. Soto-Sanfiel. Based on the results of this scientific meeting, Vorderer and Soto-Sanfiel have coedited the present special issue and another for the International Journal of Arts and Technology.
The Role of Feeling in the Entertainment = Emotion Formula
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Abstract. This paper examines feelings and emotions in relation to entertainment experiences. Feelings reflect an appraisal of everyday events or media products that shape our experience of pleasure and interest which are complementary. Pleasure can result from the meaningful interpretation of a program or from positive associations that it evokes. Interest in a program can result from intellectual engagement and a search for meaning or simply to alleviate boredom. According to a reactive model of media involvement, a person selects stimuli which modulate feelings of pleasure or excitement. This affective covariation process is superficial in the sense that there is no need for deep processing in order to determine the value of the stimulus. Emotions are more closely tied to the self and the meaning of social situations. Emotion can be related to a reflective model of aesthetic involvement whereby a person interprets the work in terms of relevant aesthetic knowledge and personal life experiences. This search for underlying layers of meaning leads to deeper aesthetic engagement and emotional elaboration. The main point here is that processes related to the experience of feelings and emotions run concurrently. Feelings reflect more global responses to events involving characters and plots. Emotions are more firmly grounded in the search for meaning in depicted situations and implicate the lives of audiences who watch the programs.

Keywords: emotion, pleasure, interest, self, media, culture

The formula Entertainment = Emotion is certainly catchy, but what exactly does it mean? The word entertainment denotes, in the English language at least, “something affording pleasure, diversion, or amusement, especially a performance of some kind.” (Random House Webster’s Dictionary) This definition suggests two things. First, the purpose of entertainment is to make a person feel good or experience excitement. Entertainment, therefore, implies lighter programming that modulates feelings but does not evoke deeper emotions. Second, to the extent that entertainment is associated with a performance, it usually takes place in front of an audience who share the experience. However, with the advent of television and personal media devices, individuals can also seek entertainment in a private setting. What are the implications of this shift from collective to solitary engagement? Does it parallel the movement toward private reading of pocket-size books? The term emotion in the formula is equally problematic because it encompasses both feelings related to pleasure, interest, and arousal, and words associated with primary emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and sadness are oriented toward particular situations that are meaningful to the person and related to the self. The relationship between feelings and emotions needs to be spelled out for important theoretical reasons. It can be argued that feelings are more “bodily” and emotions are more “mental.” How do cognitive and bodily processes interact, then, to shape feelings and emotions in everyday life and during entertainment events or aesthetic episodes? A solution to this apparent contradiction can be reached by describing complementary ways in which mental and bodily processes combine to generate feelings and emotions.

Feeling as the Shadow of Cognition and as an Awareness of Bodily Processes: Pleasure, Interest, and Arousal
I adopt the position that feelings imply an awareness of bodily states or mental processes. For example, a person might

say, “I feel pleasure (or pain)” or “I feel excited,” thereby referring to bodily states. Scholars have been less clear about the status of interest, with some arguing that it is a primary emotion (Izard, 1971) and others treating it as a type of orienting response (see Berlyne, 1971, 1974). Berlyne (1971) showed that interest increases linearly as a function of complexity, whereas pleasure is associated with an inverted U-shaped curve wherein people prefer moderate levels of complexity. This provided empirical support for Fechner’s (1878/1867) principle of the aesthetic middle. In contrast to Berlyne’s adherence to Fechner’s “objective” psychology based on contrived stimuli, Arnheim (1985) found some seeds of Gestalt theory in Fechner’s idea that people could sense gravity through the tendency toward stability in their living centers.

We found complementary relations between pleasure and interest in a study where participants made pair-wise comparisons between paintings under contrasting instructional sets (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1990). The interest set instructed them to adopt a detached and objective viewpoint, whereas the pleasing set instructed them to relate to the paintings subjectively and personally before making their judgments. There were two dimensions underlying detached judgments of the interest value of paintings. The first had to do with a search for knowledge and meaning in the midst of complexity and was comparable to Berlyne’s (1949) original “curiosity” dimension. The second showed that participants found unfamiliar paintings to be more interesting. This was consistent with Berlyne’s (1949) “variation” dimension, which involved the alleviation of boredom through mere novelty. Two dimensions also accounted for judgments of pleasingness. The first dimension, emotional associations, contrasted paintings depicting social interaction that were simple, warm, and emotionally moderate with complex, cold, and emotionally intense paintings illustrating negative themes, such as aggression and social alienation. The second dimension represented affective effectance, the pleasure that comes from meaningfully interpreting challenging materials, an idea Reception Theorists have favoured since the 1960s (e.g., Schmidt, 1982).

There are a number of implications here for the analysis of entertainment. Interest in a program can result from intellectual engagement and a search for meaning or for alleviating boredom. Pleasure can result from the meaningful interpretation of a program or from the positive associations that it evokes. Interest and pleasure are therefore complementary processes. At a superficial level, a program can serve merely to distract a bored viewer and elicit pleasant associations. At a more profound level, a viewer can be drawn into the interpretive process that is pleasurable in and of itself: the pleasure of hermeneutic effort, so to speak. The feelings of pleasure and interest, therefore, imply an awareness of the process of engagement and its byproducts, relative interpretive success or personal associations: In this sense, feelings are the shadow of cognition. A third feeling that needs to be considered is the experience of arousal or excitement associated with gut-level encounters with stimulus events. Feelings therefore reflect an awareness of bodily and mental processes.

Affective Covariation and Entertainment

In recent publications (Cupchik, 2002, in press), I traced the development of a motivational tradition originating in the Enlightenment, which focused on the relative pleasure derived from practical actions in everyday life. This action-oriented tradition assumed a principle of affective covariation, whereby the perceived positive or negative value of stimuli is correlated with dimensions of feeling including pleasure, interest, and arousal. A matching criterion determines whether a stimulus has the potential for a positive or negative effect on pleasure or arousal, given a person’s expectations and needs (hence the covariation principle). In an artistic context, English and French Neoclassical theatre of the 1700s stressed the manipulation of an audience’s emotions through the judicious selection of character, situation, and plot in order to simulate the social world (Schneider, 1995). The resulting associations were sufficient to make the theatrical event appear real and thereby elicit emotions.

According to a reactive model of media involvement (Cupchik, 1995; Cupchik & Winston, 1992), a person selects stimuli that modulate feelings of pleasure or excitement. Thus, someone in a nostalgic mood might choose a romantic film that elicits warm and pleasurable feelings. Another person who is bored and in need of stimulation might prefer action films, which foster an energized experience of dramatic uncertainty. This is a homeostatic process because exposure to an appropriate stimulus will ultimately diminish the need and terminate interest in the evocative stimulus. Of course, the process is bi-directional because some films, books, or television programs are designed to elicit feelings of pleasure or excitement in readers or viewers. This affective covariation process is more superficial because there is no need for deep processing in order to determine the value of the stimulus. The process is reminiscent of the Uses and Gratification model in media studies (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) and is akin to affective surfing because the person will immediately feel the affective implications of the program and respond accordingly.

Emotion as a Link Between the Self and Bodily Responses to Meaningful Events

Primary emotions, such as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, or disgust are considered to have adaptive value because they link the person to meaningful situations and events, social or otherwise. The use of the word “am” in the phrase “I am happy” implies that emotions are related to the active self for whom emotions have existential value. The interpretation of situational meaning can be considered more profound than the appraisal of its relative value in meeting needs and achieving goals. It is also more holistic and
exhaustive, whereas appraisal is limited to critical dimensions or features and terminates once needs or expectations are matched. All potentially important aspects of a situation must be taken into account in order to interpret its meaning in a coherent manner, whether in everyday life or an aesthetic context.

Emotional Elaboration and Entertainment

In an earlier project (Cupchik, 2002), I noted that the introduction of the term “emotion” reaches back to the 17th century and the shift in discourse from “passion” to “emotion”, which paralleled the increased secularization of society (see Danziger, 1997; Dixon, 2003). The idea that emotion does not merely overcome a person but, rather, the person actively plays a role in emotion-related episodes is very much linked to the emergence of individuals as active agents who assume responsibility for their lives; hence, a new emphasis is placed on the self and emotion. Interestingly, theory of drama during the Romantic era in eighteenth-century Germany emphasized the recreation of meaningful life situations and episodes that would absorb audiences. The goal was not mere simulation through the manipulation of isolated features (related to character, setting, or plot) but distillation or embodiment of meaningful truths that stimulated reflection and permitted catharsis. This can be related to a reflective model of aesthetic engagement (Cupchik, 1995; Cupchik & Winston, 1992), whereby a person interprets the stimulus, be it a painting, short story, or drama in terms of relevant aesthetic knowledge and in relation to personal life experiences. The principle of emotional elaboration implies that a person searches for underlying layers of meaning. Since cognition can never be separated from emotion, a deeper understanding must always include relevant emotional life experiences, which are either personally recollected or vicariously experienced. This personal absorption guarantees richness and depth of understanding in contrast to the narrow precision of appraisal-based analyses. The deeper the analysis, the stronger the remembrance of a particular work, in line with the contrast between recall and recognition (Garner, 1962). The reflective model holds that a deeper aesthetic engagement occurs when a person allows the work to resonate through his or her emotional life experiences. A search for coherence in the unfolding narrative, be it a short story, play, novel, or film provides an occasion, not simply to digress into one’s own life, but to critically embrace the episode and adopt a fresh perspective on life.

The value of emotional elaboration has been demonstrated in a variety of our studies dealing with the reception of short stories (Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994; Cupchik, Leonard, Axelrad, & Kalin, 1998; Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998; Vorderer, Cupchik, & Oatley, 1997), novels (Braun & Cupchik, 2001), sculptures (Cupchik & Shereck, 1998), and paintings (Cupchik & Gignac, 2007). The findings showed that readers slow down their pace when a short story excerpt is personally relevant (Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994; Cupchik, Leonard et al., 1998); when they can be absorbed in a text to the extent of imagining that they are in the scene (Braun & Cupchik, 2001); when they relate scenes depicted by sculptures back to their own life experiences (Cupchik & Shereck, 1998); and when they immerse themselves into multilayered images that remind them of their own life experiences and stimulate reflection on personal growth (Cupchik & Gignac, 2007).

When a person engages in emotional elaboration, he or she runs the risk of anamnesis, an excessive digression into the self and consequent abandoning of the actual work. This was precisely the point made by Edward Bullough (1912) in his classic paper on psychical distance. He noted that people seek to achieve a proper balance between aesthetic absorption, which increases with the personal relevance of a piece, and aesthetic distance, which is a result of detached analysis. The central principle is therefore maximal involvement without excessive self-absorption: “utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance.” (Bullough, 1912, p. 94) This was the meaning behind Samuel Taylor Coleridges’s (1983/1817) notion of “willing suspension of disbelief,” a readiness to abandon strict criteria of verisimilitude in order to enter literary consciousness and imagine the depicted scene as if it were real.

Reconciling Feelings and Emotions

I have adopted the position that feelings are the shadow of cognition in the sense that appraisals of the quality or value of an analyzed event are experienced via feelings of pleasure, interest, or excitement. These feelings are a result of mental activity or reflect the explicitly recognized effect of events. Since feelings reflect a response to both mental and bodily events, it can also be argued that feelings represent the form of an emotion. This idea is specifically tied to an aesthetic model of emotion. The distinction between subject matter and form in any aesthetic work, be it a painting, short story, or film and the distinction between the subject matter that stimulates an emotional episode and the bodily form of its experience are comparable. Accordingly, when people experience a deep emotion, the very parameters of experience are transformed; time slows down or speeds up, space expands or contracts, sensory awareness may become acute, a sense of connection to others may be enhanced or diminished, and the structure of causality may be distorted when the event is self-related. A crucial point is that these transformations are spontaneously and implicitly embodied in people’s experience of the event itself and projected onto their world, either onto an everyday event or onto their experience of a play, story, or film.

I therefore arrive at two conclusions concerning the relations between feelings and emotions. First, feelings are the shadow of cognition when people are explicitly aware of bodily states of pleasure, interest, or excitement. They can then use these feelings to better adapt to certain stimuli and to reach decisions about what something means and how valuable it is for them. Second, feelings are the form of an emotion when people are personally absorbed in an
event and experience it in an expressive way. This expressive reaction spontaneously and implicitly shapes their experience without their being aware of the subtle changes involved. The unity of this experience is characterized by changes in the very parameters of experience: temporality, spatiality, causality, sensory awareness, and social connection. These transformations are felt by the person especially if accompanied by subtle bodily changes that further shape the experience of meaning projected onto the world. In the first case, one sees that a feeling of pleasure or excitement is a direct result of worldly events. In the second case, one spontaneously sees (and feels) the world as an embodiment of one’s worst fears, greatest hopes, and so forth. People thus project their experiences onto the world.

This account of feelings and emotions can be applied to the roots of so-called objective and subjective knowledge. Objective knowledge is ostensibly the result of a rational analysis of worldly events. According to my argument here, objective knowledge involves the explicit and self-conscious application of arbitrary standards about what is real and what may be good or bad. Conversely, subjective knowledge is supposedly about idiosyncratic perceptions and interpretations of worldly events. However, according to my analysis, meaning is implicitly projected onto the world and treated as if it were true! The value of insight into mental processes is therefore twofold and complementary. It is important to appreciate how culturally shaped knowledge of a standard determines what people believe to be true; this knowledge is, in fact, arbitrary. It is equally important to appreciate how a world that appears so real can be shaped by idiosyncratic needs, feelings, and emotions.

The Complementarity of Feelings and Emotions

When a person is exposed to entertainment, two complementary processes unfold, which try to answer different questions. One process is concerned with what the program is about, and the answer is supplied by setting, plot, and character details. The person will be absorbed and will want to know how it all comes together, to the extent that the program is seen as real. The writer and editor of the program have a level of control over this process, tossing valuable cues (and ‘red herrings’) here and there, usually embedded in characters and their actions in different situations. The character is at the behest of the unfolding plot and is constrained by the story. Feelings of interest, pleasure, and excitement sustain the readers through the developing narrative or prompt them to close the book.

A second process, simultaneous and complementary to that described above, is not concerned to such an extent with the “realism” of the story but, rather, with the message that it conveys, or its truth value. Scholars of the Romantic era in eighteen-century Germany, such as the Schlegel brothers, described successful narratives as relating meaningfully to social episodes that people experience in their daily lives (see Wilkinson, 1945). Here, the notion of social situations and episodes embedded in organically unfolding narratives contrasts the notion of mechanical simulation set forth by the Enlightenment theorists. The synthetic value or ecological validity of the story stimulates an interpretive process involving both social and story knowledge. Personal knowledge places a story in a private context and brings about emotions experienced in the past in relation to the represented episode. However, the author challenges the person to find meaning embedded in the work, and this reflective effort engages the person in elaborated emotions pertaining to the truths of life. Such entertainment episodes create the ideal context for transcendence, both personal and aesthetic. Furthermore, when a program, such as a movie or a dramatic theatre play, is seen in a public setting, shared social experiences and values shape the viewing experience and provide an opportunity for group catharsis or stimulation.

The Two Sides of Novelty

The balance between experiencing feelings and full blown emotions in an entertainment episode relates to the contrast between superficiality and depth. Feelings run along the surface of these encounters and are very much tied to the novelty of the episode and the person’s effort to assimilate it into available mental schemas (as Piaget might argue). Accordingly, a program that depicts an original event (yet one whose genre is familiar) stimulates feelings that overshadow the entertainment episode. Interest reflects the extent to which a program is engaging. Pleasure marks the success with which a person understands the unfolding plot and experiences positive associations. Excitement is shaped by the simulated novelty of the situation (i.e., the plot) and the potential danger embodied in it (within the safe confines of the theatre). It is in this context that the principle of affective covariation applies, because it links specific features of the program to affective needs and desires.

Familiarity plays a much greater role in the experience of emotions according to the principle of emotional elaboration. While, at the outset, familiarity superficially pertains to the “reality” of the characters, setting, or plot, a deeper and more abstract level of analysis concerns the situation or problem itself. To what extent does the depicted episode ring true? Profoundly meaningful episodes must relate to human emotions and, when these episodes are familiar, the emotions run deep. The principle of emotional elaboration applies here because one cannot fathom the depths of the episode depicted on stage or in the program without understanding the emotions that are implicated in all their nuance and subtlety. Thus, personal life experiences play an important role in this process.

The main point underlined here is that processes related to experiencing feelings and emotions run concurrently. Feelings reflect global responses to events involving characters and plots. Emotions are more firmly grounded in the search for meaning in a depicted situation and implicate the actual lives of audiences. One can imagine the process in terms of a layer cake metaphor. The top layer has to do with the
“presence” of the program, its salience for the person, which is a product of its perceptual novelty (e.g., exotic location) and mere intensity (e.g., dramatic action). This salience draws the person in but is not sufficient to prevent him or her from changing the channel and shifting attention to another program. It is the dual quality of novelty/familiarity which is crucial. Novelty engages the person in an effort to resolve uncertainty or to identify with certain characters who are appealing. Familiarity makes it possible for a person to understand what happening; in the case of deep familiarity, the events touch home and awaken deep emotions that may sometimes feel uncomfortable. If the emotion becomes too painful, the person will turn away. If there is sufficient aesthetic distance, on the other hand (the knowledge that, after all, this is only a play), the person can cope with the work, liberate repressed feelings, and realize that his or her own pain is shared by others, or at least by the playwright. Masterpieces are said to ply the waters of feelings and emotions, utilizing affective covariation and emotional elaboration to both engage audiences and awaken them to the verities of life.

A Note on Method

How, then, does one explore the dynamics and processes proposed to underlie feelings and emotions? One strategy is to select materials that vary along important stimulus dimensions and observe how participants react to them. For example, Allison Gignac and I (Cupchik & Gignac, 2007) have presented participants with paintings that varied in the extent to which images were superimposed onto one another. Those who were most disposed (as a personality trait) to become absorbed in artworks, music, stories, or films found meaning related to personal growth in these works. On the other hand, participants who were in a negative mood state when arriving at the laboratory preferred novels, which is an illustration of catharsis. In another project, Michelle Hilscher and I (Cupchik & Hilscher, 2008) examined participants’ reactions to industrial design objects that “moved them” and found that originality and a relationship to personal identity shaped these attachments.

I propose that a good methodological strategy would be to start out by asking participants to bring to the research session examples of stories or programs that evoke feelings or deep emotions. The researcher can read or view the program selection together with the participants and have them perform a “feel aloud” or “emote aloud” task in which they point out when feelings or emotions are evoked. At this point, the participant also describes those feelings or emotions. The question then arises as to what features of the narrative are provoking these feelings or emotions. The participant may not be able to explain why the piece evoked a particular feeling or emotion, because it is a spontaneous process. However, working together may make it easier to determine those features of the program relating to setting, plot, or character that combine with meaningful scenes to produce the observed effects. We have had great success performing a structural analysis of responses to all kinds of stimuli to understand how people relate to their worlds. I recommend the same method to the analysis of entertainment and its effects.

References


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Abstract. This contribution explores the relationship of emotion and cognition in entertainment experience. Drawing on the reflective model of aesthetic experience (Cupchik, 1995) and the concept of appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), we propose a multi-level view of affective processing that includes simple affect schemata as well as more elaborate forms of sociomoral reasoning that build on this basic layer of emotional meaning. To better understand how affective factors can stimulate or impede cognitive elaboration processes, we review research on motivated cognition that has dealt with the influence of arousal, valence, and personal relevance on cognitive depth. The role of affect in defensive information processing (i.e., the motivated neglect or denial of information) is also considered. Specifically, we discuss how research on motivated cognition can help explain thought-provoking entertainment experiences, and the potential of such experiences to stimulate self-reflection and personal growth.

Keywords: entertainment, affect, motivated cognition, appreciation, eudaimonia

For nearly two decades, the work of Gerald Cupchik and his associates (Cupchik, 1995; Cupchik & Gignac, 2007; Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998; Cupchik & Shereck, 1998) has dealt with a topic that entertainment researchers have only begun to fully appreciate and explore in recent years, namely the relationship of emotion and cognition in art and entertainment experience. It is a commonplace assumption in emotion theory that emotion and cognition are inseparable (cf. Damasio, 1994; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001); however, in the field of entertainment research, relatively little is known thus far about the ways in which emotion and cognition intertwine in individuals' processing of movies, novels, games, TV shows, and other entertainment offerings.

The fact that entertainment research focuses mainly on emotions is due, perhaps, to a widely held belief that audiences' emotional involvement with media content comes at the expense of cognitive depth and rational scrutiny. One of the most popular and radical expressions of this view is Postman's (1985) Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, where he argues that the growing prevalence of emotion-focused entertainment media, and their successive merger with the news media, will lead to a decline in serious information and meaningful political debate. This concern is also echoed in research on infotainment, politainment, and the tabloidization of news (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Other lines of research have also dealt with less than rational learning and persuasion effects from emotionally engaging media content as well, including, for instance, research on exemplification (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002), and narrative persuasion (Appel & Richter, 2007; Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). Collectively, these lines of research seem to suggest that emotional involvement with media content promotes a superficial and heuristic mode of information processing, which makes the viewer susceptible to different kinds of cognitive fallacies and biases and can lead to irrational persuasion effects (cf. Appel & Richter, 2007; Wheeler et al., 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Cupchik’s Reflective Model of Aesthetic Experience

The work of Cupchik (1995; this issue) recognizes that entertainment experience can be affect-oriented and intellectually superficial. This aspect of entertainment is covered by his reactive model of aesthetic experience. At the same time, however, Cupchik confronts this notion with a radically different view of emotion and cognition in aesthetic experience. His reflective model of aesthetic experience assumes that emotional involvement with an artwork can also have the opposite effect, that is, the experience of emotions can be associated with heightened levels of reflectiveness, insight, and personal meaning:

The reflective model holds that a deeper aesthetic engagement occurs when a person allows the work to resonate through his or her emotional life experiences. A search for coherence in the unfolding narrative, be it a short story,
play, novel, or film, provides an occasion, not simply to digress into one’s own life, but to critically embrace the episode and adopt a fresh perspective on life. (Cupchik, this issue, p. 8).

In a series of qualitative studies on individuals’ experience of artworks, Cupchik and colleagues found evidence that personal memories and reflectiveness can be stimulated by emotional viewing or reading experiences in a variety of genres. For example, the studies showed that readers can find personal meaning in short story excerpts (Cupchik et al., 1998), can relate scenes depicted by sculptures back to their own life experiences (Cupchik & Shereck, 1998), and can be inspired by multilayered images that evoke personal memories and stimulate reflection on personal growth (Cupchik & Gignac, 2007).

This reflective model of aesthetic experience does not seem to be confined to “high culture” products such as literature, sculptures, or paintings. Early research from a uses-and-gratifications perspective has revealed comparable gratification factors in film and TV audiences. For example, Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) found that in addition to using media for purposes of entertainment and relaxation, individuals also reported using media as a means of experiencing beauty and raising morale. Likewise, Tesser, Millar, and Wu’s (1988) research on movie gratifications identified a motivational factor labeled “self-development” that was characterized by greater interest in viewing films with the purpose of experiencing strong emotions and understanding how others think and feel. Recent research that has explored the field of more serious, poignant, and pensive media experiences, specifically (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2008), has confirmed that such experiences play an important role in audiences’ viewing motivations and gratifications. This serious entertainment factor is labeled “appreciation” by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and is described as “an experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience.” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, p. 76) Like Cupchik’s reflective model, the concept of appreciation assumes that, under certain conditions, emotions can stimulate more profound reflection on and elaboration of media content.

Thus, although the reflective model of aesthetic experience is less frequently considered in entertainment theory, it is backed by a growing body of empirical evidence as well. Hence, the question arises as to how both assumptions can be true. How can emotions be associated with a heuristic and superficial mode of information processing, on the one hand, and stimulate more profound reflection and elaboration, on the other hand?

Multiple Levels of Affective Processing

According to Cupchik (this issue), superficial and in-depth forms of affective processing are not mutually exclusive. To illustrate this point, he uses the metaphor of a layer cake: Affective processing usually starts at the top layer of simple perceptual schemata and appraisals, and then optionally proceeds to explore more complex and profound layers of meaning. To distinguish superficial and in-depth forms of affective processing, Cupchik discriminates between the role of “feelings” and “emotions” in aesthetic experience. Feelings are conceptualized in his model as fleeting states of pleasure, interest, and arousal that reflect the embodied processing of superficial meaning structures, such as the matching of media content with perceptual schemata and stereotypes, the construction of mental models of the story world, and the appraisal of media content with regard to the viewer’s needs and desires. Emotions, by contrast, are associated in his account with a more meaningful mode of processing that relates the media content to personal life experiences and creates a more holistic understanding of social situations and underlying verities of life.

This notion of multi-layered affective processing is in line with research on socioemotional development (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Mascolo & Fischer, 1998) indicating that complex moral concepts and self-images grow out of the stepwise integration and elaboration of simpler affect schemata. According to Fischer et al. (1990), basic emotion scripts and scripts of pleasant and unpleasant social interaction form the building blocks of more complex socioemoral reasoning, including abstract concepts such as “honesty” and “responsibility” or the development of mature self-images that integrate both positive and negative aspects of the self. As these authors point out, basic affect schemata that are acquired at early stages of socioemotional development continue to function independently, but are progressively embedded in architecture of more elaborate concepts and meaning structures, such that higher-order concepts reflect the relationship between basic affect schemata and their moral implications.

Through this lens of multi-layered affective processing, then, it may be wrong to ask whether affective processing per se is elaborate or superficial, as it seems that it can be either, depending on individuals’ willingness and ability to engage in more substantive processing after superficial layers of affective meaning have been decoded. As Cupchik suggests, the most gratifying kinds of art and entertainment experience seem to combine both levels of affective processing: “Masterpieces may be said to ply the waters of feelings and emotions, utilizing affective covariation and emotional elaboration to both engage audiences and awaken them to the verities of life.” (Cupchik, this issue).

Hence, a more fruitful question that entertainment researchers may ask is what motivates audiences, in terms of the layer cake metaphor, to either content themselves with enjoying the surface layer, or to explore and appreciate more profound layers of meaning.

The Role of Affect in Motivated Information Processing

In the field of persuasive communication, extensive research on motivated information processing has been conducted (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Forgas, 1995; Lang & Yegiyan, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Wegener, Petty,
which may help elucidate questions on the motivational background of cognitive elaboration and may inform future research on elaboration processes in the context of media entertainment. This literature is far too voluminous to be reviewed comprehensively in this contribution. Therefore, we focus on a set of three factors that are directly related to the role of affect in motivated information processing, namely the influence of personal relevance, valence, and arousal. Furthermore, we consider the role of affect in defensive processing, i.e., the motivated neglect or denial of information in the interest of goals such as mood-management or bolstering of self-esteem.

**Personal Relevance**

Personal relevance is one of the key elaboration factors that has been studied, for instance, in the framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Results from this line of research indicate that media users are motivated to process messages more thoroughly when the content of the message is relevant to their personal goals, values, and interests. A remarkably parallel claim about the role of personal relevance in emotion elicitation has been made by appraisal theories (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001). According to these theories, appraisal of events as relevant to personal goals and concerns is the key condition for emotion elicitation. Thus, apparently, the same relevance appraisals that evoke emotions seem to motivate the allocation of cognitive resources to the processing of information (cf. Lang & Yegiyan, 2008).

Despite the straightforwardness of this theoretical conclusion, a caveat is in place here concerning the fictional nature of much entertainment media content. If the people and events portrayed are purely fictional and cannot, therefore, affect the viewers' real-life concerns, the question arises as to how fictional media content can be perceived as personally relevant. Cupchik (this issue) suggests that evocation of personal memories may fill this theoretical gap and may account for the perceived relevance, emotional impact, and cognitively stimulating effects of fictional portrayals. A complementary explanation is that a sense of personal relevance may arise in the context of perspective taking, identification, and pansocial interaction with media characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Igartua, 2009; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). If the viewer adopts the perspective of one or more of the characters and appraises the fictional events from the characters' perspective, then a sense of personal relevance may be vicariously experienced, thus providing a basis for emotional responses and cognitive elaboration. Results of Igartua (2009) indirectly support this assumption, indicating that film viewers' identification with the characters is associated with more intense affective reactions and with greater cognitive elaboration of the film content.

**Affective Valence**

Research concerning the influence of affective valence on cognitive elaboration has typically supported the idea implied by the saying “sadder but wiser”, i.e., that positive moods are associated with a casual and heuristic style of processing, whereas negative moods are associated with a more careful and reflective style of processing (e.g., Fiedler & Bless, 2001; Forgas, 1995; Lang & Yegiyan, 2008). The theoretical assumption behind much of this research is that the valence of mood serves as information that guides the allocation of cognitive resources: A positive mood signals to the organism that things are going right, and that casual information processing is sufficient, whereas a negative mood signals that important concerns are at stake, and that careful processing is required to avoid erroneous actions and decisions (cf. Fiedler & Bless, 2001; Forgas, 1995).

These findings concerning the influence of affective valence on the depth of cognitive processing seem to fall in line with research on movie enjoyment and appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), which indicates that among movies from different genres, dramas were perceived to be most thought provoking, whereas comedies were rated least thought provoking. However, despite the intuitive appeal of the idea that dramas and other forms of serious entertainment can make us sadder but wiser, this notion needs to be treated with some caution. First, it is important to note that entertainment is not typically associated with thoroughly negative feelings. Rather, the experience of dramas seems to be characterized by a co-occurrence of positive and negative valence, either in the form of mixed affect (Oliver, Limparos, Tamul, & Woolley, 2009) or in the form of negative feelings that are accompanied with positive meta-emotions (Bartsch, Appel, & Storch, in press; Oliver, 1993). Second, as Nabi (1999) points out, discrete emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness may be associated with specific effects on motivated processing that go beyond the influence of positive or negative valence per se. For example, although the levels of negative valence experienced in response to dramas and horror movies are comparable, horror films are perceived to be less thought provoking (Bartsch, Oliver, & Mangold, 2009). Thus, it seems that negative valence alone cannot account for the thought provoking appeal of dramas.

**Arousal**

Arousal is a third affective factor that has been found to influence the depth of cognitive processing (Keller & Block, 1995; Lang & Yegiyan, 2008). For example, in a study on public service announcements, Lang and Yegiyan (2008) found that arousing messages with both positive and negative valence were processed more carefully than calm positive and negative messages. Thus, at moderate levels, arousal seems to enhance cognitive elaboration. However, as Lang (2000) points out, the relationship between arousal and depth of processing may be reversed at high levels of arousal, specifically in the case of negative emotions. That is, at high levels of arousal, message scrutiny is diminished compared to that observed at moderate levels of arousal (cf. Sanbonmatsu & Kardes, 1988).

This inverted U-shape relationship of arousal with cognitive elaboration is explained by Lang (2000) within a psychophysiology framework referring to the dual function of
the aversive motivational system: At moderate levels, aversive arousal is assumed to motivate vigilance and careful information processing, whereas at high levels of arousal, emergency reactions such as the fight/flight reaction set in, redirecting the focus away from time consuming scrutiny and preparing the organism for unhesitant action (cf. LeDoux, 2002). In terms of entertainment, the inverted U-shape relationship of arousal with cognitive elaboration may help explain why horror movies, despite the particularly high levels of arousal typically experienced in response to this genre, are rated among the least thought-provoking entertainment experiences (cf. Bartsch et al., 2009).

Affective Factors in Defensive Processing

Finally, in addition to influencing the motivated elaboration of media content, affective factors also seem to be involved in defensive processing, that is, the motivated neglect or denial of information in the interest of goals such as mood-management or the protection of a positive self-image (Das & Fennis, 2008; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002; Wegener et al., 1995). For instance, individuals tend to disregard or downplay information that threatens their self-image (Das & Fennis, 2008; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002). Furthermore, the hedonic contingency view (Wegener et al., 1995) proposes that individuals in a good mood are motivated to preserve their good mood and are, therefore, more sensitive to the hedonic consequences of information processing than those who are in a negative mood and, thus, have little to lose in hedonistic terms. In line with this prediction, Wegener et al. (1995) found that individuals in a good mood were likely to process uplifting messages more carefully, and to process unpleasant messages less carefully, whereas for individuals in a negative mood, depth of processing was less influenced by the assumed hedonic consequences of message elaboration.

However, as Das and Fennis (2008; cf. Raghunathan & Trope, 2002) point out, such hedonistic motivations may be moderated by self-relevance. If messages are relevant to the self, intensive processing of negative information may have short-term affective costs, but it can also benefit the self in the longer run; for instance, it can promote the development of a more realistic and mature self-concept that integrates both informative and affective factors, more enduring personality traits may actually be associated with more complex patterns of affect and cognition may be even more complex than assumed in Cupchik’s (1995) active/reactive model of aesthetic experience in which self-relevance, via emotional memories, is conceived as the primary source of motivation to engage in elaborative processing of media content. The feeling qualities of affective valence and arousal that are assumed in his model to be linked with heuristic processing may actually be associated with more complex patterns of influence on cognitive elaboration. Furthermore, in addition to state-like affective factors, more enduring personality traits such as need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986), need for affect (Maio & Esses, 2001), or eudaimonic motivations (Oliver & Raney, 2008), which we cannot discuss here due to space limitations, may also contribute to individuals’ motivation to engage in elaborative processing of emotional media experiences.

Though it is a rather ambitious task to integrate and extend this complex body of research on motivated cognition within the context of entertainment research, we think it is worth the effort. Affective factors including arousal, valence, and personal relevance, as well as their interactions, seem to be among the primary determinants of individuals’ motivation to either content themselves with superficial, heuristic processing, or engage in more extensive elaboration and reflection. We think entertainment research could profit from expanding its current focus on emotion per se to the interplay of emotion and cognition, so as to better understand how media entertainment can not only provide its audiences with a (sometimes much needed) “brain holiday”, while also making people more cognizant and reflective of important information about the self and about reality that they tend to neglect in everyday life.

Summary and Outlook

To summarize, research on motivated information processing can offer a great deal of insight to entertainment researchers concerning the role of affect in cognitive elaboration of media content. Despite the cursoriness of the present overview, it seems safe to conclude that this role is far more complex than suggested by Postman’s (1985) notion of affect-oriented and intellectually demanding entertainment audiences. The interplay of affect and cognition may be even more complex than assumed in Cupchik’s (1995) active/reactive model of aesthetic experience in which self-relevance, via emotional memories, is conceived as the primary source of motivation to engage in elaborative processing of media content. The feeling qualities of affective valence and arousal that are assumed in his model to be linked with heuristic processing may actually be associated with more complex patterns of influence on cognitive elaboration. Furthermore, in addition to state-like affective factors, more enduring personality traits such as need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986), need for affect (Maio & Esses, 2001), or eudaimonic motivations (Oliver & Raney, 2008), which we cannot discuss here due to space limitations, may also contribute to individuals’ motivation to engage in elaborative processing of emotional media experiences.

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Mary Beth Oliver
The Role of Morality in Emotional Reactions to and Enjoyment of Media Entertainment

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Abstract. This article examines the complex role that morality plays in emotional reactions to media entertainment. Morality no doubt influences and to a certain extent governs our emotional responses to media, with the stories we chose to consume, the characters we love and hate, the rationale behind those feelings, the emotions that we experience on their behalf, and the pleasure and meaning comes as a result. Specifically, as media consumers, we experience emotional reactions to characters (liking), to their plights (anticipatory emotions), and to their ultimate outcomes (enjoyment and appreciation). Each of these emotional reactions are regulated by morality: character liking by moral judgments about the behaviors and motivations of characters, anticipatory emotions by sense of expected justice restoration, and enjoyment by the moral evaluation of the actual outcome portrayed in relation to the expected outcome. These processes and relationships are discussed in light of recent work on moral intuition, moral emotions, and moral disengagement.

Keywords: morality, moral disengagement, moral emotions, enjoyment, affective disposition theory

The investigation of entertainment as a media effect (cf. Zillmann & Bryant, 1994) has gained intellectual traction over the past decade. In simple terms, this line of research examines the experience of entertainment and enjoyment as an intended effect – perhaps with unintended consequences – of media consumption, with varying psychological processes and individual differences mediating and moderating this effect. From this perspective, researchers have noted the role of subjective viewer morality (Oliver, 1996; Raney, 2002, 2005; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975) and the desire to witness the righting of moral wrongs (Schmitt & Maes, 2006; Zillmann, 1998) as motivation for media genre selection and enjoyment. The importance of moral evaluation of characters and content (ADT; see below) and the disengagement of moral concern (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Klimmt, Schmid, Nesper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2006; Raney, 2004; Shafer, 2009) also contribute to the enjoyment process. This research will serve as the intellectual foundation for the current essay. However, to date, it has failed to sufficiently investigate the complex relationship between morality and emotions within the entertainment context. I hope to address these shortcomings in the following pages.

ADT and the Morality-Emotion-Entertainment Relationship

To begin the investigation, I turn to the one theory that directly addresses the morality-emotion-entertainment nexus: affective disposition theory (ADT; Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Most simply put, ADT seeks to explain how people derive enjoyment from entertainment. According to the theory, the enjoyment of media entertainment is a function of a viewer’s emotional connections with characters and with the narrative outcomes associated with those characters. Enjoyment within this tradition is most often described using emotional terms associated with pleasure, such as happiness, liking, and elation. In fact, many of the emotions associated with media entertainment can be characterized as moral emotions (Haidt, 2003). This point will be fully explained below.

Why should viewers emotionally invest in specific media characters? Which ones are worthy of their investment? Obviously, viewers are not as likely to root for the villain as for the hero. Social instinct dictates that favor not be doled out capriciously, whether in reality or fantasy. In daily life, moral sensibility or intuition (see Haidt, 2001, 2007) guides people to show partiality and favorability to those with whom they share values, beliefs, and morals—those whose behaviors and motivations fall within the boundaries of what the viewers find morally acceptable. The same is the case with media characters: People’s emotional side-taking with characters in entertainment must square with their notions of right and wrong. Media characters must be morally justifiable. Moral justification allows for partiality to be freely granted. Moreover, with justified partiality comes the moral amnesty to hope for the success of one, typically at the expense of another. Without such justification, granting favor to one character over another would lead to cognitive dissonance and distress (cf. Festinger, 1957) and to little enjoyment.
To determine to whom favor will be granted, entertainment viewers evaluate and judge the behaviors and motivations of characters (Zillmann, 2000). As a result, the more viewers judge the actions and motivations of a character to be morally correct, the more positive the disposition they form toward the character. In contrast, the more viewers judge the actions and motivations of a character to be morally incorrect, the more negative the disposition they form toward it. Many additional factors (e.g., character gender and attractiveness, plot, dialogue, genre, and viewer mood) also influence the affiliations people form with characters and ultimately the enjoyment of a particular narrative, but ADT studies have consistently demonstrated that moral considerations are central to the process of character liking (Raney, 2002, 2005; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975).

**Mortality and Emotional Reactions to Characters**

An emerging intuitionist perspective in moral psychology rejects the long-lived rationalist assumption that all moral judgments are the product of conscious moral cognition and reasoning. Instead, this “new synthesis” (Haidt, 2007) argues for the primacy of emotions and affect (Zajonc, 1980) and moral intuition (Barth & Chartland, 1999; Haidt, 2001), assuming an active and automatic evaluation of experiences—good–bad, like–dislike—generated by the phylogenetically old affective system in the brain. Moral intuitions, then, are “fast, automatic, and (usually) affect-laden processes in which an evaluative feeling of good–bad or like–dislike (about the actions or character of a person) appears in consciousness without any awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion.” (Haidt, 2007) This perspective aligns perfectly with earlier observations and speculations about disposition formation in the ADT literature that questioned the conscious moral contemplation of character behaviors and motivations (e.g., Raney, 2004). Thus, it can be stated that viewers experience moral feelings about characters, which dictate to whom favor is granted or withheld.

In turn, giving favor to characters governs viewers’ emotional involvement in the narrative. This is because partiality activates the “moral emotional process of empathy.” (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007) Once characters are liked, viewers can identify with their struggles, empathize with their pain, and hope for their ultimate success. On the other hand, once characters are disliked, viewers are unable to identify or empathize with them; in fact, because disliked characters stand in the way of a favored character’s success, viewers are free to hope for the downfall and demise of antagonists. Thus, when a beloved character is facing certain suffering and defeat, viewers feel apprehension and fear because of their empathic concern for the character. The key variable in this equation is the disposition, brought forth by moral considerations. Moral consideration leads to emotion, which opens the door to enjoyment.

**Moral Emotions and Entertainment**

Emotional reactions to characters alone cannot elicit enjoyment; merely liking or disliking characters is not enough. Enjoyment is bound to what those characters actually do within the narratives: They encounter trials and tribulations, joy and pain, victory and defeat. As alluded to above, viewers feel for characters in anticipation of the outcomes they might experience. By definition, the feelings that viewers experience are moral emotions, which Haidt (2003) described as those experienced in relation to social events not directly affecting the self. Surely, responses to media entertainment meet these criteria, as they involve emotions experienced in response to the trials and triumphs of (albeit mediated and fictional) others.

According to ADT, enjoyment should increase when liked characters experience positive outcomes and/or when disliked characters experience negative ones. Conversely, enjoyment should suffer when liked characters experience negative outcomes and/or when disliked characters experience positive ones. One the surface, this formula appears quite straightforward: The success of a loved one brings joy, while the success of an enemy brings pain. However, at the crux of this seemingly simplistic recipe is a complex set of moral-judgment ingredients. Carroll (1990) alludes to this complexity when describing fictional suspense as the tension generated by morally superior and morally inferior or evil potential outcomes. Although viewers might be tempted to describe any potential outcome as merely bad or good, Carroll points beyond such a simple dichotomy to the moral considerations upon which the character liking was initially based.

The implication to be drawn from Carroll’s (1990) assessment is that outcomes experienced by characters in drama constitute statements about justice and moral propriety; in fact, other researchers have made similar claims (e.g., Lachlan & Tamborini, 2008; Raney & Bryant, 2002). The so-called “justice sequence” (Raney & Bryant, 2002, p. 404) within fictional narratives is composed of one or more scenes in which an instigational and retributinal action are portrayed; upon presentation of both actions, the justice sequence is completed and a statement concerning justice has been made. For instance, when Tony Soprano orchestrates the murder of his friend turned FBI informant, Big Pussy, during the second season of The Sopranos, a statement about justice is made. Likewise, when the slovenly but loveable guy gets the “out of his league” girl at the end of countless romantic comedies, a statement about justice is made.

With the outcome portrayed, viewers must render an evaluation on the justice statement: To what extent does the resolution meet my expectations of fair treatment of liked characters? This evaluation is of ultimate importance: Enjoyment hangs in the balance. However, the evaluation involves comparing what is presented and what the viewer expects will be presented. The determination of what is fair, right, just, equitable, excessive, or insufficient is made by viewers, based upon expected outcomes and anticipatory emotions relative to the intensity of their affective dispositions toward characters and to their individually held notions of justice. Viewers expect that liked characters—favored
because they are morally upright in the first place—should act in a morally upright and justifiable manner, while hated characters will act in a morally unjustifiable manner. Therefore, it is morally proper for the protagonist to succeed and the antagonist to fail; this is not simply what viewers want to occur, but rather what they think should occur. Outcomes that advantage liked characters and punish hated ones are anticipated, hoped for, or feared because viewers think that such outcomes are morally justified and proper. Thus, the anticipatory emotions that people experience during a dramatic narrative are facilitated by a metaphysical hope for justice to reign and for good to overcome evil (cf. Appel, 2008; Goldstein, 1998; Rubin & Peplau, 1975), the intensity of which surely varies across viewers. When met, those anticipations lead to increased enjoyment.

In sum, viewers experience emotional reactions to dramatic characters (liking), to their plights (anticipatory hopes and fears), and to their ultimate outcomes (enjoyment). However, each of these emotional reactions is regulated by morality: character liking is regulated by moral judgments about the behaviors and motivations of characters; anticipatory emotions by a sense of expected justice restoration; and enjoyment by the moral evaluation of the actual outcome portrayed in relation to the expected outcome.

How Moral Are the Emotions Experienced with Entertainment?

Given the discussion to this point, one might quickly conclude that entertainment viewers are inundated with countless moral quandaries and judgments at every turn. It is no wonder that social critics and commentators often point to entertainment as playing a key role in the moral decline of society. Perhaps such a conclusion is nevertheless premature. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, many of the emotions experienced during entertainment consumption can be classified by definition as moral emotions. However, Haidt (2003) also offered a rich description and classification of moral emotions that should have some bearing on the present discussion. First, he argued that the moral aspect of an emotion is a matter of degree. Thus, some emotions are more prototypically moral than others. Second, he argued that a more prototypical moral emotion is distinguished from others along two basic dimensions: the nature of the elicitor and the resulting action tendency.

An event (e.g., an automobile accident) occurring to family members triggers an emotional reaction (e.g., sadness, empathy, distress); a similar event occurring to a complete stranger may also trigger an emotional reaction (e.g., compassion). The more disinterested the elicitor, the more moral the emotion. Thus, compassion is classified as more moral an emotion than sadness because it is elicited without an existing connection between the self and the eliciting event. Additionally, emotions naturally trigger a tendency to act in response to the eliciting event. Emotions triggering action tendencies that are prosocial in nature (rather than merely self-serving) are said to be more prototypically moral. Sadness and compassion might both prepare a person to intervene in the given example, but compassion is still classified as more moral because the triggered reaction is directed toward a disinterested party.

Hence, emotions can theoretically be plotted in a two-dimensional space as more or less moral using these criteria. Of course, such a classification is highly subjective, but Haidt (2003) offered one version of it. Although one might characterize emotional responses to media entertainment as moral by definition, in truth the most typical reactions to entertainment events—happiness, sadness, distress at the distress of others, fear, or Schadenfreude—all fall within the most minimal classification of moral emotions, as they are elicited by, and promote action toward, affiliated others. That is, the emotions that people experience while watching movies and television programs, reading a novel, or playing a video game can be characterized as moral emotions, but just barely. They are emotions experienced in reaction to beloved others that motivate self-interested (though impotent) actions.

This is not unexpected, however. Emotional involvement with entertainment requires partiality; it does not (or cannot) operate as entertainment when the viewer is disinterested in the portrayed events. Indifference toward characters does not generate the empathy necessary to prompt emotional reactions. Thus, the fact that media emotions are limited with respect to their moral component by the viewer’s self-interest in the outcomes makes immediate sense.

Prototypical moral emotions do exist, though; namely, (righteous) anger, elevation, guilt, and compassion (Haidt, 2003). These emotional reactions are not bound to self-interest in the eliciting event and trigger prosocial action tendencies when experienced. This leads me to the following question: Can entertainment elicit prototypical moral emotions? The simple response is “Yes.” For instance, every person can think of films, television series, novels, and even serious games that bring about feelings of compassion, guilt, anger, and elevation. At the same time, one should readily admit that these entertainment products seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

Prototypical moral emotion-evoking entertainment leads viewers to consider things beyond themselves. It leads them to contemplate their existence, to ruminate on the human condition. They feel prototypical moral emotions, but it seems that they think them as well. Stated differently, entertainment that elicits prototypical moral emotions seems to promote (or require) increased cognitive activity. In fact, people likely understand this difference and select their media content based on such a distinction.

As a matter of fact, a few researchers—most notably, Mary Beth Oliver (see Oliver in this issue; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Raney, 2008)—have begun arguing for a better conceptual distinction between media viewing motivated primarily by pleasure-centered enjoyment and that driven by eudaimonic or “truth seeking” appreciation. Media consumers seeking primarily to be amused pursue enjoyment and (hope to) experience positive affect. Those more driven by a desire to ponder life’s purpose and meaningfulness pursue appreciation and (hope to) experience a complex combination of affect and cognition. The researchers contend that hedonistic enjoyment is the default motivation for most.
viewers, but they also agree that most (if not all) viewers seek in addition to experience and appreciate the greater insight that entertainment can sometimes offer.

Within the current context, I argue that the enjoyment-appreciation distinction also illuminates the differences in moral emotions experienced by consumers. Some entertainment experiences yield more moral emotional reactions than others. This claim leads to some interesting questions: Are some people more naturally inclined to seek out media that elicits prototypical moral emotions? If so, what individual difference variables would predict this? Can such desires be cultivated? Moreover, what are the repercussions of seeking out—or better yet, not seeking out—media experiences that stimulate moral emotional responses? Can doing so or not doing so improve, inhibit, erode, or quicken our moral and emotional responses to real-world situations? A brief section addressing these questions will conclude the present discussion.

Possible Effects of Experiencing Moral Emotions with Entertainment

In keeping with the appreciation literature mentioned above, I contend that motivations for entertainment viewing or playing matter considerably. From a selective exposure perspective, it seems reasonable to assume that the exercise of moral reasoning within fiction and fantasy is functional. In fact, scholars have noted for decades that mediated stories and other forms of play (cf. Vorderer, 2001) offer great opportunity to confront the feared and dreaded in a nonthreatening environment, to rehearse life skills through vicarious experiences, to battle one’s demons by watching others slay their own. Using entertainment narratives for therapy and practical purposes certainly includes the cultivation of the moral self. Thus, selecting media fare for the purpose of appreciation and for experiencing prototypical moral emotions is undoubtedly functional. Researchers should focus their analytic gaze on better understanding this function and its effects.

The more difficult issue at hand raises the following question: What are the implications of willingly—and almost exclusively—viewing entertainment as a way to experience less moral emotions or to avoid experiences that require moral scrutiny and contemplation? Escape or diversion has been identified for decades as the primary motivation for seeking out all types of entertainment fare (cf. uses and gratifications research; e.g., Blumler & Katz, 1974). I contend that the motivation to escape is primarily based on hedonistic concerns and is therefore intended to elicit enjoyment. That is, viewers and players often seek out entertainment experiences that allow them to pleasantly escape from the pressures and demands of their own hectic lives into fictional worlds filled with success, exhilaration, love, and excitement. This being stated, I would also assert that viewers seeking out entertainment primarily for escape or diversion purposes would be most likely to experience the less moral emotions described above.

Certainly, viewers are confronted with moral issues and concerns in any entertainment fare, regardless of their motivation for viewing. How are they able to “avoid” the cognitively taxing experience of moral contemplation and the eliciting of prototypical moral emotions? In truth, from time to time, viewers are unable to do so: The weight of the moral issues presented can lead to moral reasoning and contemplation (despite an initial desire to avoid this), or it can lead to a rejection of the content altogether (i.e., either loss of attention or selection of a new stimulus). Most of the time, however, it seems that the motivation to escape enables the viewers to look beyond the moral quandaries inherent in the content. It is as if they have switched off the moral lens through which one can view the world.

I have described this phenomenon elsewhere as moral disengagement for the sake of enjoyment (Raney, 2004, 2006), based on Bandura’s explanation of how all people justify the violation of their moral codes in reality (Bandura, 1986, 1991, 2002). This happens, returning to the ADT formulation, because viewers like characters, know from past media experiences that enjoyment comes from seeing them prosper, and interpret their actions—even some that may be morally questionable, as in the case of so-called antiheroes—in a way that helps them view these characters as virtuous, morally appropriate, and motivated. Media consumers do so because of the partiality that they have extended to the protagonist or withheld from the antagonist. Thus, the intensity (or granted supremacy) of their moral emotional responses to beloved despised characters eclipses further contemplation of the characters’ actions. Enjoyment is desired and the feelings of pleasure can be experienced cheaply; partiality removes the need for moral scrutiny and contemplation. With enjoyment as their intended destination, viewers know and choose the shortest path: through the phylogenetically ancient affect system and through the least moral of the moral emotions. This line of reasoning is supported by Haidt’s social intuitionism model (2001, 2007) referenced above.

In sum, narratives can offer viewers the chance to escape from this world of constant moral monitoring to another where good triumphs over evil and everyone lives happily ever after. Embracing the cognitive-miser urge, viewers trade moral scrutiny for partiality and favoritism. Their desire to enjoy themselves is of utmost importance; thus, they freely give protagonists great moral license to ensure that enjoyment is experienced.

Given this, one must still ask: Do dangers lurk for those who would use entertainment content for escape? If viewers morally disengage for the sake of media enjoyment, does that enable or encourage them to do the same more often in reality? Does the constant seeking of less moral emotions atrophy the desire to seek prototypical ones? As with all such questions, the answers are quite complex and highly dependent on many factors. One could argue, however, that efforts to educate children about the potential negative effects of consuming media messages containing racial mischaracterizations, gender-role stereotypes, and largely unattainable body shapes presuppose that the answer to these questions is “yes.” In teaching children to recognize these misrepresentations, it seems that media literacy supporters advocate more cognitive engagement—which of course includes moral contemplation and appreciation—with media. Efforts to curb harmful impacts encourage effortful processing of entertainment messages.
Media consumption for escapism, on the whole, may have certain implications, with effects on real-world moral disengagement being one possible outcome. If people turn off (or at least minimize the impact of) their moral code for the sake of enjoyment, it seems reasonable to think that they can be conditioned to do so in real-world situations, too. Investigations into what are possibly long-term effects of this process are warranted.

Concluding Thought

The purpose of this article was to examine the role of morality in emotional reactions to media entertainment. Wrapping up, one might argue that more questions have been asked than answered. This might well be the case. But I do hope that the threads of research and reasoning offered here can lead others to wrestle with these complex issues. Without a doubt, morality plays a role in emotional responses to media, impacting the stories viewers choose to consume, the characters they love and hate, the rationale behind those feelings, the emotions they experience on the characters’ behalf, and the pleasure they derive as a result. As people seemingly fill their days more and more with all things entertaining, a better understanding of these relationships is certainly in everybody’s best interest.

References


**Date of acceptance:**

Arthur A. Raney is an associate professor and director of doctoral studies in the School of Communication at Florida State University (USA). His research examines the psychological processes associated with enjoying media entertainment, ultimately trying to better answer the question “how and why do we enjoy what we enjoy?” To that end, he examines the role that moral judgment plays in the enjoyment of dramatic, violent, sports, and interactive content. He also examines various cognitive and emotional effects associated with consuming that content. His work has been published in many entertainment and media-effects anthologies, as well as *Journal of Communication*, *Media Psychology*, *Communication Theory*, and *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. He is also the lead editor of *Handbook of Sports and Media* (with Jennings Bryant, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

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Not So Moral Moral Responses to Media Entertainment?
A Response to Arthur A. Raney

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Abstract. The present contribution comments on Art Raney’s article on the role of morality in emotional reactions to media entertainment. It dwells on Raney’s distinction between pleasure-based versus appreciation-based media entertainment. On a normative level, Raney seems to favor appreciation-based media entertainment over pleasure-based entertainment, because he presumes the latter one to result from more automatic, archaic and, overall, less desirable moral activity among users. Recalling and extending Raney’s arguments, the present article discusses the ambivalence of seemingly moral judgments of characters, the potential selfishness of users’ concern for the fate of the protagonist, and potential biases in the appraisals of justice restoration. However, the present article wrestles with Raney’s arguments underlying his critical evaluation of pleasure-based entertainment. While agreeing to most of his arguments about the moral mechanisms underlying pleasure-based entertainment, it departs from his normative position. The present article argues that pleasure-based entertainment may fulfill a psychologically functional role: it may allow people to effectively recreate and to restore exhausted resources.

Keywords: entertainment, enjoyment, morality, recreation, challenge

In his article, Arthur Raney discusses the complex relationships between morality and emotions within the context of media entertainment. At its core, Raney’s article questions the extent to which exposure to media entertainment involves moral processes among users – such as moral judgments and moral emotions – and consequently, the desirability of these responses to media entertainment. In this spirit, Raney brings up an old but still heated debate on whether media entertainment consumption represents a good or bad activity, and whether it promotes a society’s welfare or decline (see for example Postman, 1985). In general, the public discourse has been quite skeptical of media entertainment in the past. This seems to be true even for scholars working in the field. The standard view appears to be that media entertainment is problematic, and arguments suggesting that entertainment may also have “beneficial” or “serious” effects such as conceptual learning (e.g., in serious games, Michael & Chen, 2006), cathartic purification (Scheele & DuBois, 2006), or the development of justice beliefs and justice norms (Schmitt & Maes, 2006) are extremely rare.

Researchers seem to doubt that the light-hearted pleasure typically experienced through exposure to entertaining media content is something desirable in itself. Light-hearted pleasure may not be serious, substantial, and meaningful enough to qualify for a “higher ethical good.” Raney, too, seems to be skeptical of merely pleasurable media offerings. He rather favors media content that leads people to contemplate their existence and the human condition. In this context, he refers to Oliver’s (2008, 2009) argument that users may not always enjoy, but may nevertheless appreciate media content, if it makes them think of a deeper truth. According to this view, users may appreciate media content even when it induces aversive states such as sadness or irritation, because it provides meaningful insights and leads to an important and satisfying learning experience. Although it is more common for laypeople to link entertainment to light-hearted pleasure or enjoyment (Dew, 1984), this view argues that users feel entertained by media content even if it primarily evokes painful but relevant insights.

Accordingly, media entertainment could either generate light-hearted pleasure or the appreciation of insight accompanied by mixed emotions. It seems that Raney is more suspicious of pleasure-based entertainment, as he presumes that it may lead to detrimental effects. Appreciation-based entertainment, in contrast, promises to kindle “a change in the individual towards higher moral standards.” (Scheele & DuBois, 2006, p. 408) This suggests that bad (pleasure-based) entertainment can be distinguished from good (appreciation-based) entertainment.

The Seeming Morality of the Enjoyment of Dramatic Narratives

Raney considers appreciation-based entertainment to be more desirable, although he agrees that pleasure-based
entertainment involves a great deal of moral activity among the users. This is especially true for the enjoyment of dramatic narratives. According to the empirically well-confirmed affective disposition theory (ADT; Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), users of dramatic media content engage in three different moral processes. First, users form a disposition toward the displayed characters based on moral judgments. Usually, antagonists are considered to be bad, because they did something unjust to a protagonist. Second, out of a desire to see justice restored, viewers tend to feel empathetic toward the protagonist and hope for his or her best, while feeling counter-empathetic toward the antagonists and hoping for their failure. Raney assumes that hoping for a positive outcome is not a matter of whim. Viewers do not only want certain outcomes to occur, but they think those outcomes should occur, out of a transcendental hope for justice to prevail. Third, viewers enjoy if justice is restored (in the so-called justice sequence): They applaud a positive outcome for the ‘good guys’, which usually implies a negative outcome for the ‘bad guys’. Taken together, Raney’s review of ADT-related research provides good evidence that the enjoyment of dramatic media content involves a substantial amount of moral activity among users.

Not So Moral Moral Processes

One of Raney’s central arguments, however, is that these moral processes are not as moral as they may appear at first glance. The moral processes outlined in the ADT may not be enough to consider the light-hearted pleasure derived from dramatic media content an ethically desirable response. Raney underlines his claim with two arguments. First, Raney conjectures that the moral emotions experienced by users of dramatic media content may often not arise from an altruistic stance. Rather, users may be worried about a protagonist’s fate because they are worried about their own entertainment experience. In other words, the seemingly moral emotions of users may only be the result of a profound self-interest that is rooted in their need to feel entertained.

In this case, the moral substance of users’ empathetic concern for the welfare of a protagonist would indeed be questionable. According to Haidt (2003), for example, truly moral emotions have to be “linked to the interests or welfare of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent.” (p. 853) Emotions are more moral the less they “directly relate to the self.” (p. 853) Haidt explicitly does not consider emotions to be moral if they arise when a user “identifies temporarily with the other (as when one fears for the protagonist in a movie)” (p. 853) and thus maintains a strong self-interest. Therefore, users’ empathetic concern for the protagonist of a narrative may indeed be less moral than it appears at first glance, if it primarily derives from a selfish interest in their own entertainment experience.

However, two arguments can be made to counter this view. One counterargument relates to a certain inconsistency in Raney’s own argumentation. Earlier in his text, Raney presumes that users are not worried about a protagonist’s fate due to sheer self-interest, but to a “metaphysical” desire for justice to prevail. If this is true, however, users’ concerns about a protagonist would be moral, because they reflect an interest in the principles of justice rather than a selfish interest in one’s own entertainment experience. A second counterargument refers to Haidt’s (2003) belief that emotions resulting from an identification with a protagonist may not be called moral, because by identifying with a protagonist users care about their own fate rather than somebody else’s fate. Haidt, however, seems to employ an out-dated notion of identification that assumes users would adopt the perspective of a protagonist entirely and would indeed feel like being the protagonist. Such a notion of identification, though, has received little support in the past. According to Zillmann (2000), drama viewers do not identify with the protagonists but empathize with them. Empathy, in turn, is a truly moral emotion because it is inherently bound to the fate of another person rather than one’s own fate.

Taken together, the moral value of users’ concern for a protagonist is ambiguous. It seems to depend ultimately on how users cognitively represent the narrative and the exposure situation. If they only fear for a protagonist’s fate because of concern for their own entertainment experience, their unease may be barely called moral. To the extent users feel genuine, altruistic concern for the fate of the protagonist, as opposed to their own, and they fear potential violations of the principle of justice, their emotional responses seem to hold moral value.

Raney offers a second argument for why the moral processes outlined by the ADT may be not as moral as they appear on first glance. His second argument is linked to users’ emotional responses to the justice sequence of drama. He assumes that users may not always enjoy the justice sequence because they enjoy the restoration of universal moral laws, but because they fall prey to more immoral tendencies. For example, users in their automatic drive towards retributive justice may call for a punishment of the villain that is too severe to be judged as morally acceptable upon more reflective consideration. As Zillmann (2006) states, “Moral sanction is conceived of as a readiness to accept, in moral terms, observed outcomes. It may well happen that, on occasion, specific harm, such as torture and death, is deliberately wished upon a brutal villain.” (p. 233). Although revenge and even severe forms of harm such as torture or death may satisfy users’ intuitive feelings of justice, they seem to violate other moral principles bound to the welfare of humankind. For example, from the point of view of an Aristotelian virtue-based ethical theory, a person who is indulging revenge cultivates a wrong character, reinforces virtueless traits, and distances him/herself from the ultimate goal of eudaimonia. To rejoice in the punishment of a villain may be therefore considered immoral. This is

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1 The role of moral activity in pleasurable exposure to non-narrative media content is less clear, e.g., in the enjoyment of simple video games like Tetris, TV game shows, or art paintings. Accordingly, the present discussion focuses on narrative entertainment content.
particularly the case if users, in line with Haidt’s discussion of self-interest (2003), accept even severe forms of punishment of a villain for the sake of enjoyment. As Raney concludes, viewers expand their breadth of moral sanction or even morally disengage for the sake of enjoyment.

In addition to Raney’s two arguments, one could set forth another argument for why the moral activity of users of dramatic narratives may be equivocal. As Raney states, viewers of dramatic content often do not judge characters in a reasoned manner, but rely on automatic and intuitive judgments (Haidt, 2001). According to Haidt’s social-intuitionist model of moral judgment (2001; Haidt & Graham, 2007; see also Tamborini, this issue), a person’s intuitive moral judgments are shaped profoundly by his or her early socialization in a certain moral community. Accordingly, a member of a culture is likely to reflect the moral consensus of that culture. Persons tend to automatically judge things that are valued by the culture surrounding them as moral, and things that are defied by their culture as immoral. Culture-specific principles, however, do not necessarily provide the most adequate basis for moral judgments—if judged from a broader, supra-cultural perspective—as cultures may foster immoral values themselves (e.g., the doctrines of the Third Reich). Accordingly, intuitive moral judgments are not necessarily desirable, if evaluated in a more elaborate and reflective ethical manner (e.g., by a philosopher). People from a certain subculture may feel offended by the skin color of another person, for example, because it automatically violates their moral principle of purity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). They may therefore tend to develop a negative affective disposition toward the other person. Although this process could be described as a moral mechanism, many people, if they reflect upon it, will probably consider it undesirable.

Similar “not so moral” intuitive moral judgments may accompany the exposure to many dramatic narratives offered by the media. In Hollywood movies, for instance, the antagonists seem to be bad at times simply because they violate certain moral principles of the American culture: They have the “wrong” ethnic background (Russian, North-Korean, German, etc.) and they do not adhere to typical US standards of cleanliness (i.e., they have filthy hair, dirty clothes, etc.). Users’ intuitive moral reactions to these media characters may not be desirable because they do not adhere to moral principles that foster the welfare of all human beings.

In sum, it can be argued that pleasure-seeking users of dramatic media content engage in three different moral processes that have been outlined in the ADT, that is, moral judgment of characters, a concern for the fate of the protagonist, and appraisals of justice restoration. To a large extent, these moral processes are rather automatic than reflective. Raney’s doubts concerning the moral value of these processes are based on the assumption that most processes are somewhat automatic. Upon more reflective consideration, the outcomes of automatic moral processes may not always be desirable. Accordingly, Raney concludes that when enjoyment is the users’ aim, partiality with the protagonist eliminates the need for moral analysis. Raney’s doubts seem justified to the extent that users intuitively form dispositions on the basis of questionable moral principles that do not promote the welfare of humankind, and to the degree they readily accept even severe forms of retributive justice. However, the moral value of users’ empathetic concern for the fate of a protagonist seems less questionable as long as it does not result simply from a selfish interest in a good entertainment experience.

Are Truly Moral Emotions Still Entertaining?

In his paper, Raney asks whether there are good forms of media entertainment that should be promoted in society. In this context, he suggests media content that elicits emotions that are both truly moral and entertaining. Are truly moral emotions entertaining, however? Users’ moral responses to drama would probably be less problematic for many people, if they would only include “(burdensome) moral feelings such as grief, desperation, guilt, regret, etc., […], which make possible the further development of the self.” (Scheele & DuBois, 2006, p. 418) Among the various moral emotions identified by Haidt (2003), guilt, shame, embarrassment, contempt, anger, and disgust are also rather burdensome. However, such taxing moral emotions may raise self-consciousness in users and may urge them to reflect upon themselves. To experience burdensome emotions and a raised self-consciousness is probably not typical for the mood-optimizing entertainment seeker who primarily sees drama as a means to escape from a noxious reality (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998; Zillmann, 2000). Such emotional responses seem to oppose light-hearted pleasure-based entertainment.

The idea that truly moral responses may be entertaining requires a very broad understanding of the concept; one that acknowledges that people may feel entertained not only when a media stimulus brings them pleasure and enjoyment, but also when it offers alternative rewards such as insights into a deeper truth (Oliver, 2009). For example, users may feel entertained because they learned something relevant about themselves or their environment (Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). Even if this learning experience was painful, users may still appreciate what they have learned. Truly moral emotions may also lead to learning experiences that are appreciated, even if they are not enjoyable in themselves (Scheele & DuBois, 2006). In this respect, media content may promote truly moral emotions that create an entertaining experience. It should be noted, however, that the concept of appreciation-based entertainment is far removed from the original scientific understanding of the term that focused on

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2 This argument presumes that most emotions that are truly moral are also burdensome emotions that oppose light-hearted pleasure. An exception to this assumption needs to be made. As it has been argued before, empathic concern (or “compassion”, see Haidt, 2003) is a truly moral response that may also underlie pleasure-based entertainment.
pleasure and enjoyment (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998; Vorderer, 2001), as well as from common-sense interpretations of entertainment (Dehm, 1984).

In sum, it appears that truly moral emotions do not fit well with light-hearted, pleasure-based entertainment. Truly moral emotions seem to evoke a rather different entertainment-experience; one that users may appreciate, but that they do not simply enjoy (Oliver, 2009). If truly moral emotions are pivotal in separating good media entertainment from bad, it seems that pleasure-based entertainment is indeed rather “bad” and appreciation-based entertainment is rather “good.”

**Entertainment Is Good, Because It Is Adaptive**

Is pleasure-based entertainment, which is probably the prevalent type, indeed merely a bad and undesirable activity? I think it is not. To underline this statement, I would like to propose an alternative view on media entertainment that may help to integrate appreciation-based and pleasure-based enjoyment; maybe such a view also rebuts the need to distinguish “good” and “bad” media entertainment. My basic suggestion is that pleasure functions as a “marker” for something people seek to derive from the media (see “utility”, Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997). As outlined in my recreation/challenge model of media entertainment (Hartmann, 2006a, 2006b; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009), I assume that this “something” is, to a great extent, recreation and comfort, and to a lesser degree, challenges or adventure. Both recreation and challenges can provide pleasure, but challenges are risky and are usually accompanied by noxious states, as well as suffering and pain. I suggest that people feel entertained by the media if they experience the pleasure of recreation and of mastered challenges. The concept of appreciation only seems important when challenges may provide harmful learning experiences that users still consider relevant.

Many people’s lives are dominated by exhausting work-related activities. Leisure time, in contrast, offers opportunities for recreation. People therefore seek media entertainment in their leisure time. It seems plausible that they often go through leisure time in a state of exhaustion or with a depleted ego. In conditions of exhaustion, people’s capability to exploit their cognitive potential is diminished (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Schmeichel, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2003); they give in to their impulsive or even primitive drives, which makes them more prone to seek light-hearted pleasure. I presume that media entertainment plays an important role in regenerating exhausted or depleted resources (Reinecke, 2009; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007). At the very least, entertaining content does not seem to drain further already exhausted resources. It seems plausible that people, particularly if they are exhausted and cannot handle risks, tend to enjoy familiar media content, including well-known media characters and easily comprehensible humor (cf. Schmeichel et al., 2003). This enjoyment would not be part of a recreational mechanism if it were not strongly rooted in people’s effortless automatic processes, such as intuitive moral judgements. Taken together, I believe that media entertainment allows users to recreate exhausted resources, which is an adaptive and in this sense desirable function, although the recreation process may involve automatic, archaic, and less desirable moral processes.

At the same time, most entertaining media content challenges the user to a certain extent. Users may be challenged by novel content they need to comprehend; by aversive emotions they need to master, such as suspense or fear; by irritating or even self-threatening information they need to accept; by vicarious tasks their hero needs to accomplish (for them); and by tasks in interactive media environments they need to accomplish themselves. As long as users manage to meet these challenges, they will be rewarded with pleasurable learning experiences that may allow them to appreciate their previous travels through the uncomfortable “danger zone” (Apter, 1992).

Challenges usually require self-regulation and mastering of one’s cognitive effort. It therefore seems reasonable that users’ existing resources determine how big a challenge they seek and appreciate, and whether they feel seduced or repelled by a particular challenge. Exhausted users may not feel inclined to meet the challenges of comprehending modern art, of listening to complex classical music, of experiencing fear during a horror movie, or of receiving painful (but true) insights about themselves (Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006). They may likely avoid these and similar challenges and seek light-hearted pleasure in well-controlled areas, such as feel-good movies, standardized narratives, manageable video games, or long-lasting, barely thrilling sport contests that always offer the comfortable opportunity to blame the team in case of a defeat. To sum up, I would like to argue that media entertainment typically provides a lot of light-hearted, comforting pleasure that allows for recreation, as well as some challenges that require self-regulation and usually involve some suffering on the side of the user, which can be appreciated if well-mastered.

In this sense, the distinction between seemingly “bad” pleasure-based entertainment and “good” appreciation-based entertainment may be artificial. Even a well-known and illustrious movie like Schindler’s List would not entertain viewers if it did not provide some simple pleasures (e.g., the recreational pleasure of just sitting on a sofa or movie chair; or the aesthetic appeal of the protagonist). On the other hand, even a seemingly pleasurable cartoon movie like Ice Age may provide some inconvenient challenges, like suspenseful uncertainty and a reflection on the deeper truth that friendship is of ultimate importance in life.

I would like to stress the argument that both mechanisms, recreation on the one hand and mastery of challenges on the other, may be adaptive and therefore—in an ethical sense—desirable, because they allow the individual to function within his or her social environment. Pleasurable recreation allows exhausted people to become “human-beings” again, that is, persons capable of making use of all means of human functioning (Baumeister, 2008). Accordingly, every mastered challenge implies a learning experience that helps an individual adjust to a given environment in the
long-run (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this view, it may be good if people sought media entertainment in their leisure time, as it could help them recover and tackle some challenges within the limits of their depleted resources. This is true even if users, by doing so, engage in not so moral moral processes.

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Appreciation of Entertainment
The Importance of Meaningfulness via Virtue and Wisdom

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to examine the experience of appreciation to media entertainment as a unique audience response that can be differentiated from enjoyment. To those ends, the first section provides a conceptualization of appreciation in which we outline how we are using the term and how it is distinct from questions of emotional valence. The second section discusses the types of entertainment portrayals and depictions that we believe are most likely to elicit feelings of appreciation. Here, we suggest that appreciation is most evident for meaningful portrayals that focus on human virtue and that inspire audiences to contemplate questions concerning life’s purpose. In the final section we consider the affective and cognitive components of appreciation, arguing that mixed-affective responses (rather than bi-polar conceptualizations of affective valence) better capture the experience of appreciation and its accompanying feelings states such as inspiration, awe, and tenderness.

Keywords: appreciation, elevation, virtue, meaningfulness, gratification

The concepts of enjoyment and entertainment are so closely related that it seems the words go hand-in-hand. Enjoyment is generally understood to be the motivation for entertainment consumption, the yardstick by which quality entertainment is judged, or the primary audience response that encapsulates the entertainment experience. Indeed, for a person to say that he or she did not enjoy some form of entertainment suggests that either the experience of consumption was less than gratifying in some way, or the entertainment fare itself was somehow inferior or lacking.

In this article we do not mean to challenge the importance of enjoyment as descriptive of many forms of viewer reactions. Rather, the goal of this article is to suggest that the identification of additional types of audience responses—namely appreciation—may help account for some of the limitations associated with an exclusive focus on enjoyment. To that end, this contribution first considers the distinctions between enjoyment and appreciation, then turns to the types of entertainment characteristics that likely elicit appreciation, and finally addresses the phenomenology of appreciation in terms of its affective elements.

Enjoyment versus Appreciation

Typically, within the field of media psychology, the notion of audience enjoyment has been strongly tied to hedonic considerations and has therefore tended to emphasize the positive valence that is thought to accompany or define enjoyment. Likewise, many of the most notable theories of entertainment psychology (e.g., disposition theory, mood-management theory) have identified (or implied) that hedonically positive affective experiences are part-and-parcel of audience enjoyment (Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1988, 2000).

Although enjoyment via positively valenced responses may well account for the vast majority of typical forms of entertainment consumed by individuals on a day-to-day basis (e.g., television sitcoms, variety programming, etc.), it is evident that joy, mirth, or joviality are not the only affective reactions that elicit gratification. A number of researchers have recently provided explanations for the concept of enjoyment which not only note its complexity, but also “allow for” forms of enjoyment that are not necessarily characterized in terms of positive affect. For example, Bartisch, Vorderer, Mangold, and Viehoff (2008) conceptualized the entertainment experience in terms of meta-emotions, arguing that the appraisal of responses experienced during entertainment (including positive and negative emotions) forms the basis of gratification (see also Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). More recently, Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, and Organ (2010) applied the general concepts of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to argue that enjoyment of entertainment can be most generally conceptualized not in terms of the valence of the experience, but rather in terms of the needs fulfilled by it, including both lower-order needs most akin to hedonic needs and higher-order, intrinsic needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

With these more recent conceptualizations of enjoyment in mind, it is clear that scholars are moving toward a greater distinction between the direct affective responses that viewers have in reaction to entertainment (e.g., humor from
a comedy, fear from a thriller) and the gratification they experience. In other words, it is now typical for researchers to recognize readily that material that is more somber or fails to elicit immediate feelings of pleasure may be deeply gratifying nevertheless.

Recently, we proposed that entertainment scholars would benefit from making a conceptual distinction between enjoyment (as commonly understood) and appreciation—not only as a means of resolving the seeming paradox of the “enjoyment of tragedy” but also as a means of broadening the scope of what entertainment gratification can represent (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). To that end, we conducted several studies to develop and validate measures of enjoyment and appreciation. Together, these studies suggested that enjoyment appears to be more closely associated with hedonic concerns, including experiences of fun and amusement, whereas appreciation appears to be more closely associated with concerns related to meaningful entertainment experiences. Specifically, appreciation of films included both cognitive and affective responses, as reflected in items such as “I found this movie to be very meaningful,” “I was moved by this movie,” and “The movie was thought provoking.”

It is important to note that in developing these scales we did not conceptualize enjoyment and appreciation as opposite ends of a continuum. Consistent with this reasoning, our measures of enjoyment and appreciation were uncorrelated under some circumstances, such as when participants recalled and rated the most recent movie they had seen as part of their everyday media diet (.04 < r < .09), but were strongly correlated in the case of participants rating a film classic they had just watched as part of a film class (.50 < r < .79). Based on these findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that some forms of entertainment may elicit high levels of both appreciation and enjoyment (e.g., an engaging, meaningful film), some may elicit enjoyment but not appreciation (e.g., a fun but shallow “guilty pleasure”), some may elicit appreciation but not enjoyment (e.g., a somber but moving depiction), and some may elicit neither (e.g., a bad film!). With this conceptualization of appreciation as an additional dimension of audience response distinct from enjoyment, the next section considers more closely the characteristics of entertainment content that is likely to give rise to appreciation.

The Nature of Appreciated Entertainment

Given the apparent distinction between enjoyment and appreciation, what might characterize best the different types of content that gives rise to these responses? Perhaps one criterion that comes to mind at first is the artistic or creative talent reflected in the entertainment. Consistent with this reasoning, our current (2010) research showed that perceptions of artistic value are more strongly related to appreciation than to enjoyment. However, our factor analyses found that items reflecting aesthetic appeal cross-loaded on both appreciation and enjoyment measures. These findings imply that whereas perceived aesthetic talent is a necessary component of appreciation, some “shallow” films (e.g., an action film filled with impressive special effects) may nevertheless be perceived as artistically valuable on some level.

In addition to artistic value, our (2010) research utilized film genres as a means of validating responses of enjoyment and appreciation. Perhaps not surprisingly, enjoyment tended to be higher for light-hearted, comedic films (e.g., The Wedding Crashers), whereas appreciation tended to be higher for more somber fare (e.g., A Beautiful Mind). In many respects, this finding makes a great deal of sense—after all, if the word “enjoyment” conjures up notions of positive, pleasant affect, then the use of this term to describe entertainment experiences seemingly devoid of this response seems misplaced. Likewise, looking at the list of films in this research that were particularly appreciated by viewers (e.g., Schindler’s List, Crash, and Hotel Rwanda), it is tempting to conclude that appreciation is most relevant for entertainment that elicits sadness or grief—a conclusion that would help address theoretical bafflement over the appeal of tragic entertainment (Zillmann, 1998).

Although “sadness” might be one correlate of appreciation, we believe that it is too narrow of a descriptor—an argument that we will discuss further in the last section of this article concerning viewer response (cf. Oliver, 2008). That is, although sad or tragic portrayals may be associated with higher levels of appreciation, we contend that sad depictions are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for appreciation. First, they are not sufficient, as there are numerous examples where sadness is the intended or primary affective reaction to some entertainment fare, but rather than being appreciated, they are more aptly described as “silly,” “manipulative,” or “melodramatic”—names often used to refer to “chick flicks” such as Steel Magnolias or Beaches. Second, sadness is not a necessary precursor to appreciation either, as evidenced by films that are not focused on grief or tragedy but that appear to be deeply appreciated (e.g., It’s a Wonderful Life).

Rather than focusing on the tragic or sad nature of entertainment fare that elicits appreciation among viewers, we believe it is more fruitful to characterize such entertainment in terms of its meaningfulness. Naturally, this statement raises the question—What is meaningful? Questions concerning the nature of meaningfulness are obviously gargantuan, and are therefore more readily addressed by philosophers than by media scholars. Thus, ancient philosophical writings provide one context for addressing this question. Specifically, Aristotle’s (Nicomachean Ethics, W. D. Ross, Trans.) distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness may be interpreted, in part, in terms of meaningfulness. In contrast to hedonic happiness, which reflects more superficial or basic states best described in terms of the experience of pleasure and the absence of pain, eudaimonic well-being means living a “just” or fulfilled life that is defined in terms of virtue guided by practical reason. In this sense, eudaimonic happiness (or flourishing) depends upon living a life that embodies both the moral virtues noted by Aristotle, such as justice, courage, gentleness, generosity, and truthfulness, and the intellectual virtues, such as knowledge, wisdom, and intuition, which in turn allow for the recognition of moral virtues.
Placed in the context of entertainment, one way in which “meaningfulness” can be conceptualized is via reference to eudaimonic concerns (Oliver & Raney, in press). Specifically, entertainment can be understood as increasingly meaningful when it focuses to a greater extent on questions of human moral virtues, it demonstrates such virtues (or the ramifications of the lack thereof), it teaches or inspires insight into these virtues, or it causes the viewer to contemplate them and what it means to live a “just” or “true” life. Hence, the film To Kill a Mockingbird could be characterized as meaningful through its depiction of wisdom and justice; Saving Private Ryan through its depiction of courage; and Field of Dreams through its depiction of generosity and gentleness. In contrast, entertainment that appeals to more hedonic concerns may be enjoyed to the extent that it elicits feelings of pleasure and fulfills needs and desires that do not necessarily stand the test of reason and moral scrutiny (e.g., Superman, or a tasteless love story).

Ultimately, then, one plausible characteristic of content that gives rise to feelings of appreciation is meaningfulness, conceptualized in eudaimonic terms via the extent to which the entertainment fare inspires viewers to consider questions regarding human virtue and life’s purpose. It is important to note at this point that our application of eudaimonic concerns to media experiences is narrower than other researchers’ conceptualizations of non-hedonic need satisfaction. For example, Tamborini et al. (2010) and Vorderer and Ritterfeld (2009) draw on considerations of eudaimonia as employed by self-determination theory (SDT), which treats eudaimonic happiness as the fulfillment of intrinsic needs (for a full discussion of SDT’s view of eudaimonia, see Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). From this perspective, then, Tamborini et al. predicted and found support for the idea that various elements of the gaming context (e.g., player controls, social game play) contributed to feelings of greater fulfillment of intrinsic needs (e.g., feelings of competence, autonomy, relatedness), with these feelings, in turn, relating to higher levels of self-reported enjoyment.

Our notion of eudaimonia shares with these alternative conceptualizations of non-hedonic need satisfaction the idea that feelings of pleasure or positive valence are not a necessary condition for entertainment to be experienced as fulfilling or gratifying. It is important to note, however, that although both eudaimonia (as we are employing the term) and self-determination are dealing with non-hedonic “higher-order” needs, these concepts may be distinct, and their theoretical interrelation awaits empirical exploration and testing. Future research using different measures that tap into non-hedonic needs and gratifications (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, in press; Ryan et al., 2008) might help elucidate this theoretical issue. For instance, it should be possible to test Tamborini et al.’s (2010) suggestion that the concept of eudaimonia as discussed by Oliver (2009) is akin to the autonomy need in SDT. An alternative outcome of this test might suggest that other than fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which contributes to enjoyment (cf. Tamborini et al., 2010)—eudaimonia is associated with a distinct experiential quality that is best characterized as appreciation (cf. Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Indeed, we believe that such an outcome may be possible, as the current operationalizations of higher-order needs as associated with SDT seem to focus on the self (as the name implies), whereas our conceptualization of eudaimonia has a more transcendent focus that puts individual need satisfaction into perspective with regard to questions of human purpose and life meaning.

In referring to these alternative conceptualizations of eudaimonic concerns, we do not wish to suggest that the articulation of intrinsic needs is too broad, or that the fulfillment of such needs is not gratifying. Indeed, we find it very plausible that motion-controllers lead to feelings of greater competence, and hence greater enjoyment, when playing a video game. What we do want to suggest, however, is that although the fulfillment of many needs via media engagement, including different intrinsic needs, may be characterized in terms of enjoyment, our narrower conceptualizations of appreciation and eudaimonic concerns rest on perceived meaningfulness, moral considerations, and contemplations of life’s purpose. The consumption of media content that is devoid of such portrayals may be fulfilling and hence enjoyed, but we are not certain that it would be appreciated in the way we are using the term. Perhaps one way to illustrate this distinction is to ask, “To what extent are you inspired to contemplate meaningful life questions or motivated to become a better person having [read that book, seen that film, watched that TV-program, played that game, etc.?”

Although our focus on and conceptualization of eudaimonia in terms of meaningfulness might represent only one of several higher-order needs, we suggest that entertainment that addresses questions of life’s purpose and human virtue is unique and deserving of special consideration with regard to what it does and does not share with the fulfillment of other intrinsic needs. We have argued here that it is the contemplation of meaningfulness via human virtue that forms the basis of appreciation. Importantly, too, we believe that the experience of appreciation as we have conceptualized it is associated with unique affective and cognitive responses and important motivational outcomes. Consequently, the last section of this paper considers the phenomenology of appreciation.

The Experience of Appreciation

A great deal of entertainment fare is described in terms of identifiable, discrete, primary emotions: thrillers elicit fear, tear-jerkers elicit sadness, comedies elicit joy, etc. Furthermore, the valence of affective responses is often conceptualized (and hence operationalized) in bi-polar terms: If a viewer experiences high levels of positive affect, he or she, by definition, experiences low levels of negative affect.

Given these typical conceptualizations of affective responses, it is not completely surprising that the experience of appreciation is often thought to be tied more closely with sad than happy affect. Contemplations of life meanings (e.g., justice, honesty, courage) possibly force people to confront not only how their lives might fail to live up to such virtues, but also how their lives are fleeting opportunities to strive
for such fulfillment. As a result, although one may appreciate grappling with questions concerning life’s meanings—if for no other reason than the fact that contemplating such virtues can lead to a greater understanding of life’s purpose—such introspection may result in sad or melancholic cognitive and affective experiences.

In contrast to this explanation that focuses on sadness specifically, we believe a more fruitful direction of research is to reconsider the usefulness of conceptualizing affective and cognitive responses in terms of bi-polar valence. Specifically, conceptualizing (and operationalizing) affect in terms of positive or negative responses fails to capture a diversity of subtle yet powerful affective states, which are described using terms such as “poignant,” “emotional,” “inspiring,” “moving,” or “touching.” Though these types of affective states have yet to garner much empirical attention among media scholars, they are the very ones expected to accompany the consumption of entertainment that tackles eudaimonic concerns, and thus accompany appreciation.

Recently, scholars who have begun to study meaningful affective responses have provided evidence for both the importance of moral considerations as instigators of such affect, and the notion that meaningful affect seems to be best described in terms of mixed valence. For example, Haidt’s (2003) research on “moral emotions” identifies a state that he calls “elevation.” Elevation, which is similar to notions of inspiration, is broadly characterized as feeling emotional or moved in response to “seeing humanity’s higher or better nature,” (Haidt, 2003, p. 864) including such acts as kindness, sacrifice, and loyalty. Importantly, though Haidt and his colleagues generally characterize feelings of elevation as positively valenced, such feelings are also recognized to reflect frequently tinges of sadness or bittersweet feelings. Similarly, in a more recent study, Ernsner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, and Carstensen (2008) argued that feelings of poignancy can be conceptualized and operationalized in terms of mixed affect that accompanies meaningfulness. These authors defined poignancy as “a mixed emotional experience that occurs when one is reminded of the passing of time during a meaningful experience.” (p. 165)

The value of studying mixed affect in response to media offerings is only beginning to emerge at this point, though what limited research exists points to its probable role in viewers’ appreciation of entertainment. For example, Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo (2001) found that people were likely to report feeling both happy and sad after viewing the film Life is Beautiful. Likewise, recent research by Oliver, Limperos, Tamul, and Woolley (2009) found that when viewers characterized their reactions to entertainment in terms of meaningful responses (e.g., moved, tender, contemplative), such reactions were associated with the experiencing of both happy and sad affect simultaneously. Consequently, these emerging studies point to the importance of rethinking the way viewers’ affective (and cognitive) reactions are conceptualized and operationalized, and by doing so allowing for consideration of a broader and more nuanced array of audience reactions, including appreciation.

Importantly, too, researchers should also consider studying the implications of the experience of appreciation on motivational outcomes. Specifically, Haidt and his colleagues’ research (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003) suggests that feelings of elevation experienced via moral beauty (a process one would call “appreciation” in a media context) result in a heightened motivation to be a better person or to help others. Consequently, insofar as the experience of appreciation (as we have defined it) may encourage decidedly pro-social outcomes, future research could explore how to harness such potential for beneficial ends.

Concluding Comments

The brevity of this article precludes a more thorough treatment of what is obviously a complex but enriching topic. Our focus here has been on meaningfulness and human poignancies specifically, and therefore other scholars may argue that a broader focus is needed or is more theoretically fruitful. In other words, although we suggest that the meaningfulness of entertainment and hence the appreciation of it rests on the extent to which it encourages addressing questions of life’s purpose in a way that is guided by wisdom and insight, others may argue that much contemplation is merely one of several higher-order needs that entertainment can fulfill. At the same time, though, we believe that appreciation is a conceptually distinct experience from enjoyment and self-focused gratification, and that the experience of appreciation is associated with unique cognitive and affective elements and motivational outcomes. Ultimately, though, we hope this contribution will encourage future work and debate on the nature of appreciation, the types of portrayals that elicit this moving response, and the affective states that accompany such deeply inspiring experiences.

References


**Date of acceptance:**

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Abstract. This comment briefly examines the history of entertainment research in media psychology and welcomes the conceptual innovations in the contribution by Oliver and Bartsch (this issue). Theoretical perspectives for improving and expanding the “appreciation” concept in entertainment psychology are outlined. These refer to more systematic links of appreciation to the psychology of mixed emotions, to positive psychology, and to the psychology of death and dying – in particular, to terror management theory. In addition, methodological challenges are discussed that entertainment research faces when appreciation and the experience of “meaning for life” need to be addressed in empirical studies of media enjoyment.

Keywords: enjoyment, appreciation, terror management, entertainment theory

Introduction

Entertainment theory has made significant progress over the past decade, with both new broad-scope models (e.g., Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004; Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004) and specifications to established concepts such as mood management (Knobloch, 2003) or affective disposition theory (Raney, 2005). Most of this conceptual progress has been achieved in a typically Anglo-American style of communication science – that is, theory construction is bound to, fueled by, and/or directed toward, empirical inquiry. For instance, intelligently designed experiments help to better understand processes such as sports spectators’ suspense (Knobloch-Westerwick, David, Eastin, Tamborini, & Greenwood, 2009); self-report scales serve to establish transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000), and conceptual models such as the Vorderer et al. (2004) proposal are structured to match the requirements of multivariate empirical testing.

With the term “appreciation,” Oliver and Bartsch (this issue; see also Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) have introduced a conceptual expansion of entertainment theory that is somewhat different from this data-driven incremental progress we have seen in recent years. The entertainment experience that is meant by appreciation is more complex in nature, involves several parallel affective processes, and is even difficult to verbalize for those individuals who have gone through it. This approach should be welcomed as a necessary extension to the body entertainment concepts, because it is an attempt to do justice to the fact that not all media entertainment is about first-order emotions (e.g., exhilaration) and “affective fast-food.” So elaborating more complex modes of entertainment experiences is an important step to (a) make sure that our theories mirror the communication reality out there (which includes both Rambo and Schindler’s List) and (b) make sure that our object-focused theories mirror our higher-level notions of humanity (e.g., our assumptions about which kind of reflexiveness a human being can achieve).

Clearly, most accounts of entertainment in media psychology to date fall short of capturing the experiential qualities and complex emotional processes triggered by various types of media entertainment that exist in reality. For example, mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988) has roots back in behaviorism (as it understands human organisms operating under direct influence of physiological dynamics). So the theory is somewhat incompatible with more holistic accounts of human reflexiveness that have been proposed – for instance, in philosophy and also in action psychology (e.g., Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996). Because the entertainment audience is not (always) a mechanistic affect regulator, there is more capability, reflection, and complexity in readers, viewers, and users than mood management theory can cover. The notion of “appreciation” is a potentially powerful concept to map these added complexities onto entertainment theory.

In this comment on the appreciation concepts advanced by Oliver and Bartsch, I will make some suggestions to further expand the conceptual horizons of complex entertainment experiences, and I will also address a fundamental methodological implication that the inventors of the appreciation concepts seem to have ignored thus far. This is the question whether the same methods we have applied to achieve the incremental progress in entertainment theory described above are suited to substantiate our understanding of complex modes of experiences such as appreciation.
Conceptual Add-Ons

Mixed Emotions

Oliver and Bartsch (2010) explicate appreciation as a type of experience in which mixed emotions (can) occur, such as feeling happy and sad at the same time. Indeed, much entertainment use comes along with mixed emotions. This seems to happen particularly when entertainment content displays comprehensive models of the true complexity of life – the joy and sorrows of being a mother, the fraternity and conflict among best friends dedicated to the same career goal, the admirability and frustration of outstanding individuals facing objective barriers established by a social system, to name a few examples. Psychologists have developed conceptual accounts of mixed emotions that can be metaphorized in terms of parallel emotions (e.g., happiness and sadness occurring at the same time: cf. Egloff, 1998; Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001; Schimmack, 2005) or vertical emotions (i.e., a first-order affective experience is evaluated at a metalevel, which creates a potentially different overall affective state ruled by the metalevel affect, see Mayer & Gaschke, 1988; Parrott, 1993).

During media consumption, however, mixed feelings do not only stem from the fact that the narrative, characters, or “content” is capable of putting the audience in a state of mixed emotion. Mixed emotions may also result from the fact that affective responses to media messages can refer to several dimensions of the message, such as content versus form. My example is the final sequence of the shooter game Call of Duty IV: Modern Warfare (Infinity Ward / Activision, 2007), which resembles the showdown of a Hollywood action movie in a way that was unprecedented in the history of video games, including in its dramaturgy and “camera” techniques. At the level of narrative, mixed emotions occur in this situation because (a) those two fellow soldiers that advanced to the player’s closest friends within the preceding story are killed by the supervillain when they are lying injured and unable to defend themselves, directly in front of the player character and (b) because shortly before dying, the player’s commander throws a gun to the player’s character that allows him to kill the supervillain and his two remaining guards and save his own life “just in time.” The sadness of personal loss of good friends, combined with the feeling of relief that the “Russian terrorist nuclear strike nightmare” is finally over, is an example of mixed emotions, obviously; yet the fantastic dramatization provided by the interactive narrative (truly cinema quality) serves as an additional source of emotion – being impressed, surprised, feeling admiration for the developers who achieved this dramatic story ending – whatever it is precisely, it has to do with the form of the media presentation. Content- and form-related emotions flow together and generate a complexity of affective experience that is unique to entertainment/media message consumption.

Building on this example, I suggest that the term “appreciation” can be explicated further if the distinction between sources of cognition and affect (content and form) is considered in more detail. Schramm and Wirth (2008), for instance, argue that there are several levels or objects in entertainment messages that emotional appraisals can relate to, which ultimately can result in mixed emotions. While this approach is bound to the appraisal theory of emotion (sensu Klaus Scherer), the overall idea of people reflecting and feeling about different levels of the media presentation they are exposed to is certainly a useful perspective for the appreciation concept as well. Vorderer’s contributions regarding involvement modes (i.e., audiences switching dynamically between strong engagement and distanced evaluation of the message, see Vorderer, 1993) and Oatley’s (1994) taxonomy of emotions in literary reading (i.e., emotions that are bound to story characters, versus emotions rooted in the user’s own life) certainly deserve consideration in moving forward with the explication of mixed feelings during entertainment consumption as well.

Entertainment and Positive Psychology

With the description of appreciation, Oliver and Bartsch (2010) inject an area of philosophy of happiness into the entertainment theory discourse, which is a great widening of our conceptual perspectives. Referring to hedonic versus eudaimonic happiness as concepts from ancient Greek philosophy is very helpful to address the complexity of human being’s inner life and motivational structure. Interestingly, the affinity of entertainment experiences with happiness, recreation, and well-being has rarely been acknowledged in media psychology (see Reinecke, 2009, for a rare exception). Therefore, tremendous conceptual opportunities connected to the field of happiness studies – positive psychology (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999) – have not been exploited in entertainment theory so far. Oliver and Bartsch (this issue) refer to Algoe and Haidt (2009), which is a good example of how positive psychology and media entertainment research can and should be connected. Concepts of hedonism and eudaimonia have been debated in positive psychology for some time, and with “well-being”, positive psychology has to offer an interesting theoretical and also normative concept of reference that should be reflected in entertainment research (Kahneman et al., 1999).

Appreciation, Meaning in Life, and a New Perspective: Human Mortality

Oliver and Bartsch connect the sense of appreciation to the personal “meaning” that is involved in entertainment use. Perceived relations between media content and issues of meaning of life are certainly key to complex modes of entertainment experiences. For instance, a multiplot romantic movie such as Love Actually, which displays all kinds of facets of love relationships, is likely to stimulate some reflection in viewers about their own romantic relationship history as well as the outstanding value of being involved in a positive romantic relationship.
I suggest that the issue of entertainment tapping into issues of subjective meaning in life that is addressed by the appreciation concept should be theorized with one more important dimension. Meaning in life and the search for meaning are closely connected to the fact of human mortality. Meaning in life becomes important because life will inevitably end sooner or later. One’s own death and the death of relevant others is therefore a powerful driver of the human search for meaning in life, particularly in adults and elderly people (e.g., Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1986). So thinking and feeling about death, and also coping with one’s own mortality, are likely to play a major role in people’s search for meaning in life; this in turn implies that complex modes of entertainment experiences may somehow be connected to issues of death and dying.

One conceptual beginning in this direction could be an application of terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) to media entertainment. TMT basically states that people display coping reactions when they are confronted with their own mortality. It predicts rather simple responses of people who are requested to ruminate about their own death: a search for distraction and a tendency toward cultural world view defense. The latter is suggested to function as an attempt to reduce the overwhelming impression of mortality by focusing on people, social groups, or values that are long-lasting and particularly meaningful (e.g., “the nation,” liberalism, or family). According to TMT, people’s central response to cognitions of their own mortality is a self-reassurance of the fact that they are a “valuable contributor to a meaningful, eternal universe” (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999, p. 839). Much entertainment content, I would argue, works on TMT mechanics: Tragic events (e.g., murder of an innocent victim) remind people of their own mortality, and subsequent events (e.g., punishment of the killer and restoration of justice) enable a defense of the cultural world view. Interestingly, tragedy is the only entertainment genre to which TMT has been applied thus far (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Johnson, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Other genres, particularly crime drama, are promising candidates for exploring the connections between mortality cognitions and media enjoyment. It might turn out that entertainment research based on TMT will not uncover complex modes of experience such as appreciation, however, but rather new patterns of simple cognitive-affective audience response that are based on single emotions such as pride or moral satisfaction. Clearly, there is a need to further explore TMT in the context of entertainment consumption.

In the meantime, however, I would like to expand the mortality perspective on complex entertainment experiences by including the notion of “solace.” Because we all – the audience of media entertainment – know about our inevitability of death, and this knowledge holds the potential to generate aversive emotions, we are in need of solace. Older people, who have built a more solid understanding of the value of life and perceive death as being closer to them, may tend to be in need of more solace than younger people. I would argue that sensational modes of media entertainment – suspense thrillers, comedy, etc. – serve a distraction function in the sense that they temporarily suppress or overwrite aversive emotions related to one’s own mortality. Such distraction would be a rather ineffective mode of coping with mortality ruminations, as it merely postpones the inevitable task of making up one’s mind concerning the end of life.

More “artistic,” complex types of entertainment, however, seem to serve a more proactive type of coping, as they “work through” the complexities of life (and frequently, also the contextualities of death and dying, as in some tragedies or Schindler’s List). By learning others’ (smart, visionary, helpful, inspiring) propositions about human existence and its boundaries, appreciation may include a significant dimension of solace. So I suggest we should enrich Oliver and Bartsch’s understanding of appreciation not only in terms of eudaimonia, but also in terms of coping with mortality, terror management, and solace. Clearly, this view addresses functions of entertainment that are close to religion, which is another promising field where building blocks for theories of complex entertainment experiences might be found.

Appreciation and Nonintellectual Entertainment Messages

My final conceptual comment on the inspiring work by Oliver and Bartsch refers to the problem of using message examples for communicating the content of the appreciation concept. The authors use well-known examples of “intellectual” movies with great artistic value, such as Life Is Beautiful. It is an intuitively useful strategy of explicating what is meant with “appreciation” to offer example movies for which many readers have recollections of their own complex entertainment experience. However, this message-oriented approach to describing appreciation involves the risk of overlooking “meaning” that audience members may find in messages where we – the intellectual, well-situated academics – would not assume it. Superman is a good example. Oliver and Bartsch (2010) use Superman to illustrate that “entertainment that appeals to more hedonic concerns may be enjoyed to the extent that it elicits feelings of pleasure and wishful fulfillment of needs and desires that don’t necessarily stand the test of reason and moral scrutiny” (p. 8). However, there may be audience segments for whom Superman is in fact a messenger of eudaimonia, because he precisely embodies the values, morality, and reason that are inscribed in their world view and in the perception of their own existence.

My argument here is that a message-oriented focus on meaningfulness is in danger of reifying elite culture perspectives regarding where meaning is “in” and where no meaning can be found. An audience-based approach will be required in addition to a message-centered approach to figure out what kind of meaning a given user/reader/viewer takes out of a given entertainment message. There is the possibility that Die Hard 4.0 provides as much meaning for life to some members of society as Schindler’s List provides for other members. Individual differences (bound to social groups within society) are thus a key issue in unfolding the theoretical capacity of the appreciation concept.
Complex Entertainment Experiences and the Methodology of Entertainment Research

In addition to conceptual comments, the fundamental innovation that the appreciation concepts represents for entertainment theory calls for methodological reflection as well. Research on positive psychology has shown that there is merit in empirical (mostly self-report based) inquiry into people's happiness, well-being, eudaimonia, and perceived meaning in life. However, as with all concepts, psychology tends to reduce complexity of social reality in order to make it theorizable, and more importantly, measurable. I suggest that with the term “meaning in life” that is foundational for the appreciation concept, we may reach a point that marks the incompatibility between the concept content and the capacities of standardized psychological measurement. We certainly can construe scales to measure whether people see any meaning in life (yes/no), and we can apply rating scales for people's perception whether they are satisfied with the (amount of) meaning they perceive in their life (not at all satisfied / somewhat / very much satisfied). However, if meaningfulness is so important for appreciation of entertainment fare, it would be great to get into individual audience members’ details. *What is the meaning that appears to viewer X when watching movie Y? How is that meaningful to her/him?*

The “content” of meaningfulness is likely to be bound to individuals’ life stories, intellectual abilities, norms, attitudes, marital and family status, and much more. It is therefore difficult to account for in a technical sense (an ultra-multi-factor concept, so to speak), and it is likely to display so many manifestations that it is impossible to measure it in a standardized way. (A standardized content-of-meaning-in-life questionnaire could be interpreted as the universal formula to human happiness, the finding of which has turned out to be a tricky task.) This general methodological statement includes a criticism of Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) operational procedure for measuring appreciation in their studies: Items such as “meaningful,” “moving,” and “thought-provoking” are not necessarily optimal from a measurement validity perspective, because they are likely to mean very different things to different participants.

However, the more fundamental issue here is that appreciation and meaningfulness are related to human existence, ambition, even spirituality. Can we break down these phenomena into pieces, and transform their individual variability into statistical variance that can be explained? Can we, to put it the other way round, manipulate meaningfulness experimentally to test Oliver and Bartsch’s assumptions with the traditional rigor of entertainment research? Maybe. It might however be the case that only methodologies of *understanding*, that is, qualitative, case-based, biography-intensive approaches, can help to identify the content of people’s perceived (or lacking) meaning in life and the appreciation of entertainment that results from it. In contrast to the conventional categories of entertainment experiences (such as suspense or exhilaration, for which the psychological design formulas are quite well-known), meaningfulness and appreciation may not “function” for empirical entertainment research. With the move toward a more philosophical construal of entertainment experiences, then, it is not only theoretical challenges that need to be resolved. The move that Oliver and Bartsch have begun may also turn out to be very demanding in terms of methodology and the foundations of science that entertainment research can be built on within the next decade.

References


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Abstract. This paper applies the social intuitionist perspective of moral foundations theory (MFT) to the study of media entertainment. It begins by introducing the MFT’s conception of morality as an intuitive evaluative response governed by the association of moral codes organized in five mental modules. These include harm/care (concerned with suffering and empathy); fairness (related to reciprocity and justice); loyalty (dealing with common good and punitiveness toward outsiders); authority (negotiating dominance hierarchies); and purity (concerned with sanctity and contamination).

After discussing initial tests examining MFT’s application to narrative appeal, and its potential broad application to entertainment theory, a model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME) is presented. The model describes long-term and short-term processes of reciprocal influence between media and moral intuition. In the long-term, the model predicts that repeated exposure to module-related content will lead to an individual and culturally-shared increase in the salience of specific modules and module exemplars. In the short-term, resulting patterns of module salience will affect the immediate appraisal of media content or, if content presents ambiguous or complex moral patterns, a delayed response though careful reappraisal. Patterns of positive or negative evaluative responses resulting from these appraisal processes are expected to shape individual and aggregate patterns of selective exposure to media, as well as the subsequent production of content within media systems driven by these exposure patterns. The paper concludes with an example of the model’s utility by showing how its short-term components can be applied to address conceptual difficulties in distinguishing enjoyment from appreciation.

Keywords: moral intuition, media entertainment, moral foundations theory, MIME, enjoyment and appreciation

Introduction

Issues concerning the relationship between media and morality have been central to entertainment theory and research. To date, most entertainment research on morality has addressed these issues by adopting the rationalist perspective of moral psychologists such as Kohlberg (1981). This article proffers that an intuitionist perspective can help clarify both simple and complex processes that shape the relationship between morality and media entertainment. It begins with an introduction to moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2008), and the conception of moral judgment as an evaluative response produced primarily from intuition – and occasionally from rational thought (Haidt, 2001). This essay then reviews evidence from initial research on individual differences in narrative appeal showing the ability of intuitive processes to predict reactions in simple entertainment settings. Following this, two distinct processes that underlie MFT are explicated to account for the complex emotional reactions associated with moral dilemmas, and a broad model outlining the reciprocal influence of moral judgment and media entertainment is presented. Finally, the model’s utility is shown by using it to address the conceptual challenge of distinguishing “enjoyment” and “appreciation.”

Moral Foundations Theory

Rationalist models suggest that moral judgments are formed through methodical reasoning used to appraise whether behaviors are right or wrong (cf. Kohlberg, 1981). From this perspective, judgments result from a slow and mentally taxing process that involves conscious deliberation and cognitive effort. Yet in many situations, moral judgments may be made with little or no contemplation, making rationalist perspectives appear poorly equipped to explain these unconscious reactions. Indeed, the audience response commonly observed in entertainment seems better characterized as an automatic “gut” reaction, where immediate emotional response occurs without careful consideration.

A promising alternative for understanding moral judgments in entertainment is found in the social intuitionist perspective (Haidt, 2001). Haidt presents converging evidence supporting the conceptualization of moral judgments as “the sudden conscious appearance of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike) without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion” (p. 818). From this perspective, moral judgments are an immediate intuitive “good-or-bad” reaction that shapes
evaluations of behavior that, in many cases, involves no rational thought. Moreover, when rational thought is involved, generally it is used post hoc to justify the intuitive response. Only in comparatively few cases does rational thought influence judgments. As such, Haidt does not reject the rationalist perspective. Instead he proposes a dual-model moral system where a fast, holistic intuitive process accounts for most of our evaluative responses, while rational processing plays a smaller role limited to situations that require deliberate thought.

The MFT of Haidt and Joseph (2008) proposes that moral intuitions fall into five broad domains relevant to specific content areas referred to as moral modules. Modules in this context are thought of as innate, synaptic connections that provide a “core set of initial, evolved, architecture-derived content-specific valuation assignment procedures” that can act as motivating principles (Haidt & Joseph, 2008, p. 317; Tooby, Cosmides, & Barrett, 2005). Humans are thought to be born with these organizing templates that are later edited by experience. The five MFT moral modules include: Harm/Care (concerned with the suffering of others and empathy), Fairness (related to reciprocity and justice), Loyalty (dealing with common good and punitiveness toward outsiders), Authority (negotiating dominance hierarchies), and Purity (concerned with sanctity and contamination). They combine past experience and emotion into intuitive “bits of mental structure” (Haidt & Joseph, 2008, p. 6) that can have a powerful and immediate influence on moral judgments related to specific content areas (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). They are thought to exist in every culture, but the salience of specific modules differs between cultures (see Haidt & Joseph, 2008). Though questions about the validity of this perspective remain, the concept of moral judgment as an intuitive response, as well as the five domains identified in MFT, have been supported through behavioral observation (Haidt & Joseph, 2008).

Initial Evidence – MFT and Individual Differences in the Appeal of Simple Narratives

The characteristics of MFT seem to offer benefits for research in areas of entertainment theory, with disposition-based theories central among them. Disposition theories attempt to explain how respondent judgments of character behaviors and the deservingness of outcomes shape entertainment’s appeal. A moral intuitionist perspective has clear implications for this. For example, efforts to test predictions of the moral-sanction theory of Zillmann (2000) are hindered by the inability of researchers to adequately define and identify morality subcultures. To the extent that MFT helps overcome this obstacle, its application would offer great benefit. Recent research shows MFT’s potential to aid understanding of the relationship between morality and media entertainment by demonstrating the ability of module weights to predict the appeal of domain-related content.

Four studies by Tamborini and colleagues (see Tamborini, 2009) applied MFT to an entertainment context using simple narratives to test both bivariate relationships and a more complete causal model; later research examined the theory’s broader application in a more natural setting. Study 1 built on research by Haidt and Graham (2007) demonstrating that module weights for Harm/Care and Fairness were related to perceptions of real world justice. This first study showed that the salience of Harm/Care and Fairness predicted the appeal of narratives varying on the domain-relevant content attributes of graphicness and justification. Study 2 broadened this line of research to include all five modules, and showed that individual module weights negatively predicted perceived character morality in 7 of 10 stories violating domain-relevant modules. Recognizing the potential for spuriousness in two-variable models, Study 3 examined MFT’s ability to account for a more complex process found in the moderated mediation model suggested by Zillmann’s moral-sanction theory (Zillmann, 2000). The mediated process posits that the module adherence of observed behavior influences perceptions of the behavior’s appropriateness, which shapes subsequent dispositions toward characters, and moral values are predicted to moderate this mediated sequence. The test in Study 3 using the Fairness module was consistent with both mediation and moderation predictions. Fairness module weights moderated the influence of module adherence on perceived appropriateness and subsequent character disposition. Study 4 used an online survey to test MFT’s applicability to evaluations of popular media characters. Findings demonstrated that audiences use distinct combinations of module-relevant attributes to differentiate heroes and villains. Beyond what these results tell us about heroes and villains, they indicate that these intuitive moral codes may guide responses to popular media experience, and show MFT’s value in understanding how audiences evaluate entertainment.

MFT and Group Differences in Simple Narratives’ Appeal – Identifying Morality Subcultures

These initial studies suggest that MFT offers a theoretical foundation for defining morality in the context of media entertainment, based on module-weight patterns that impact entertainment processes. The logic applies to evaluations of characters as well as judgments of specific behaviors and story resolutions. An individual’s enjoyment should be determined by the extent to which story outcomes are consistent with relevant modules and the weights an individual assigns to those modules.1 Notably, if this logic is sound,

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1 Entertainment theory tells us that the strength of a person’s response is unlikely to be shaped simply by the weight of relevant modules and whether the story upholds or violates them. For instance, exemplification logic (Zillmann, 2002) suggests that concrete exemplars (i.e., representations sharing a number of primary defining module attributes) will produce stronger intuitive reactions than less tangible exemplars. Beyond theory, narrative convention suggests that story content will often touch upon more than one module.
the potential value of applying a universal theory of morality to entertainment research may lie less in its ability to predict individual reactions, and more in its ability to predict group response. The logic could explain group differences in content appeal as a function of matching module-weight patterns among group members. Moreover, if these modules are truly universal and their varying weights are shaped through cultural influence, not only could MFT’s logic be used to identify features that delineate appeal within and between groups, but it could also be used to explain the forces that shape them. Haidt (2001) suggests that cultural emphasis on certain moral modules makes some intuitions more salient than others, and notes that most cultural knowledge is acquired by observation and imitation (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Fiske, 1999). As such, along with direct experience, the cultural values expressed consciously or unconsciously in narratives should play a role in shaping group module-weight patterns.

A moral intuitionist perspective appears well suited to explain how different audience groups should react. A good example is MFT’s ability to conceptually distinguish the kind of morality subcultures described by Zillmann’s moral-sanction theory (Zillmann, 2000), and to explain the aggregate response patterns it suggests. MFT would define morality subcultures as the existence of different module-weight patterns developed through shared group experiences, and identify group membership by looking for predicted differences in module-weight patterns among audience members. The theory’s logic suggests that group members become sensitized or desensitized to domain-specific content, and that this sensitivity can be observed. Haidt and Graham (2007) have shown MFT’s potential to identify subcultures in research that distinguishes Conservative and Liberal political group members by patterns of module-weights, groups known to vary in their media preferences (Wenzel & Blakley, 2007). Applied to entertainment, we might expect subgroups identified by module patterns to vary in preference for specific programs or genres that differ in content – for example, in terms of purity.

Early attempts to detect Zillmann’s morality subcultures without a solid grounding in moral theory have been incomplete and challenged by methodological confounds (cf. Tamborini, 2009). Recent evidence supporting the moral intuitionist perspective shows promise of providing nonconflated indicators of morality that are not only present in all cultures but able to delineate them. The belief that these modules can distinguish subculture response to narratives is suggested above in research showing that Fairness weights moderated the approval of behavior and subsequent character perceptions. The potential widespread application of MFT to media is suggested by data from a large-scale trend study of German TV viewers over a 10-year period (Mahrt & Schoenbach, 2009). Inspection of viewing patterns showed genre preference correlated with a set of “social orientation” values closely tied to Haidt’s modules. The values included helping, social justice, commitment to family, participation in political life, and religious faith. The similarity of these values to Harm/Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity modules is apparent, and not only suggests the importance of the modules to widespread media exposure, but also supports claims of the their universality.

With the provision of a solid theoretical foundation, MFT’s potential to delineate morality subcultures in terms of distinct module-weight patterns holds great promise for scholars trying to predict entertainment’s appeal to different audience groups. The considerable benefit afforded by the conceptual clarity the theory brings can be found in more complex areas of entertainment research as well.

MFT and Complex Narratives – Conflicting Modules and Moral Dilemmas

Hypotheses in initial studies of MFT tested only the most conspicuous part of the theory’s logic, dealing with the types of quick and easy evaluations expected in response to uncomplicated narratives. Yet the theory’s value becomes most apparent when explaining the appeal of more complex story lines. This section attempts to show the comprehensiveness of the theory by adding to the earlier discussion of MFT’s basic processes to address the appeal of complex narratives – that is, those in which there is no clear pattern of module adherence or violation. While MFT focuses primarily on intuitive processes, it also accounts for responses resulting from rational thought. Although these processes are thought to occur somewhat infrequently in social interactions, when they do occur, role taking is considered their common cause (Selman, 1971). When role taking, a person may sense that there is more than one side to an issue and be subjected to a “moral dilemma” in which multiple intuitions are in conflict. This process may be more common in narratives written to encourage role taking (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974).

Unlike with intuition, the moral reasoning that occurs in the MFT’s rational component represents an effortful process. It could be posited that the need for careful moral deliberation results from several factors, such as the extent to which a story provides salient exemplars that are difficult to categorize, or from cases in which simultaneous conformity to different modules may be impossible within the story line. Story endings with exemplars that are easily categorized and adhere to all modules, or that adhere to the most salient modules at the time, should require no effort from audience members to justify. These stories should produce an immediate and positively valued intuitive response.
By contrast, when it is hard to tell if the story example shares a module’s defining features, the story may require more time to categorize. Similarly, exemplars that deviate from adherence to a highly salient module may require greater effort to justify outcomes.4 Indeed, it may even cause audience members to reappraise their initial response.

Research attempting to test this logic might establish conditions that vary the simultaneity of module adherence or the ease of exemplar categorization before observing the speed of evaluation. For example, films in which characters adhere to all modules and are rewarded should be responded to quickly and enjoyed. Conversely, stories in which characters equally adhere to some modules while violating others will require contemplation to judge, regardless of outcomes that offer reward or punishment. In such films, viewers may resolve the conflict by relying on their strongest intuition, or by a reasoned process in which a principle is consciously applied. In either case, they should respond more slowly, with nonintuitive rationalization processes playing a larger role. Ultimately, such films should be liked or disliked to the extent that they adhere to the module driving the intuitive or principled response. Of course, considerable work must still be done before we can be confident in this logic, but if this approach proves convincing, valuable applications are apparent for producers and for scholars attempting to understand the manner in which narrative content influences audiences.

A Tentative Model of Intuitive Morality and Exemplar Salience

Discussion until now has focused on MFT’s potential to explain determinants of audience response. This section builds a broad model representing the complex association between media and morality (see Figure 1). The model provides the skeletal outline of a reciprocal process describing the mutual influence of individuals and their environments on moral intuition. MFT logic is used to form the foundation for a multistage model representing both short-term and long-term influence processes. The short-term process describes how (a) existing module salience (patterns of module weights) and exemplar salience (weights assigned to module exemplars) combine to influence the automatic and controlled appraisal processes that shape evaluative response to media content, and (b) how these appraisal outcomes influence patterns of media exposure (both individual and aggregate). The long-term process describes how these module-driven, aggregate patterns of media exposure lead to the mass production of module-adhering media content, and how this content subsequently feeds back into the model (along with culturally shared experience relevant to modules) to influence existing module and exemplar salience (for both individuals and subculture groups).5

The short-term features of the model use MFT to explain and predict immediate responses to entertainment (and to non-entertainment). Central here is the appeal of specific content (and its subsequent selective exposure). The theory is consistent with simple disposition logic suggesting that we like to see righteous behavior rewarded and unrighteous behavior punished; however, it adds to disposition theory by explicating how both simple and complex judgments of righteous and unrighteous behaviors are made. The model indicates that audience members will judge content as righteous, and positively evaluate it (i.e., find it appealing), to the extent that content is perceived as adhering to their overall moral-module system. Content will be perceived as adhering fully to an overall system if it is judged to adhere to all modules, or judged to adhere to those modules made exclusively or dominantly salient by the message. Content will be perceived as adhering to an overall system (but not adhering fully to all parts of the system), if, though judged to deviate from adherence to a highly salient module, rational thought leads audience members to sublimate the need for adherence to one module in order to conform to adherence to another. Corresponding to this, the salience of module exemplars used to show adherence to, or violation of, modules will influence the extent to which a module is exclusively or dominantly salient, as well as the likelihood that an audience member will sublimate the need for adherence to one module in order to conform to another. A module with a more heavily weighted exemplar is more likely to become dominantly salient in automatic appraisal. As such, audience members are more likely to accept the need to sublimate other modules to one made overriding salient by a heavily weighted exemplar.6

The long-term portion of the model focuses on the manner in which recurrent media representations of modules and module exemplars influence the development and evolution of module-weight patterns and exemplar salience. One of the most obvious applications of this to entertainment theory lies in its implications for understanding the development of morality subcultures. The model suggests that recurrent module exemplars will combine with salient environmental experiences to shape group module-weight patterns. Though the model’s indication that recurrent themes in media content will influence audience values is nothing new, MFT improves our ability to delineate morality

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4 The extent to which different examples serve as exemplars of different modules should differ by culture and experience. As such, morality subcultures may be delineated both by whether groups consider specific examples as module exemplars, and by the shared salience of specific exemplars within groups. Potentially, both have the same capacity to delineate morality subcultures, as do group differences in module weight patterns.

5 Though beyond the scope of the discussion here, the logic used to explain how media representations can increase exemplar salience and its influence on issue perception is consistent with the framework used to predict the dispositional consequences of exemplification (Zillmann, 2002). For example, beyond exposure recency and frequency, the concrete and emotion-inducing quality of exemplars should influence their dispositional consequence.

6 A heavily weighted exemplar will only lead to module dominance when other things are equal (e.g., given otherwise equally salient modules, and after accounting for the influence of an exemplar’s secondary attributes on the salience of other modules).
subcultures as well as the processes that form them. MFT’s coherent description of the morality system’s components and functional links can be used to define the categories that delineate different subcultures. It allows us to identify these groups by examining configurations of module weights and exemplar salience shared among group members, and to predict these configurations from media representations of related modules and exemplars.

The long-term processes here are similar to a morality “agenda setting” model in which the importance (or weights) of different modules and exemplars are increased through media’s focus on them. This representation can be tested in two ways: First, modifications of traditional agenda setting research techniques can be used to examine the influence of exposure frequency on the salience of modules and exemplars. For example, experimental and nonexperimental research could be conducted to see if frequent exposure to particular modules or their salient exemplars increases a module’s weight for a length of time after exposure beyond that expected from a simple prime. Second, content analysis can be used to test the module’s indication that, in the long-term, aggregate patterns of exposure to positively evaluated content lead to an increase in the production of content featuring adherence to salient modules and exemplars. Since aggregate preferences should vary as a function of morality subcultures, predictable differences should be observed in the content produced for two cultures known to vary, for example, in the weight assigned to the Purity module. Analysis comparing the media systems of these two cultures should reveal more frequent reference to Purity, adherence to the Purity module, and culturally salient Purity exemplars in content produced for the culture assigning greater weight to Purity.

Model Applications and Extensions

To show the value of the intuitionist perspective to entertainment research, MFT is applied here to the challenging questions addressed in this issue by Oliver and Bartsch (2011) regarding the conceptual distinction between “enjoyment” and “appreciation.” Oliver and Bartsch observe that researchers now explicate enjoyment in a way that does not require the experience to be characterized as positive affect. Noting the paradox of tragic media, they propose a conceptual distinction between appreciation and enjoyment that explains the appeal of somber media in terms of the gratifications it provides. They distinguish “enjoyment” from “appreciation” by suggesting that enjoyment is the commonly understood form of positive affect that results from hedonic pleasure, whereas appreciation results from “meaningful” content. Recognizing the challenge of defining meaningfulness, Oliver and Bartsch turn to moral philosophy to define content as meaningful in terms of its association with human virtues. Something is meaningful if it teaches us or causes us to contemplate such virtues.
From here, their explication progresses by compiling a broad list of different virtues associated with the concept of meaningfulness. The list comes from Aristotle’s (trans. 1931) writings on eudaimonia, and includes attributes such as justice, courage, gentleness, generosity, truthfulness, knowledge, wisdom, and intuition.

Although this approach to explication can be valuable, it is limited in situations where the essence of a concept is not fully described by the compilation of its components, but instead requires an understanding of the functional associations among its components. In such instances, the value of a theory’s focus on the functional links among concepts becomes more apparent. This may be the case for appreciation and enjoyment, and, if so, their essence may be described more fully by explicating the processes that link their experiential components. Though other frameworks may exist, MFT offers an approach to describe the links among their component in a manner that can distinguish the experience of virtues that are, or are not, meaningful.

An application of MFT to Oliver and Bartsch’s groundwork can begin with their description of a “meaningful” response to entertainment. Notable here is their focus on rational thought, a response that is more slow and deliberative. Meaningfulness in their discussion is attributed to acts that “inspire insight,” or cause us “to contemplate,” along with those “guided by practical reason.” In contrast to a meaningful response are those that are “superficial” and do not rely necessarily on “reason” and “scrutiny.” This distinction between responses “that require careful contemplation” and “those that do not” fits well with MFT’s dual-model system. For example, contemplative reactions might characterize forms of audience response that Oliver and Bartsch call “appreciation” and refer to as a form of eudaimonic well-being. This contrasts with the quick “gut” reactions posited by the intuitionist perspective, which might characterize acts that Oliver and Bartsch call “enjoyment” and refer to as hedonic happiness. The model might be used to differentiate what Oliver and Bartsch call appreciation and enjoyment parsimoniously as responses resulting from the intuitive and rational systems. From this perspective, the five moral modules would be the components of the model, and the module-weight patterns would represent the functional links among the components. A positive response resulting from the more deliberate contemplation of MFT’s rational system could be labeled appreciation, and one resulting from the intuitive system could be labeled as enjoyment.

The purpose of this discussion is to show how MFT might add to groundwork built in this area by Oliver and Bartsch. The discussion does not challenge their claim that “appreciation is a conceptually distinct experience from enjoyment” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011, p. XX), it simply distinguishes the two as positive evaluations that result from an intuitive reaction or the need for rational reappraisal.

References


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The Complicated Relationship Between Media and Morality
A Response to Ron Tamborini’s Model of “Moral Intuition and Media Entertainment,” From a Narrative Perspective

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Abstract. This contribution reflects content and effects of moral messages in media from a narrative perspective. Building on Tamborini’s (2011) Model of Moral Intuition and Media Enjoyment, several issues are raised: First, the difficulty of conceptually and empirically defining “morality” in media entertainment is elaborated. Several options of moral ambiguity arising from the narrative structure of a story are sketched. Then, the link between processing moral content and positive media experiences such as enjoyment and appreciation is considered. Finally, issues of effects, especially on the long-term, are raised and implications for empirical questions are discussed.

Keywords: moral intuition, entertainment, moral ambiguity, narrative structure, narrative engagement

Introduction

Stories are a traditional vehicle for moral education: Didactic stories in religious texts, tales and myths are tailored to lead audiences to particular moral conclusions; many films are made with an attempt to advance the world by advocating certain behaviors and discouraging others. But most stories are less ambitious: They are commercial, mainstream, entertaining fare produced for audience success. When audiences turn to media entertainment, they do not expect to get moral lessons. Nonetheless, it is in the nature of stories to highlight in some manner questions of right and wrong. A story without norm violations is a narrative impossibility; every story contains some conflict (see, e.g., Chatman, 1989), and often these conflicts are defined by norm violations that ultimately compose a pattern of morality within a narrative (see, e.g., Carroll, 1998). A common definition of moral that will be used for this article is the entirety of behavioral norms that is accepted and sanctioned in a community, as well as justified by social welfare (Hakemulder, 2000).

Model of Moral Intuition and Media Entertainment

Ron Tamborini (2011) in this issue develops a model that describes how audience members’ moral values interact with media content to result in moral judgments about characters. Subsequently, this influences enjoyment and appreciation, as well as selective exposure patterns. Adherence is the key here: Media content that can be accommodated with one’s values will be enjoyed or appreciated, and selected. Apart from this microperspective on experiences and processing, the model delineates two assumptions concerning macro processes: One assumption posits that moral values are shaped by an individual’s group membership (e.g., religion or gender); the other is that an individual’s exposure will eventually lead to the production of media content that is characterized by a similar moral structure to ensure future commercial success. The model is simple and parsimonious, is firmly based on theoretical foundations of moral psychology, accommodates prior empirical findings from communication research, and allows clear empirical predictions.

The model is based on Haidt’s (2001) social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. This model assumes that people form quick, spontaneous moral reactions based on stable moral values that are innate, but refined through experience. These reactions are called moral intuitions and contrasted with a slower, more deliberative and rational way to form moral judgments. Moral intuitions are the default in everyday life. Only if the situation calls for more thorough thinking, may a person form a different judgment based on rational argument, or form a new intuition, for example, by taking over the perspective of another person. Haidt and Joseph (2008) identify five domains of morality – the
“modules,” fast domain-specific mental structures that operate moral judgment: (1) Harm/Care, (2) Fairness/Reciprocity/Justice, (3) Ingroup/Loyalty, (4) Authority/Respect, and (5) Purity/Sanctity. The researchers connect morality to narratives through the mode in which narratives are processed: They suggest that everyday moral thinking and reasoning are more attuned to a “narrative mode” (Bruner, 1991) through its specific way to construct reality by creating a coherent and rich narrative world rather than a rational argument.

Other characteristics of narratives also support this argument. Generally, a narrative provides all information that people need to form moral judgments and infer causality or responsibility (actors, physical capacities, mental states, objects, actions, and relations to actors and objects; see Sloman, Fernbach, & Ewing, 2009). They represent lived experience of believable characters with plausible emotions. If we assume that morally desirable characteristics are acquired inductively, through experience and exposure to examples of such conduct (in contrast to rational deduction; Haidt & Joseph, 2008), vicarious experience with numerous examples in the numerous narratives we consume daily will serve the same function. As morally relevant situations are connected to emotions (Connolly & Hardman, 2009), and emotions in fiction are known to be perceived in a similar way to real life emotions (Damasio, 1999), we may assume that the way in which vicarious moral experiences are made is vivid and memorable.

The conceptualization of moral reactions to entertainment as intuitive, spontaneous, and automatic processes makes sense when we consider how people generally process narratives. Often, narrative processing is contrasted with rhetoric, argument-based processing (Bruner, 1991; Green & Brock, 2002). In narratives, readers or viewers relive cognitively and emotionally what the characters are going through; the style is highly emotional, subjectively effortless, and accompanied by the feeling of being present in the narrative world rather than in the actual world (narrative engagement: Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; transportation: Green & Brock, 2000). Audiences are not in the mood to argue and reason when they watch a film or read a book. Nonetheless, fiction is known to provoke thoughts and reflections concerning one’s own life and values (Hakemulder, 2008). Both of these possibilities – the default automatic intuition and the exceptional reflective mode – are covered by Tamborini’s model. A basic tenet of the model is that people assign a certain weight to each moral module and that story outcomes may be consistent or inconsistent with these. Depending on consistency, people will either make automatic or controlled appraisals, and evaluate content positively or negatively. Specifically, if content adheres to all modules that are important for a viewer, an automatic and positive reaction follows. If content violates all modules, an automatic and negative reaction follows. If one module is supported to the detriment of another (e.g., saving 4 million lives by shooting a friend), a controlled appraisal follows that is positive when people agree to the trade-off between moral modules, or negative, when they do not accept the trade-off.

### Moral Content and Moral Ambiguity

The central mechanism of the model hinges on consistency of media content and moral modules (adherence versus violation). Thus, identifying what is actually the case in the story is crucial. This is not a purely methodological question – theory needs to provide criteria for determining moral content and for the match/mismatch. The definition given by the model may not be sufficient for this purpose: “content designed with the intention that it will be perceived by target audience members as adhering to their overall moral system” (Tamborini, 2011, p. 43). The normative component (“designed with the intention”) may be an unreliable, most probably inaccessible indicator. The interpretive component (“perceived by target audience members as adhering . . .”) cannot serve as a criterion for content, because it is identical to the outcome of the match between content and module salience.

Thus, the model needs a firm definition of what moral content is, and when it does or does not match the audience member’s moral modules. Morality is as self-evident to an incidental observer as it is elusive and obstinate to the researcher. This is true for three reasons.

First, the affirmation of moral norms is somewhat invisible in the narrative, as interactions in which all norms are followed, are smooth and undisturbed. Thus, if a character walks up to a newspaper stand, takes a newspaper, pays for it, and walks away, he has neither lied, nor betrayed, nor was he disloyal to someone nor has he offended someone’s religious feelings. The potential list is endless. Of course, moral maxims may also be verbalized by characters, but this is a rare phenomenon. What we are left with to determine the moral structure of a narrative is the opposite – the norm violations. Many genres build their plots around a norm violation, reflect it in several plot lines, and in the end show punishment of the wrongdoer and forgiveness of the victims.

Second, moral norms are embedded in a rich narrative context that makes the moral message in the majority of media narratives more complex and hard to determine. It is surprising how even simple genre films such as romantic comedies contain complex moral plots enriched with multiple norm violations, an array of justifications and emotional reactions, and involve different consequences as well as initiate character development (Bilandzic, Sukalla, & Kinnebrock, 2008). The theory guiding a content analysis needs to consider the narrative construction of a story. The analysis itself needs to make use of the interpretive abilities of the coders (Bilandzic et al., 2008). Just as viewers or readers need to “fill in the gaps” to make sense of a story (Chatman, 1989), coders need to re-trace this process to capture the complex relationships between narrative events. Justification may be the most important contextual factor for moral implications of narratives as they may weaken the validity of a moral norm. Kohlberg’s (1981) approach of moral developmental is essentially based on justifications with different reference points for accepting the justification or not (fear of punishment on the lowest level, and abstract, self-contained principles on the top end). Tamborini’s model
only specifies one possible justification for a norm violation: A concurrent moral domain that cannot be adhered to without hurting another. However, other justifications are present in stories – someone can be forced to violate a norm, lack the skills to follow the norm, experience a lapse of control, or violate norms for revenge (Bilandzic et al., 2008). Thus, audiences may learn justification types portrayed as acceptable in a given society or group, as much as they learn the moral values themselves.

Third, most stories (except for ones we construct ourselves for experimental purposes) offer several plot lines that may differ in their moral implications for norm support. Tamborini accounts for morally complex narratives and defines them as having “no clear pattern of module adherence or violation” (Tamborini, 2011, p. 41). Complex narratives should elicit more careful deliberation in the audience; this may be the result of several factors – e.g., salient exemplars that are difficult to categorize, or story lines that make it impossible to adhere to all modules. It may be necessary to be more specific about the ways in which a story can be morally complex and how people perceive this ambiguity.

We can identify at least five cases of different nuances of moral ambiguity including the extreme ends of moral affirmation and violation:

1. **Congruent norm affirmation**: Several plot lines converge into affirming the norm by showing parallel norm violations; in each plot line, the norm violation is eventually punished. For example, three different plot lines with a different set of characters may show how a betrayal in a romantic relationship is being punished by the break-up of the relationship (e.g., in the movie The Holiday). It is easy for the viewer to integrate this into one moral message.

2. **Congruent norm violation**: In the other extreme case, norm violations in several plot lines go unpunished, and no other plot lines exist that affirm the moral domain. For example, two plot lines may show how killing is not punished (e.g., in the movie Natural Born Killers). Text is open to viewer interpretation and needs controlled reflection in order for the viewer to come to terms with a moral narrative that strongly diverges from moral intuition.

3. **Contradictory plot lines**: In this case, several plot lines in one story deal with the same moral domain, but one plot line shows an unpunished norm violation and one shows punishment. Justifications may be present for both. An example of such a type of story is the television series Dexter; there is psychological justification for vigilantism by the protagonist, and legal justification for law enforcement by the police. Again, plot lines need to be integrated by the audience.

4. **Norm-affirming plot line as frame**: Similarly, several plot lines in a story deal with one moral domain, and in one plot line, the norm violation is punished, in one plot line it is not. However, the plot lines are not equally important; the norm-affirming plot line is used as a frame for interpreting the open-ended plot line. An example of this is the movie The Heartbreak Kid. The protagonist lies to his wife, later lies to his lover, and ends up losing both. In the end, when he is remarried, he meets his former lover again, and, again, lies to her. This particular lie goes unpunished because the film ends at this point. However, the film plays with viewer expectations: As lying was punished before, viewers fill in the open ending and expect that the lie will be punished again (even if it is not shown). Thus, the plot lines where lying is punished serve as a frame for interpreting the open ending.

5. **Moral violations in the microplot versus moral affirmation in the macroplot**: The last case looks at different time frames within a story. On a micro level of the plot, sequences of action and reaction determine the plot. A norm violation on this level may be punished – for example, when an insult evokes aggressive retaliation from the victim. However, many norm violations such as deceptions or lies are not immediately detected, and are only punished at the end of the plot (macro level). Thus, there may be a discrepancy between micro and macro levels regarding the moral message. The conclusion of a viewer may depend on his/her ability to follow and integrate the whole plot (which children, e.g., have difficulty doing).

To sum up, adherence is complicated to define in an unambiguous way and solely out of the text. I also want to make the point that adherence may not suffice as an explanation for enjoyment and appreciation.

### Enjoyment and Appreciation of Moral Content

Ron Tamborini suggests that the modes of processing affect enjoyment and appreciation: “A positive response resulting from the more deliberate contemplation of . . . [the] rational system could be labeled appreciation, and one resulting from the intuitive system could be labeled enjoyment” (Tamborini, 2011, p. 44). In Oliver and Bartsch’s (in press) concept, enjoyment is positive affect in reaction to media entertainment, and appreciation is a positive evaluation of media entertainment that broadens one’s mind about oneself by providing meaningful content. Connecting the rational system to appreciation means that appreciation will only occur when the rational system is active and comes to a positive evaluation. In Tamborini’s model, this is the case when two or more moral modules conflict, but the viewer ultimately agrees that violating one is necessary for conforming to the other. Enjoyment will only emerge when the plot adheres to all (salient) modules. While, on the surface, this connection between processing and positive evaluation seems plausible, two logical implications do not seem sound.
First, enjoyment may come up even in cases in which audience members have a negative intuitive response, because salient modules are violated, or in cases in which reflecting comes to the conclusion that violating one module to conform to another is not appropriate. Even with a negative evaluation of the moral content, viewers may perceive enjoyment — but for other reasons than morals. For example, the show House MD may deviate from one’s moral maxim to treat other people with respect; the justification presented in the show — rudeness is justified by healing the patients — may not be accepted. Nonetheless, viewers may enjoy the show because of the comic effects that the protagonist’s rudeness entails; humor seems to have this rehabilitating effect in the context of moral transgressions. Also, audiences may (paradoxically) take pleasure in other people’s transgressions when viewing or reading a narrative, in a similar way as people enjoy gossiping about deviant behavior, or engage in rumors and dirty jokes. Another reason for audiences to enjoy media content that is inconsistent with their own moral values is that they engage in a form of mental play with social rules, vicariously living out transgressions that would not be possible in the actual world. Pippi Longstocking may be the most famous example of such a character. Finally, enjoyment may also stem from morally contrasting oneself with the wrongdoer and using a downward social comparison to stabilize one’s own identity.

Second, appreciation may be too restricted in the model. Appreciation is assumed to occur in situations where an audience member finally agrees with the justification presented for moral divergence (as appreciation is the positive response in controlled appraisal, and positive response only emerges when we agree to the justification). However, there is no reason to exclude narratives that violate modules without justification. Natural Born Killers (containing no justification for brutal killings) has more potential to stimulate reflection about human nature in audiences than the television series 24 (containing very strong justifications in the form of trade-offs between moral goods). Provocative narratives explicitly build on this effect. Audience members do not have to subscribe to vigilantism to appreciate Dexter, a sympathetic young forensic expert who in his leisure time kills people “who deserve it.” Conversely, if an audience member is confronted with conflicting modules, it is not necessary to assume that people are confronted with meaningful content, or extract anything meaningful from the conflict.

Effects of Exposure to Moral Content

In the long term, exposure to many similar instances of moral conduct should lead to gradual adoption of moral values, an enhancement of moral skills and competence. The model considers such long-term effects as similar to agenda setting; this has some appeal, especially when looking at entertainment that turned into publicly debated, spectacular media events, such as Big Brother, which influenced interpersonal communication agendas to a great extent (Bilandzic & Hastall, in press). However, agenda setting implies a fixed entity that gets activated again and again, notwithstanding its content, direction, or interpretation by the audience. This is difficult to apply to moral content, which may go both ways in terms of the moral lesson shown, and requires a good deal of activity on the part of the audience regarding interpretations and inferring unstated conclusions (narrative filling-in; Chatman, 1989). Also, moral episodes are more complex than topics (the focus of agenda setting). For example, justifications may set boundaries for validity of moral virtues, and conflicting plot lines may need integration.

Conversely, modeling consequences of frequent exposure to similar, stereotypical moral content lends itself to a cultivation perspective; indeed, some of the descriptions provided by Haidt and Joseph (2008) explaining the merits of intuitive approaches, resemble cultivation rhetoric and are compatible with descriptions of narrative effects (e.g., regarding virtue theory: “One of the crucial tenets of virtue theory is that the virtues are acquired inductively though exposure to — sometimes with efforts to copy — many examples of the virtue in practice,” Haidt & Joseph, 2008, p. 385). The basic idea of cultivation may harbor some inspiration for a model of media and morals. Cultivation considers relationships between media and audiences as reciprocal, and long-term, it deals with the consequences for the systemic level as well as patterns of deeply rooted world views, not unlike morality. More recent accounts and reinterpretations of cultivation have stressed the role of viewing experiences in motivating selective exposure and accumulating short-term effects into cultivation phenomena (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2004; Van den Bulck, 2003), which may help

Perspective Taking

The implications of Ron Tamborini’s model for effects of media entertainment are particularly interesting and represent an important step toward a meaningful, theoretically rich explanation. The model assumes that in the rare cases where rational deliberation occurs, it happens through role-taking, which makes a person see another person’s perspective and thus the problem to be more multifaceted. Tamborini emphasizes the adequacy of narratives for such a process: “This process may be more common in narratives, which are often written to encourage role taking” (Tamborini, 2011, p. XX). This stands in the tradition of Kohlberg (1981), in which role taking is the motor of moral development, as a person can take the other person’s presumed considerations into account. I suggest taking this argument further and considering perspective taking as an important factor for moral intuition too. Audiences need to take the perspective of a character to understand the plot, the emotional structure, and character evaluations (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Good and bad in narrative are often determined relative to their consequences for, and perceptions by, other characters. Thus, perspective taking within the narrative should be an important factor for all judgments made on its basis, intuitive and rational.
to accurately conceptualize the hypothesized process of selective exposure and moral effects as well.

Conclusions

In all, Tamborini’s model paints a rather conservative picture of moral effects on an individual and aggregate level: People who see a moral value violated that they esteem highly, will not be convinced that the transgression is right, but will be outraged by the violation. On the other hand, making moral modules more salient by exposure should lead to interpreting events with the moral frame that was set by media. How is moral change possible in this constellation? In Haidt’s intuitionist approach, change is possible through a spiral-shaped relationship: One person has a moral intuition about a situation, forms a judgment, and reasons about it with other people; this in turn elicits moral intuitions in other people, who then form a judgment and verbally disclose their reasoning to their counterpart. So reasoning from other people is a source of change for moral intuitions. Another source is the rare case in which people revoke their original intuition and reach a different judgment via reflection (“repeated judgment” in Haidt & Joseph’s conceptualization). The third way is to activate a new intuition via taking the perspective of someone else (“private reflection link”). This potential for change is not yet reflected in Tamborini’s model. Of course, processes like the ones mentioned above introduce considerable uncertainty into the model that may push it over the cliff into the realm of reconstructing single cases rather than explaining with a general principle. While this is a risk, there are some benefits of the differentiated view as well. Just to name one example: Narratives do not only provide “eliciting situations” (i.e., examples of people who act in a morally good or bad way), but also moral reasoning (e.g., a minor character who verbally expresses the moral maxim). The distinction between the two is similar to the distinction between implicit inferences that viewers need to make themselves and explicit conclusions provided directly in the media text; the two may have different consequences for effects.

Tamborini’s model offers a variety of new and inspiring insights into the complicated relationship between media and morality. It raises a number of interesting questions that may be the starting point for further theorizing and empirical investigations – for example, concerning the audience’s interpretations of media content, narrative fillings-in, and the cognitive integration of differing moral examples. Modeling moral judgments as the outcome of alternative routes of processing has particular merits and interesting implications for differential mechanisms of effects. It is also an excellent match for the two types of morality-related effects that have been identified in empirical literature research: “moral effects” that describe how audiences appropriate moral views, and “ethical effects” that describe how stories may instigate critical thinking about an ethical problem and raise awareness of the possible nuances (Hakemulder, 2000). A central question of research based on this model will be how this audience interpretation can be anticipated in a content measure. Finding unambiguous cases for experimental research will be easier than investigating a sample of narratives with all their nuances and complicated plots. Finally, another promising field of research will be to explore how experiential qualities such as humor interact with processing the moral structure of a narrative.

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H. Bilandzic: The Complicated Relationship Between Media and Morality


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Abstract. We reflect on the typical sequence of complex emotions associated with the process of scientific discovery. It is proposed that the same sequence is found to underlie many forms of media entertainment, albeit substantially scaled down. Hence, a distinct theory of intellectual entertainment is put forward. The seemingly timeless presence of multiple forms of intellectual entertainment finds its roots in a positive moral approval of the self of itself.

Keywords: emotions, intellectual entertainment, media entertainment, scientific discovery

Introduction

One of the outstanding problems of the entertainment industry is to cope with the changing preferences of consumers and to create products that enforce their fidelity. Narrative strategies that seek to stimulate the experience of intense and quick emotions by exploiting dramatic features or special effects are temporarily successful. Once audiences have grasped their structure, or got accustomed to them, they rapidly abandon those products in search of innovative ways of being aroused. Industry must immediately substitute them with new products. Meanwhile, an apparently insignificant part of daily entertainment is always available in media, though keeping a low profile. It not only remains basically unchanged over time, but has proven to satisfactorily engage audiences. We refer to a type of entertainment that includes small challenges and mental exercises (e.g., chess problems, puzzles, Sudoku, and crossword puzzles).

The aim of this article is to bring attention to this kind of entertainment offering and try to describe the set of processes related to its consumption. The thesis we put forward is that daily entertainment is a particular form of the larger concept of “intellectual entertainment” that mimics the sequence of stages, and their complex emotions, that accompany scientific discovery. We state that there are commonalities between the process of scientific inquiry and that of solving an entertainment challenge. We thus present a theory of intellectual entertainment and analyze its relation to main ideas in the field. We consider this to be relevant because, as Bartsch and Oliver (2011) also state in this issue, the dominant focus of entertainment research has thus far been on emotions, and there is a lack of understanding about the relation between emotion and cognition in individuals’ processing of entertainment offerings. We shall also present some observations regarding how intellectual entertainment is currently incorporated in media. Successful movies and narratives have exploited similar characteristics for a long time. Finding a way, anticipating the resolution, and discovering the killer are all activities that appear to be based on human beings’ need to command or gain control over their experiences through intellectual skills. In fact, recently, top US TV series scripts, such as those for House or Lost, have used those narrative mechanisms and incited audiences to test their mental capabilities during their consumption.

The Thrill of Discovery

Products based on simple intellectual challenges can be considered as an example of a broader class of what we shall henceforth call intellectual entertainment. This type of media offering proposes well-specified problems to be solved by the receiver using cognitive abilities. Audiences engage in logical thinking to uncover the solution to a challenge. This process may be applied to find the correct move in a chess problem, to solve a Rubik’s Cube, to guess the ending of a complex movie, or to understand the key strategy to complete a video game. Any of these tasks is ultimately designed to make consumers experience the thrill of discovery. We shall now introduce the concept of a relationship between intellectual entertainment and scientific discovery. First, we need to concentrate on the structure of the way a breakthrough is made in scientific research. Later on, we shall focus on the details of the analogy between intellectual entertainment and scientific discovery.

At the outset, let us first observe that the analysis of the process of scientific discovery is often centered on the logical structure of theories or experiments. The distinct roles of
deduction and induction, of consistency, even the necessity of progressing through a series of errors, are presented as the path to understanding. It is nevertheless true that the complex emotions experienced by scientists play an essential role in the attitude, patience, and perseverance necessary to achieve a breakthrough. It was proposed by Kuhn (1962) that a scientist’s ego is the ultimate engine for problem solving. The mind of the scientist says, “I solved the problem,” with the emphasis on “I.” Emotions such as pride and a dose of selfishness are characteristic of important figures in the history of science. Henceforth, we shall make no effort to describe the purely objective part of scientific discovery but concentrate on the human emotions experienced by scientists.

We shall start our analysis of intellectual entertainment at the very heart of the emotions experienced by scientists. We shall focus on the moment of discovery and its accompanying emotion: being thrilled. Many scientists acknowledge the thrill of discovery as one of the most profound intellectual experiences in their lives. The very instant when a theory falls into place or an experiment unveils the structure of nature is referred to as a moment of nondescriptive pleasure. Body and mind are seized by a peculiar sense of depth and joy that switches off reality. Such a state of mind extends over a period of time that can range from hours to days.

It is natural to quote some examples of accounts of the thrill of discovery produced by scientists. For instance, Albert Einstein’s own intimate memory of his discovery of the principle underlying general relativity serves as a first example:

I was sitting in my chair in the patent office in Bern when all of a sudden a thought occurred to me: If a person falls freely he will not feel his own weight. I was startled. This simple thought made a deep impression on me. It impelled me toward a theory of gravitation. (Pais, 1982, pp. 179)

Einstein later recalled this moment as “the happiest thought of my life” (Isaacson, 2007, pp. 97). Einstein’s modest explanation introduces the meaningful superlative “happiest.” Later, Einstein completed his account with an analogy. It was, he said, a moment of pleasure that could only be compared to the feeling for great music. It is the emotion of awe for depth and beauty, so hard to put into plain words.

A more enthusiastic example corresponds to the moment where James D. Watson realized the possibility of pairing as the basis of DNA’s structure. In his own account, he says, “My pulse began to race. If this was DNA, I should create a bombshell by announcing its discovery” (Watson, 1968, p. 118). His idea was scrutinized all through the night:

But now, to my delight and amazement, the answer was turning out to be profoundly interesting. For over two hours I happily lay awake with pairs of adenine residues whirling in front of my closed eyes. Only for brief moments did the fear shoot through me that an idea this good could be wrong. (Watson, 1968, p. 118)

Let us finally recall the account of Bertrand Russell (1967) regarding the highest intellectual period in his life: September, 1900. He walked around realizing he had finally produced a contribution of worth to mathematics. He even took care not to have an accident before writing down all of his discoveries!

The analysis of many examples of firsthand accounts of the very moment when a scientific breakthrough is made shows a number of common features. Of special interest is the sequence of stages in the scientific discovery, in which each stage is characterized by a series of complex emotions experienced by scientists. We can divide them into four distinct parts: prior to discovery, at discovery, right after discovery, and long-term aftermath. It is important to keep in mind that emotions associated with these stages are similar to those experienced during intellectual entertainment:

(a) Prior to Discovery: Uncertainty. In general, scientists have worked arduously on the problem that is eventually solved. They investigate every hypothesis and try every promising idea that may lead to a breakthrough. This long period prior to discovery, involving apparently fruitless effort, produces complex emotions such as anxiety, a sense of helplessness and futility. An unsettling feeling of uncertainty dominates the mind of the scientist. The research project may be questioned, even the possibility that the problem has no solution. In many cases, the scientist is uncertain about his or her own intellectual skills, experiencing fear, sadness, and in extreme cases, wrath. He or she can be extremely depressed and, in some cases, quit the research altogether. Discovery can then be seen as a momentous termination of suffering.

(b) At Discovery: Epiphany. The riddle, either experimental or theoretical, of understanding a phenomenon may require that quite a number of possible avenues be thoroughly explored. The complexity of the research process turns into an inextricable net of ideas with varying status and no apparent general principle. Discovery often produces a simple unifying explanation. The thrill of realizing such a clear understanding — that insight — is often referred to as a grandiose epiphany. However, this very moment of discovery is extremely hard to describe. It is brief, surprising, elating. Reality is eliminated. The thrill may be preceded by a sense of anticipation. It is likely to be remembered forever.

(c) Right After Discovery: Joy. The feeling of joy and happiness is characteristic of the short-term aftermath of the discovery. The understanding singles out a moment, but the sense of happiness is maintained over a much longer period of time. The scientist is convinced of the correctness of the discovery and goes through the details of the work, analyzing possible but very unlikely errors. The scientist realizes the depth of the work and wants to share the overwhelming joy with friends and colleagues. There is a sense that the discovery needs to be announced to the whole world.
Internet. The chess problem is presented as a very precise lemma that can be found in a daily journal, magazine, or on the section.

Let us illustrate our basic idea with a typical chess problem presented as a mate in three moves. The positions of the pieces in the chessboard may be simple or complex, so different levels of depth may be required to find the correct move. The relevant point is that the solution of the chess problem follows the same four stages as a genuine scientific discovery. Prior to the solution, the effort to trace all possibilities into the future is arduous. The complexity of the task borders on the intellectual limits of average humans, so that many amateurs may quit the problem and feel dejected. A chess problem is chosen to require between a few minutes to half an hour of abstract thought. When all combinations are analyzed, or at any intermediate instant, the solution appears clear and pleasing. It is a small epiphany. Then, a sequel of happiness is often accompanied with the need to show somebody the solution in search of some recognition. We find all the elements of great discoveries, though diminished in intensity and extension. The relevant issue is that the problem proposes a task whose solution brings joy and a small exaltation of the ego.

Daily Intellectual Entertainment

Society contains only a small number of scientists but, quite remarkably, a large amount of entertainment has an intellectual basis. Let us consider, for instance, the entertainment page of many journals and magazines or some basic video games. There, we can find a chess problem, a crossword puzzle or a Sudoku challenge. We use cellular phones that may carry the ubiquitous Tetris. We may eventually try ourselves in facing the astonishing difficulty of solving Rubik’s Cube. Any of these challenges needs concentration and often some nontrivial intellectual skills to solve the proposed problems. We shall argue that the series of complex emotions attached to this kind of entertainment are close to those experienced by scientists, as explored in the previous section.

Let us illustrate our basic idea with a typical chess problem that can be found in a daily journal, magazine, or on the Internet. The chess problem is presented as a very precise challenge – for example, to find the correct strategy to force a mate in three moves. The positions of the pieces in the chessboard may be simple or complex, so different levels of depth may be required to find the correct move. The relevant point is that the solution of the chess problem follows the same four stages as a genuine scientific discovery. Prior to the solution, the effort to trace all possibilities into the future is arduous. The complexity of the task borders on the intellectual limits of average humans, so that many amateurs may quit the problem and feel dejected. A chess problem is chosen to require between a few minutes to half an hour of abstract thought. When all combinations are analyzed, or at any intermediate instant, the solution appears clear and pleasing. It is a small epiphany. Then, a sequel of happiness is often accompanied with the need to show somebody the solution in search of some recognition. We find all the elements of great discoveries, though diminished in intensity and extension. The relevant issue is that the problem proposes a task whose solution brings joy and a small exaltation of the ego.

Many other basic entertainment games are based on reproducing the emotion of discovery, albeit the goals are scaled down. Let us note the rapid and ubiquitous success of Sudoku, based on the skilful mathematical manipulation of small numbers. A typical Sudoku problem is clearly presented, identifying the level of difficulty for the proposed instance. The problem solver will take quite a long time to get the complete solution, will suffer, and will be rewarded with a brief moment of satisfaction. The consumer of this type of intellectual entertainment may eventually seek for some recognition from friends. Again, the common elements of scientific discovery are found in daily life entertainment, though in a quite unassuming and modest manner.

One of the main differences between daily intellectual entertainment and real research is the fact that the challenge is perfectly posed in the former case, whereas in science defining the problem is often an extremely hard task. Daily intellectual entertainment has to pack all of the process of discovery into a span of a few minutes. The problem, thus, needs to be well defined. It is even beneficial to present the player with a familiar scheme or format. Being exposed to the same kind of problem, the same layout, and the same routine saves time and accelerates whatever small moment of epiphany comes, if any.

It is noteworthy to observe that daily intellectual entertainment also operates as a routine that promises an escape, or modest relaxation, from reality. Intellectual abstraction provides detachment from daily problems. A chess challenge solved while taking a ride in a bus amounts to minutes of peace, away from the problems left at home and to be found at work.

Intellectual Entertainment in Media

Problem solving remains the basic idea underlying many other forms of entertainment. Let us consider, for instance, crime fiction. The reader is often put in the subjective position of the detective in charge of solving the crime, will read through all of the misleading evidences, will follow
intuition, and, it is hoped, guess who the killer is. The reader will feel secretly happy and tell other people that it is possible to solve the crime, seeking some modest degree of recognition. The very same structure for exploiting the epiphany of discovery, the very intense intellectual joy of the moment of understanding, is pursued in movie making and TV series. Movies exploit the enjoyment of understanding. Movie telling construes a reading of the film that brings suspense because no solution to the plot is obvious. Viewers feel somehow uncertain about the whole plot and about their own ability to solve it. The final scenes of the movie must be reserved for understanding. Sharing the global experience with other people will take place after the movie is finished. Similarly, TV series strive to force the viewer to try to solve the problem presented during the episode. Some good examples of this are the TV series CSI, X files, Numbers, or House. Plots are presented as problems to be solved by the viewer, asking for his or her intellectual attention. Often specialized and incomprehensible vocabulary is used with no harm to the popularity of the series. Viewers sense that they are spending some time in a manner that stimulates their brain.

Modern video games are no exception to the exploitation of the enjoyment of discovery, the emotion of insight. The level structure of video games rewards the gamer with constant episodes of small steps toward understanding. The player discovers by error and trial what the hidden rules of the game are. Once again, many players are solitary people, and the success is only reported to their peers after the game is over. Approaches to communicating with other gamers may take different forms. For instance, massive blogging, specialized Web sites, and Twitter provide channels for boasting about gaming achievements.

Toward a Theory of Intellectual Entertainment

The observations we have made so far should be further analyzed in the context of recent works on entertainment theory. It is expected a priori that intellectual entertainment follows some of the patterns already discussed in the literature, but it is also clear that its very specific intellectual nature will lead it to branch off from mainstream ideas. We will discuss our statements with reference to the other authors of this issue, for the sake of coherence and completeness.

First of all, following Klimmt (2011), and similar to the work on “appreciation” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011), both in this issue, we consider that our intellectual entertainment differs from any other form of entertainment analyzed in communication science because it is not based on empirical inquiry but on reflection. As stated above, an intellectual entertainment experience is complex. It involves many emotional and cognitive processes, showing that not all entertainment is about first-order emotions. In particular, a moral long-term evaluation of the entertainment experience is the key idea supporting intellectual entertainment.

Following Vorderer (2011), Vorderer, Steen, and Chan (2006), and Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, and Grizzard (in press), we consider that enjoyment of intellectual entertainment can be defined by means of Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intellectual entertainment fulfills a human being’s intrinsic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We clearly distinguish between the immediate and direct affective response to the content and the long-term gratification of consumption. Intellectual challenges provide users with the opportunity of testing their competence on solving specific entertainment problems. They also allow users the possibility to exercise a free exposition to a particular content and prove their need for independence and self-direction. Furthermore, intellectual challenges enhance relationships with other users, with the author of the content, and with the characters when they involve a movie.

On the other hand, regarding the relationship between message processing and intellectual entertainment, we partially agree with Bartsch and Oliver who suggest in this issue (2011) that there is a generally held thought that emotional involvement with media content comes at the expense of cognitive depth and rational scrutiny. Nevertheless, we state that intellectual entertainment might be a proof of the opposite. Emotional intensity increases as cognitive engagement does when consuming a challenge or anticipating the end of a movie. This is coherent with the reflective model of aesthetic experience of Gerald Cupchik (1994) described in this issue, which we consider could not only be applied to explain drama and art perception, but could also be adapted to intellectual entertainment. The experience of emotions along with the consumption of intellectual challenges can be associated with high levels of reflection and personal meaning. Consumers can elaborate a set of rational justifications for explaining motivation, selection, and experience of their choice of entertainment. It is, though, clear that selecting a specific intellectual content is a matter of personal taste, and that processing of messages is influenced by personal goals and values (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Finally, regarding the aesthetic dimension of intellectual challenges, it could be argued that some people, like scientists, consider solving an intellectual challenge an aesthetical act.

Intellectual entertainment relates to other concepts as well. The motivations of a person addressing a chess problem, for example, are centered on completing a challenge with a good chance for success. Note that there is also a specific kind of motivation related to this entertainment consumption – that is, training the mind – which is not found in other types of media entertainment. In general, the type of chosen intellectual entertainment will depend on a number of variables such as context, difficulty, availability, time span, state of mind, and memory of previous similar experiences. It is also of relevance to consider the users’ familiarity with the format of the entertainment challenge. A TV series where a plot is presented in a familiar sequence shortens the time to get acquainted with the characters and the riddle, and to come to the climax of understanding the solution. Furthermore, the partial success in completing steps, the emotion of anticipation, joy, pride, or suspense increases cognitive processing and motivation for solving the problem. This kind of practice provides an immediate sense of moral satisfaction.

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Morality is a very relevant issue to be discussed further. Intellectual entertainment produces a sense of rightness. The user’s time is put to good use because it is morally worthwhile to face problems that challenge our brains. This is coherent with Raney and Bryant (2002) who stated that there are cognitive structures, based on moral judgment, that precede – and coexist with – affective responses to entertainment. Positive moral assessment of intellectual entertainment can be found everywhere. As a trivial example, it is notable that it is forbidden to play cards in many university cafeterias where, on the other hand, it is possible to borrow a chessboard. We may find Sudoku games in an airplane magazine, newspaper, or on Google Wave. Medical doctors will have no reason to fear confessing that they watch House. Nowhere is intellectual entertainment labeled as a waste of time. Moreover, there is a certain amount of disdain for oneself when failing an intellectual challenge. It is a struggle of self against self that turns into a self-evaluation which in turn triggers moral metaemotions. As Hartmann (2011) and Vorderer (2011), both in this issue, have stated, entertainment is culturally shaped, but being intellectually competent is a widely accepted ideal.

The moral judgement underlying intellectual entertainment also takes place in the context of family relationships. Let us consider the case of a child asking for help to solve a puzzle made of pieces that can slide one at a time on a board. This kind of gadget can be part of a set of small presents. The child wants to reconstruct the face of his or her preferred comic hero but after pushing around the squares for quite a while without success, seeks help from parents. Mum or Dad takes the gadget and tries some movements without success, then sits next to the kid and tries harder. At some point, maybe after some enormous effort, the solution is found. Child and parent share happiness and reinforce their affective bonds. Furthermore, the parents feel the effort and time to solve the puzzle was worthwhile. They were teaching their kid, they got recognition; and they communicated the message that intellectual effort is good.

We can thus reanalyze the basics of intellectual entertainment from a positive moral approval disposition. It is then realized that one of the main motivations to choose intellectual entertainment is subtly based on a moral judgement. We may select an intellectual challenge, a TV series, or a movie because it is worth spending part of our free time moving into a higher intellectual mood. Part of the experience may be somewhat painful, but the global effect is obviously positive (see the appreciation concept in Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011). In an extreme case, some people will look actively for intellectual entertainment, driven by the moral evaluation assigned to the challenge. The more intellectual the entertainment becomes, the better.

Following the theoretical revision of Bartsch and Oliver (2011) in this issue, the experience of emotions in intellectual entertainment, as for appreciation, can be explained in terms of the affective valence on cognitive evaluation. Although we state that intellectual entertainment is a compound set of complex emotions that substitute for each other or coexist, negative emotions can elicit a more careful processing of the challenge that is faced. If appreciation implies the idea of “sadder but wiser,” intellectual entertainment would suggest the idea of “wisdom worth the effort.” Before engaging in solving the challenge, consumers know in advance that resolution only comes after making an effort. A kind of struggle among negative emotions such as frustration or impatience, positive emotions such as joy when making a step forward, and the necessity of moving forward in the cognitive processing of the challenge is constantly manifested by the user until the solution is achieved. Arousal would enhance cognitive processing, although high levels of struggle (Lang, 2000) can end in the participant dropping the challenge. Consumers will feel mixed emotions and feelings, and as Klimmt (2011) states in this issue, affective responses to media messages can refer to several dimensions of the message, such as content and form.

The relation of intellectual entertainment to mood management theory follows intuition. There is a clear positive action in proving intellectual skills to oneself, bringing some pleasure and reducing pain when the solution is reached. As with other forms of entertainment, intellectual challenges produce an escape from reality that culminates in a mood enhancement when complete. Otherwise, when a result is not achieved, because of lack of competence, users may justify their abandonment of the challenge by reducing the importance of the problem. However, consumers would anyway tend to manage their moods.

In addition, it is important to consider the role of relatedness in intellectual entertainment. Relatedness is clearly distinct in the two phases prior to and after epiphany. The uncertainty period, which is necessary to get a personal thrill, will involve very little social interactivity in many cases. The watching of a subtle movie will be silent and private, the chess problem will be mentally analyzed, and the Sudoku challenge will only need the filling in of numbers in the grid. It is certainly true that other forms of intellectual entertainment will explore many possibilities for technological interactivity, such as video games. On the other hand, the accomplishment of any purported form of intellectual entertainment will bring social interactivity. The need for recognition, the communication of success, the ranking of expertise, or any other form of need for public awareness will use various communication channels. There, manifestations of accomplishment and self-expression will be shared.

At this point, we need to take into account the fact that the effect of intellectual entertainment can be described also by means of its comparison with the appreciation concept (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011), which refers to a meaningful response to entertainment, an inspiring insight, or a form of contemplation that allows confronting or considering aspects of human virtues. Nevertheless, appreciation will only be about the user’s self and come after a deliberate observation of the experience. Let us emphasize that appreciation of intellectual entertainment experiences are likely to happen both in every preselection (anticipation of meaningfulness) and in every postconsumption memory or evaluation. In some forms of intellectual entertainment, enjoyment and appreciation can coexist as responses to consumption. We can feel hedonic emotions (e.g., satisfaction, happiness, and joy) when we solve a specific problem, and we can evaluate the experience to be meaningful to us (e.g., it trains our sense of perseverance or effort).
Regarding morality in the context of affective disposition theory (ADT; Raney, 2002, 2006, 2011; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), we propose that continuous moral evaluation is performed mainly on the self. This is quite a remarkable feature and, certainly, a daring statement, as ADT addresses the relation of audiences to characters and narratives. Though intellectual entertainment is about solving problems, mastering challenges, and discovering schemes, it can also take place in the context of narrative consumption as stated above. In those cases, when facing an intellectual challenge within a fictional exposition, moral evaluation of the narrative and its characters coexist with the referred moral evaluation of the self.

Returning to ADT, it is worth noting that whatever small amount of hedonic pleasure is produced by an intellectual activity, its effect is magnified by the positive moral judgement which accompanies the entertainment act. At the outset, users feel good when selecting an intellectual entertainment, as they expect it to work positively on their cognitive skills. For instance, if we solve a Rubik’s Cube, we feel rewarded both because the original challenge was great and because it is socially accepted that the time we spent sliding the faces of the cube around was not wasted. Note that we form a specific affective temporal relationship with ourselves based on our cognitive and emotional performance when facing the challenge proposed by the content. We test our skills to carry out the challenge despite intermediate failures. It is a matter of perseverance. Therefore, we are not only cognitively evaluating and watching the problem but our own attitude during the process (one of detachment, also addressed by Cupchik, 2011). Enjoyment, at the end, will also depend on the affective-cognitive evaluation of our own performance regarding completion of challenges. If we manage to reach a partial or total solution of the challenge, we feel content, and the enjoyment of the experience will be positive and rewarding to ourselves. In contrast, when the solution is not found, we negatively question the experience, the content, or even ourselves. Applying Raney’s work on fictions (Raney, 2011) to an intellectual entertainment challenge, we are aware of our emotional reactions to the content itself, to its components, to the plights of the characters, and to the ultimate outcome. Each one of those emotional reactions can be associated with a moral evaluation, in different grades, of the self.

Further, it is important to consider the absence of any relationship of intellectual entertainment to the human senses. In pure intellectual entertainment, there are no flavors, nothing to touch, no music, and no beautiful images involved in the solution of a problem. Neither it is necessary to talk or interact with other people. Intellectual entertainment only needs peers to sanction or simply appreciate the solution found and bring some recognition to the problem solver. Intellectual entertainment is appealing to a particular type of personality, but it is to a large extent independent of gender, culture, or age. It is not subject to fashions or epochs. It can, arguably, be considered a peculiar sort of absolute entertainment.

It is natural to reason that intellectual entertainment is a product of evolution. High levels of intellectual skills have been naturally selected. The ability to process reality in our brain has developed the possibility of predicting situations. It is possible to compute in advance whether a jump is reasonably safe or not. It is also possible to predict how enemies will respond to a given attack. It is also a product of education. Trained brains can predict better and will have an advantage for survival. Such brains need to exercise on imaginary problems. It is favored by evolution to do so. Self-training needs a mechanism to abstract from the outer world and focus on computation. This can only be possible if some sort of pleasure is attached to the act of thinking on apparently irrelevant problems. This argument seems to indicate why intellectual entertainment is unrelated to basic human senses or any common driving force such as sex or violence. There are no feelings of guilt, revenge, or physical power in solving a chess problem. It is a brain exercise, a kind of entertainment directed right at the most advanced and abstract processing part of our cortex. It is timeless and necessary. As Hartmann (2011) clearly states, an intellectual problem not only challenges the user to some extent and asks consumers to self-regulate, but it also fulfills an adaptive function.

Exploiting Intellectual Entertainment

A general strategy to exploit intellectual entertainment in media can be spelled out as follows. The basic idea is to reinforce the sequence that characterizes scientific discovery: frustration–epiphany–joy–recognition. We identify three current difficulties to producing intellectual entertainment for media:

(1) **Trivialization.** The success of the media proposal depends on the correct timing and difficulty of the intellectual riddle involved. Trivial problems bring no pleasure and undermine the trust of the individual versus the media provider. Exceedingly complicated problems only produce frustration. Finding the right level of intellectual difficulty is a very difficult issue. The tendency of media to oversimplify plots so as to reach large audiences may turn into an error as triviality deceives the average intelligent person. Therefore, trivialization is singled out as the first misuse in the design and exploitation of intellectual entertainment.

(2) **Excess of social interaction.** Intellectual entertainment retains a good deal of solitary pleasure. The first three stages of scientific discovery, frustration–epiphany–joy, are in their essence full of individual emotions. The violation of the isolation of the frustration period tantalizes many people. It is easy to seek for advice on a chess problem or on a crossword, but the epiphany moment is then no longer possible. Accordingly, reading is essentially a solitary pleasure, watching a good film should not be interrupted, and completing a difficult video game is kept as a personal achievement.

(3) **Poor reward scheme.** A fundamental problem for media intellectual entertainment is to find a sensible reward scheme. Following the example of the gaming industry, the recognition to successful players requires the use of the Internet, which brings a switch in
modality. The interactivity that goes back and forth between media provider and gamer, as well as that among gamers, needs not use the same channel as the game itself. This is a remarkable fact that is not extensively used in TV or in the movie industry. The fundamental idea we propose here is that interactivity by itself is not enough, a model for acknowledgment of success is essential.

Success in Incorporating Intellectual Entertainment in Current Media

Let us briefly analyze, then, the different levels of success in incorporating intellectual entertainment in current media as related to the problems we have just presented. We first consider traditional TV channels addressing large audiences. Intellectual challenges are scarce and often reduced to quiz programs or to moderately scientific series. Trivialization is a great danger for traditional TV, which may be one of the causes underlying the abandoning of this medium by youngsters. Solitude is often impossible, as watching TV is, in many cases, a social activity. Furthermore, reward schemes are difficult for traditional TV. The use of Short Message Service (SMS) messages cannot compete with the Internet channel which is used in other media entertainment.

Interactive TV is still quite underdeveloped. It is hard to assess how far intellectual entertainment will pervade the new channel. It is certainly true that reward schemes can be put in place.

Let us turn to movie projection in cinemas. The three challenges for intellectual entertainment are in better shape here than for traditional TV. Plots are often more sophisticated and invite the viewer to make an intellectual effort. Trivialization is part of the industry, but quite a number of movies do not follow simple avenues. When a good challenge is proposed, movie watchers remain solitary during the projection. They think by themselves and struggle to understand the subtleties of the plot without consultation. Furthermore, the aftermath of the movie will lead to discussions with friends, and will provide an opportunity for recognition and for sharing all kinds of information through all kinds of communication channels including those available on the Internet.

The video game industry certainly provides the best positioned channel to incorporate intellectual entertainment. Games can vary in difficulty and can provide different levels of intellectual challenge within the same game. Trivialization is certainly a danger, though the levels of complexity are often presented to players so as to keep their attention focused. Games are often played individually, and the success in working through the series of challenges remains a personal feat. Reward schemes are related to subsequent interactions on the Internet.

Conclusions

In this paper, a proposal for a theory of intellectual entertainment has been put forward. A nonnegligible part of current products for media entertainment is based on reproducing the sequence of complex emotions that characterize scientific discovery — namely, uncertainty—epiphany—joy—need for recognition. It is further argued that the continuous consumption of such products is deeply rooted in a positive, long-term moral judgement of the self. We have discussed our proposal in relation to the authors who appear in this present issue. Finally, we have identified three current difficulties in producing intellectual entertainment for media — namely, the tendency for trivialization, excess social interaction, and the limitation of poor reward schemes.

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References


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What’s Next?
Remarks on the Current Vitalization of Entertainment Theory

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Abstract. This paper points to new developments in the context of entertainment theory. Starting from a background of well-established theories that have been proposed and elaborated mainly by Zillmann and his collaborators since the 1980s, a new two-factor model of entertainment is introduced. This model encompasses “enjoyment” and “appreciation” as two independent factors. In addition, several open questions regarding cultural differences in humans’ responses to entertainment products or the usefulness of various theoretical concepts like “presence,” “identification,” or “transportation” are also discussed. Finally, the question of why media users are seeking entertainment is brought to the forefront, and a possibly relevant need such as the “search for meaningfulness” is mentioned as a possible major candidate for such an explanation.

Keywords: appreciation, enjoyment, entertainment, meaningfulness

Introduction
There can be no doubt that entertainment theory, as it was developed within communication science and media psychology some 20 years ago (e.g., Zillmann, 2006; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), has received a lot of attention over the past decade (see Bryant & Vorderer, 2006; Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000) and now seems to critically reassess some of its major paradigmatic assumptions (see, e.g., Klimmt & Vorderer, 2010; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). While for decades, “entertainment as media effect” (Zillmann & Bryant, 1994) was either neglected or regarded as potentially dangerous to human thinking, feeling, and behavior (see Zillmann, 2000), the sort of “entertainment research” done in the 1980s and 1990s by Zillmann and his collaborators successfully rehabilitated this leisure time activity by demonstrating how it is purposefully used by various audiences to their full advantage. It has been described and explained as an appropriate and successful way to elevate one’s own moods by selecting the appropriate content capable of eliciting such so-called mood-management (see Knobloch-Westervick, 2006).

The main difference between this well-established body of research (see Bryant & Vorderer, 2006) and what is discussed in the context of “entertainment theory and research” today seems to be that the emphasis has shifted toward a more detailed description of the psychological response of the user, which is now seen to be more complex, multifaceted, and multidimensional. Instead of understanding such a user’s response as a rather mechanical and therefore relatively simple-to-explain mechanism that only aims at managing a person’s moods, most recent elaborations stress the complexity of this response, which seems to entail several different psychological mechanisms. Feeling entertained, some now argue, is not only a matter of amusement or of simply feeling good in a general sense, but is also one of becoming involved with an important topic, of elaborating on existing thoughts and beliefs, of pleasure and of sadness, of fun and of melancholy, of emotional kicks and of deeper thinking (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010).

Two-Level Model of Entertainment Motivation
This complexity of entertainment as response to media content can be described as two-dimensional, where both the pure pleasure-seeking aspect and the more elaborate appreciation of a program, film, recording, or game, play a significant role (Vorderer & Ritterfeld, 2009) (Figure 1).

This model is not meant to question the established tradition of research on mood-management but to complement it. It claims that media users often seek to elevate their moods by selecting the appropriate content, and that both the pleasure potential of a program (which has been studied in detail by Zillmann and his collaborators) as well as the complexity of it (which has been emphasized more in the context of a “psychology of interest”; see Silvia, 2006) determine the outcome of this endeavor. Content-related and form-related aspects do come together here, but much more research needs to be done to assess the specific relation between the two impact factors. The second dimension, “appreciation,” seems to be independent from...
would know or at least have a gut feeling for what works best for them. That is, they intuit which content they need (and in which situation) to either elevate their mood, or to satisfy at least one (and potentially all) of their fundamental needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, or even achieve both goals at the same time.

This model suggests that entertainment can be achieved differently, depending on the user, the situation, or the program the user is exposed to. As a consequence of this more complex model, research on entertainment needs to differentiate the effects a program may elicit. By doing so, it can derive testable hypotheses that will enable us to better understand what the user is looking for and what he or she experiences when exposed to a specific program.

Further Developments

But despite these new theoretical developments in entertainment theory and research, a lot more remains to be done. What has not yet been achieved is a better understanding of cultural differences in our response to entertainment programs. We do very well know that different forms of entertainment are in fact enjoyed and appreciated differently not only in different parts of the world but also between different cultures and ethnicities within one society. Yet, we do not know why this is the case. Single case studies such as Liebes and Katz’ (1993) groundbreaking exploration of the cross-cultural readings of Dallas have demonstrated how important this perspective is, but they cannot provide a theoretical framework for studying such differences on a more general scale. Not even the multibillion dollar Hollywood industry has come up with an explanation, even though it is most in need of one, given that it has long produced programs for audiences across the globe.

But not only on the level of the phenomenon itself is this lack of differentiation lamentable. We also miss it in the theoretical explanation of cultural variation, and it is striking, to say the least, that Anglo-Saxon approaches have dominated the theorizing in the area of entertainment research, while other European traditions have been neglected. This is not to say that there is a fundamental difference in how Anglo-Saxons and Continental Europeans view the world in general and entertainment in particular. But I believe that it is fair to state that in the American culture there is a stronger emphasis on happiness and well-being, while in the Continental tradition there is a stronger consideration of other than positive emotions – that is, feelings and psychological states such as sadness, melancholy, or irritation. Within the field of literary studies in Germany, for example, reading was never thought only to make the reader happier or feel better. While this was studied as one possible effect of reading literary texts, other responses such as increased uncertainty (see Groeben, 1972; Groeben & Vorderer, 1988) were also taken into account. Only recently has Wilson (2008) pointed out that melancholy is one of the major forces and effects of all sorts of entertainment production and consumption, yet it has received very little attention in contemporary philosophy. Still less attention has been paid in the social sciences, communication science, or

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**Figure 1.** A two-level model of entertainment motivation.

The argument here is that human beings are constantly seeking to satisfy these three needs in their daily lives and that an extended period of nonsatisfaction would eventually lead to psychological problems. Entertaining media content is just one, albeit a very prominent and easy-to-realize, tool that can and often is used to partially satisfy these needs. This is because media users do most often feel “autonomous” and “competent” when following a particular program, and they do “relate” to others, both on the screen (see, e.g., the research on parasocial interactions and relationships; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006) as well as in front of it. In sum, being entertained means both experiencing pleasure by managing one’s own moods through exposure to media content and partially satisfying (some of) the fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Some programs might be able to satisfy all of these needs and interests at the same time, but it seems more realistic to think of programs which are rather good at doing one job at the expense of another. The users, of course, would know or at least have a gut feeling for what works
psychology, where audiences’ motives and responses to entertainment programs are studied.

On a more general level, we must concede that we still know little about the psychological state users are in while being exposed to an entertainment program. The implicit assumption of most scholars is that a user is in very nearly the same psychological situation as he or she would be in experiencing in real life the events depicted on-screen. Zillmann’s affective-disposition theory, for example, describes the mind of a media viewer in the same way as that of an observer of real events. The emotions he or she feels, their anticipatory thoughts, their hopes and fears, are all simply like the “real ones.” This is at least surprising given the fact that some of these reactions do indeed imply that the user is fully aware that the situation is not real. For example, suspense is described as a stressful anticipation of events a viewer resents and despises (see Zillmann, 1996). But in order to really feel it, the situation cannot be real, but only present an illusion of reality. If it were “real,” the viewer would be inclined to avoid the development of the particular event he or she is anticipating – for example, by preventing it. Take the example of a beloved fictional hero who in the context of a movie is in severe danger. The viewer, as Zillmann would argue, anticipates an event that he or she resents – namely, severe harm to the protagonist. The more the viewer likes the protagonist and the more likely the negative outcome is to unfold, the more suspense the viewer feels. But this is only because he or she cannot warn the protagonist, and any action the viewer might undertake is without consequence to the protagonist. The same situation happening in real life would not allow an observer to feel suspense. Instead he or she would be alert and ready to intervene in any way possible to help the observed person in the hazardous situation. That is to say, suspense seems only be possible because the situation of an onlooker is fundamentally different when he or she is a media viewer as compared with when he or she watches real life. And this observer must be aware of this or at least feel the difference.

Nonetheless, most if not all of the research assumptions made about the psychological processing of depicted events by an onlooker are similar or even identical with those made about real-life observers. I believe that a differentiation is needed, and in the future we should expect from entertainment research a more detailed description of what is happening in the mind of the media user when exposed to entertainment products. That is, we need a description and an explanation that takes into account the specificity of the mind when exposed to a fictional situation as compared with a real-life situation. No doubt over the past 20 years or so we have seen a great variety of theoretical concepts that all try to describe how the minds of media users relate to the content and the form of a media product. Theoretical constructs such “identification” (Cohen, 2006; Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009), “involvement” (Wirth, 2006), “presence” (Lee, 2006), “transportation” (Brock, Green, & Strange, 2002), to name just a view, have all competed with each other in providing a description of the user’s relatedness to media content; an explanation, however, of what this means with respect to the fictionality of the depicted events and the fact that the user “knows” about this fictionality is still missing.

A final deficit in the field of entertainment theory and research should be mentioned here: that is, the need for a satisfying answer to the question, why do people do this? Why do we all spend so much time with media entertainment? Psychology tends to explain behavior by showing that there are needs to be fulfilled and motives to be satisfied. Communication science has often claimed that a specific content is gratifying to the audience and that this is what all audiences seek: gratifications. But none of these claims can answer the question of why we have these needs. In fact, it seems that we have to leave the grounds of social and behavioral science to answer this more fundamental, rather philosophical question. Is it that we constantly have to distract ourselves from the fact that life is absurd, by escaping to a world that only exists in our minds, and only for the time that we “are there”? And even if so, are there alternatives to this form of escapism? Groeben (1989) has claimed that reading and thinking are ways of creating meaning, and that this creation of meaning is the only alternative to committing suicide in an otherwise absurd world (in the sense described by the French philosopher Albert Camus). This creation of meaning may also be called a “search for meaningfulness,” and it comes close to what Oliver and Bartsch in this issue (2011) have described as the feeling of being alive. Following the suggestions made above, entertainment can indeed serve both: the desire to escape (through “enjoyment”) the social world in which we live our everyday lives, and the urge to create meaning (through “appreciation”). From this point of view, entertainment undoubtedly remains a very powerful tool that helps people to master their lives, one way or another.

References


Date of acceptance:

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