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Enjoyment and Appreciation as Motivators for Coping: Exploring the Therapeutic Effects of Media Messages on Perceived Threat

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This study explores how experience-based media messages featuring victims, survivors, and outperformers provide therapeutic benefits through the enjoyment and appreciation of the messages. Using the economic crisis as a context, our findings indicate that whereas distressed individuals were more likely to appreciate threat-related stories featuring victims and survivors over outperformers, nondistressed individuals were more likely to enjoy such stories featuring outperformers over victims and survivors. Appreciation and enjoyment of these threat-related stories predicted effective coping outcomes: positive reappraisal of the economic situation that also led to increased perceived control over the threat through positive affect. Health implications for enjoyment and appreciation of experience-based stories as motivators for coping outcomes are also discussed.

Keywords: perceived threat, enjoyment, appreciation, social comparison, coping

The relationship between exposure to media messages and coping has been an enduring concern among scholars. Initial theorizing based on mood management theory suggests that individuals select and presumably enjoy (i.e., through the experience of pleasure, see Nabi & Krmar, 2004) media messages that are *unrelated* to their negative experiences to escape from distress and to feel better (Zillmann, 1988). However, a series of follow-up studies indicate that rather than seeking these short-term and emotional gratifications, people also choose and presumably appreciate (i.e., through the experience of meaningfulness, Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) messages *related* to their negative experiences to attain useful coping resources (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006; Oliver, 2008).

Although these prior studies imply that enjoyment and appreciation of certain messages provide positive coping outcomes, it is unclear how these two responses serve as motivators that lead to specific gratifications. The current research directly explores how the two responses derived from negative

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experience-related messages over a specific issue may facilitate positive coping outcomes involving both emotional and cognitive changes in a specific threat context. To do so, the current study manipulates experience-related portrayals using distinct characters (targets) on the basis of social comparison literature. To undertake this research endeavor, we first integrate literature on social comparison and media effects to predict individuals' enjoyment and appreciation of stories featuring distinct targets (i.e., victims, survivors, and outperformers) in a germane threat context. As with any negative experience, perceptions of threat reflect evitable or inevitable harm depending on situational control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Economic threat in particular is both a personal and social concern that adults readily face (Reisel & Probst, 2010; Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002), and thus it provides a useful testing ground for the examination of individuals' responses to experience-based messages.

Prior studies on media use and coping found that distressed people enjoy experience-based messages featuring a certain character because of the information value of the messages (e.g., Nabi et al., 2006). However, enjoyment per se in Nabi et al.'s study did not lead to more effective coping outcomes directly indicated by changes in affect. This might be because the study did not measure appreciation or a specific coping outcome, such as positive reappraisal. More recently, Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, and Bente (2014) found that hedonic and eudaimonic mediated experiences serve therapeutic functions, such as increased detachment, relaxation, and mastery. Although they considered hedonic and eudaimonic experiences simultaneously, their manipulation of media messages focused on types of affect inductions (i.e., positive, negative, or meaningful) rather than various experience-related portrayals. Moreover, their participants' negative experiences pertained to work strain as a general stress domain. Therefore, the context does not allow for specific predictions particularly regarding the role of hedonic experiences in cognitive coping outcomes such as increasing perceived mastery.

Based on this literature on media-induced recovery and coping, we therefore suggest that enjoyment and appreciation of such messages serve as possible motivators that help individuals cope with economic threat by enhancing positive reappraisal of the economic situation, which then heightens perceived control over the threat by increasing one's overall positive affect. In essence, this study theoretically contributes to our understanding of the power of positively valenced experiences—enjoyment and appreciation—with threat-related stories, as these mediated experiences stimulate a host of therapeutic effects for those undergoing negative life events.

Social Comparison and Enjoyment and Appreciation of Experience-Based Messages

The ways in which individuals think, feel, and behave are largely determined by the comparisons they make with others (Festinger, 1954), fulfilling needs such as self-enhancement and self-improvement to maintain consistent and accurate self-perceptions (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). In particular, people engage social comparisons more readily when they deem comparison targets to have relatively similar traits to themselves (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999). Two types of comparison targets—those who are better or worse off than oneself—and situational factors (e.g., perceived threat) play important roles in determining whether individuals engage in upward or downward comparisons. Whereas downward comparison entails comparing oneself to those who are inferior, or worse off, upward comparison involves comparing oneself to those who are superior, or better off (Festinger, 1954). Furthermore, one's

appraising a situation as threatening depends on the amount of personal and social resources one has to effectively deal with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, perceived threat may dictate the degree to which one makes social comparisons to reaffirm one's self-concept.

With these theoretical considerations in mind, this study tests for the effects of distinct comparison targets to understand message reception, considering categorizations from social comparison literature (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Specifically, we capture three variations of comparison targets by manipulating the target in a story focused on the economy by labeling the target as a *victim* (one who is in economic despair without any hope), a *survivor* (one who overcomes economic distress), or an *outperformer* (one who is immune to economic strains). As the economy is a major and relevant topic facing individuals and society, the manipulation of these three distinct targets has strong ecological validity. According to Wu (2011) and Wu and Day (2005), although economic stories may be more negatively framed (e.g., portraying victims) at the national level, uplifting and encouraging stories (e.g., portraying survivors and outperformers) are likely to occur at the local level. We expect that exposure to these three distinct targets will foster qualitatively different message reception experiences based on the types of social comparisons engaged.

Whereas much of the literature on social comparison points to effects of media messages on general affective states (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, Van Yperen, & Dakof, 1990) or discrete emotions (Nabi & Keblusek, 2014), less attention has been given to understanding how social comparisons made during media exposure impact one's overall media experience (i.e., enjoyment and appreciation). In other words, engaging in upward and downward social comparisons with characters during media exposure may provide unique coping benefits that are motivated by the enjoyment and appreciation of experience-based stories. As these responses are affectively and cognitively driven, we expect not only that social comparisons influence media gratifications but also that the pleasure and meaning derived from such messages have important health implications for those coping with threat. Regarding positively valenced media experiences, enjoyment has commonly been discussed as a hedonic response to the consumption of media content and attributed to liking (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000) and sensory delight, suspense, and achievement (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Specifically, enjoyment is highest for media that are fun or light-hearted because these elicit predominantly positive emotions and thoughts (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Although pleasure has been extensively studied as a form of media gratification, Oliver (2008) suggests eudaimonia as another type of gratification derived from contemplating human poignancies and vulnerabilities, particularly from sad and tragic messages. Engaging in deep contemplation and feeling moved and inspired is a state Oliver and Bartsch (2010) term "appreciation."

A wealth of research supports the notion that media consumption facilitates pleasure and delight (see Vorderer et al., 2004), and more recent research has found both hedonic and eudaimonic mediated experiences to serve therapeutic functions, such as increased psychological well-being and vitality (e.g., Rieger et al., 2014). Therefore, it is possible that in negative situations, the degree of perceived threat that guides social comparison processes may influence one's overall affective dispositions and, specifically, the extent to which one derives enjoyment and appreciation from media messages (the conduit through which social comparisons occur).

Prior research suggests that for people who perceive themselves to have minimal situational control because of high levels of threat, engaging in downward (vs. upward) comparison may be more gratifying (Gibbons, 1986; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981). Empirical evidence supports the notion that perceived threat leads individuals to socially compare themselves with those who are less fortunate as a means of increasing self-worth (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). In the economic threat context, it is possible that more threatened individuals will compare their own experiences with those of other victims, leading to greater validation based on perceived similarities (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Such forms of relatedness, or the need to feel connected to others, may foster deeper meaning and contemplation based on shared experiences. Concurrently, reflective processing (more aligned with appreciation) is suggested to result from the fulfillment of higher-order goals, one of which is relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, we expect that those who feel greater economic threat are more inclined to appreciate stories with victim, rather than survivor or outperformer, targets.

H1: Those who perceive high economic threat compared to low economic threat will more likely appreciate stories featuring victims over stories featuring survivors or outperformers.

In contrast, individuals who feel minimal economic threat are perhaps likely to have strong hedonic motivation and make upward comparisons. In this case, it is possible that less distressed people will experience pleasure when witnessing someone else's success, especially if the issue is unrelated to the threat. Yet, for individuals who are at risk, exposure to a target's achievement is perhaps personally threatening and consequently reduces enjoyment because being void of resources or skills to attain such accomplishments is self-deprecating (Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Thus, applying upward comparison to the context of economic threat, we expect that less threatened individuals will have a greater tendency to enjoy stories portraying targets who succeed regardless of challenges or who overcome financial difficulties.

H2: Those who perceive low economic threat compared to high economic threat will more likely enjoy stories featuring survivors or outperformers over stories featuring victims.

Therapeutic Effects of Enjoyment and Appreciation

Increasing attention has been given to how hedonic and eudaimonic mediated experiences have health benefits, particularly the enhancement of psychological well-being (e.g., Reinecke, Klatt, & Krämer, 2011; Rieger et al., 2014). On one hand, Zillmann (1988) initially suggests that pleasant, absorbing, and negative experience-unrelated messages may help individuals improve their prevailing mood by providing escape from real-life problems or avoidance of negative self-perceptions (see also Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). On the other hand, sad and poignant messages can encourage contemplation of negative events and foster greater life perspectives (Oliver & Raney, 2011). Thus, by considering the distinct nature of hedonic and eudaimonic mediated responses, we examine potential coping outcomes that result from the enjoyment and appreciation of stories related to economic threat, as they may offer insight into how people use media messages to alleviate distress.

Positive reappraisal. One coping strategy that individuals use to reduce distress is positive reappraisal, or focusing on the good aspects of a given situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Unlike cognitive restructuring that strives to replace unrealistic aspects of negative evaluations of an event with more realistic evaluations (Beck, 1970), positive appraisal strives to reinterpret realistically negative thoughts positively, thus increasing positive emotions and improving psychological well-being. Therefore, in the current study, as economic threat is generally a realistic concern because of daily exposure and media prevalence, examining how individuals engage in positive reappraisal to cope with such a threat is a key and relevant area of concern. Applied to media messages, because enjoyment implies pleasure and amusement derived from media offerings, such reactions should generally provide greater emotional gratifications (Vorderer et al., 2004). Moreover, recent conceptual extensions of enjoyment further inform other therapeutic functions beyond pleasure, such as fulfilling higher-order needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010). Therefore, enjoyment of stories related to economic threat should likely foster more optimistic perspectives of negative situations, as such higher-order gratifications associated with perceived mastery may encourage favorable reassessment of negative events (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Moreover, hedonic media experiences have been found to regulate stress and induce relaxation (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Rieger et al., 2014). Consequently, enjoyment of threat-related messages is expected to encourage more positive thinking.

Likewise, appreciation of media messages may also have similar coping effects. As previously noted, appreciation represents pensive states in which individuals engage in introspective processing, allowing them to reflect on life events (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Although threatening messages (e.g., those related to economic threat) may serve as reminders of prevailing negative experiences, such messages can also enhance psychological well-being and mastery (Rieger et al., 2014). Therefore, in the context of the economy, appreciation derived from threat-related stories should likely make individuals acknowledge worthwhile aspects of the economy and discover opportunities for personal growth. Specifically, the experience of reflecting on life's meaning or the activation of personal and moral virtues while consuming media messages is expected to facilitate positive reappraisal of stress through cognitive adaptation (Taylor, 1983), perhaps more so than simple enjoyment of media.

Given these positive mediated experiences resulting from enjoyment and appreciation of stories, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Enjoyment and appreciation of negative experience-related stories will lead to greater positive reappraisal.

Perceived control. Once individuals reappraise stressful situations positively, this coping outcome may elicit positive affective experiences. In coping processes, positive affect should be considered not only a response to the cessation (i.e., relief) of a stressful situation but also as an important facilitator of subsequent adaptive coping (Folkman, 1997). In other words, although negative emotional experiences influence the coping strategies that individuals employ, such strategies also affect subsequent emotional responses (i.e., coping and affect influence each other). Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) claimed that even in severe and ongoing stressful situations, people frequently experience positive emotions through positive reappraisal. Such a positive affect can result from seeking various meanings

from life events (e.g., reappraising taken-for-granted things or minor events), and it can “provide respite from distress and thereby helps replenish resources and sustain further coping” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 766). If this is the case, positive reappraisal derived from enjoyment and appreciation of threat-relevant stories should elicit positive emotions because the reappraisal helps individuals reaffirm what they value, believe, and pursue. Indeed, positive reappraisal is uniquely associated with increased positive affect, but not necessarily decreased negative affect (Folkman, 1997).

Given that exposure to threat-related messages provides individuals with the chance to mull over stress and distill positive meanings from it, positive reappraisal with the aid of threat-related stories should likely generate positive affect (though it may not be intense or enduring) that has “adaptational significance” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000, p. 648). In turn, positive affect should likely facilitate the restoration of motivation (e.g., self-confidence) or a sense of mastery. According to Pearlin and Schooler (1978), mastery is a psychological resource defined by the degree to which “one regards one’s life chances as being under one’s own control in contrast to being fatalistically ruled” (p. 5). Therefore, we suggest that generally positive emotions resulting from reappraising economic concerns in a positive manner can indeed help escalate one’s perceived control to overcome such stresses. With these considerations in mind, the following mediation effect is proposed:

H4: Positive reappraisal will lead to positive affect, which in turn increases perceived control over the economic threat.

Context of Current Research

The context of South Korea was chosen because the economic threat in South Korea has been persistent since 1997 and perceived as unmodifiable. Specifically, students who attend universities in regions outside of Seoul (the capital of South Korea) tend to have pessimistic views on their job situations after graduation (e.g., lack of chance to be involved in various outside activities) because many resources are centralized in Seoul, resulting in more determined attitudes toward and certainty about the threat (e.g., “It is very unlikely for me to get a decent job after graduating college”) (Lee, 2014). Indeed, some students postpone graduation and enroll as fifth-year students to gain time to prepare for their jobs and careers (Hong, 2012). Because the economic situation in South Korea remains unresolved, we expect that using Korean students as a sample will provide a useful testing ground. However, as many countries in the world face challenging issues pertaining to the economy, the present research can also be generalized to other areas with potentially similar economic uncertainties (e.g., the United States and Europe). Given the sample of college students, the context of the general economic downturn was narrowed down to the issue of job security following graduation.

Method

Participants

College students in various regions in South Korea were recruited online. A survey company based in Seoul that had registered approximately 1 million online users as of June 2014 was

commissioned to collect data. From these users, the company randomly drew participants who met the criteria (i.e., students who attend a four-year college located in Seoul and regional areas outside Seoul). All participants received compensation from the company.

The sample consisted of 327 students, of whom 52.3% attended universities located in non-Seoul areas and 47.7% attended universities in Seoul. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 22.16$, $SD = 2.40$), and 49.8% were female. With regard to current employment status in June 2014, 38.2% reported having a job, with 2.1% working full-time outside of school, 0.6% working full-time for the university, 28.4% working part-time outside of school, 7.0% working part-time for the university, and 61.8% without any form of employment. None of the 28 graduating seniors reported presently having a job offer. The median household income reported by students in non-Seoul areas was between 30 million and 40 million won, whereas that for students in Seoul areas was between 40 million and 50 million won.

Procedure

Participants completed an online questionnaire. First, participants rated their perceived economic threat, specifically focusing on job security. Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to read a news story featuring one of three targets: victim, survivor, or outperformer. After reading the story, participants responded to a set of items assessing manipulation checks, enjoyment/appreciation/affect responses to the given story, and two coping outcomes (i.e., positive reappraisal and perceived control over the economic threat). Finally, participants completed demographic information. Of note, the assignment of the three stories did not significantly differ between region [$\chi^2 (df = 2) = .25$, $p = .88$] or gender [$\chi^2 (df = 2) = .12$, $p = .94$].

Story Manipulation

Across three news conditions, the headline and the events of the targets were manipulated in the story. The purpose of the manipulation was for participants to consciously compare themselves with someone who was worse off or better off in the case of job security. In all story versions, the beginning and end of the story remained constant. Specifically, the beginning described increasing unemployment statistics among young people and increasing rates of senior college students postponing graduation to find a job. The end described recommendations for job seekers, such as applying for positions in businesses of all sizes in order to allow students to demonstrate their abilities fully. The final remark included suggestions for governments and industries to support new recruitment efforts. The beginning ended with recent poll results reporting that 36.7% of seniors would enroll as fifth-year college students to maintain student status if they failed to find a job. Following these poll results, the three characters per condition (e.g., three victim characters in the victim condition), resulting in a total of nine characters across the conditions, were introduced.

The victim characters were three job seekers who had applied for various positions and had several on-site interviews for temporary positions and could not find jobs in the end. They suffered from low self-confidence, fear of an unpredictable future, game addiction, and even social phobia. The survivor characters were also three job seekers who initially failed to find jobs in the past year but who overcame

the hardship and landed satisfactory jobs or established businesses in the end. While unemployed, they searched employment information regularly, learned foreign languages, and earned money from working part-time. The outperformer characters were portrayed as three overachievers who were employed by large and prominent companies right after graduation. They had proficiency in foreign languages, various overseas experiences, and several minors and majors, and they received multiple job offers.

Story length was similar across the three conditions, ranging from 525 to 549 words, and no photos were included.

Measures

A full list of measurement items assessing focal variables can be found in the Appendix.

Prestory measures. Prior to being exposed to the stimulus, participants rated their perceived economic threat and self-esteem. These items were measured on Likert scales anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree).

Perceived threat. To measure perceived threat, seven items pertaining to perceived severity and susceptibility of threat were adopted from literature on fear appeal and victimization feelings in cultivation research (e.g., Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986; Witte, Berkowitz, Cameron, & McKeon, 1998). Subsequently, these items were adapted to the context of job security after graduation. Responses to the seven items were averaged to create an index ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = .87$). Of note, perceived economic threat did not significantly differ between regions [$(M_{\text{Seoul}} = 5.16$, $SD = 1.07$; $M_{\text{Non-Seoul}} = 5.15$, $SD = .99$), $t(325) = .03$, $p = .98$].

Self-esteem. Regarding self-esteem, 10 items taken from Rosenberg (1965) were used to assess participants' general self-worth and positive outlook. Responses to these 10 items were averaged to create an index ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = .91$). This variable served as a control because it may have influenced the frequency and sensitivity of social comparisons (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Of note, students attending universities in Seoul ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.06$) reported higher self-esteem than those in non-Seoul areas [$(M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(325) = 1.99$, $p < .05$].

Poststory measures. Following exposure to the stimulus, participants responded to a series of items assessing various responses to the story and the economic situation. Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured on Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Manipulation checks for distinct targets. Right after reading one of the three stories assigned, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived the targets portrayed in the story as *victims*, *survivors*, or *outperformers* using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). These three statements served as repeatedly measured items.

Manipulation checks for social comparison. To ascertain whether the targets were perceived as being worse off or better off than the participants in terms of the economic situation, respondents rated

five items: (a) "The characters are in a better job-seeking situation, as compared to me"; (b) "I feel sorry for the characters' situation"; (c) "The characters are in a worse situation, as compared to me"; (d) "I feel hopeful for the characters' situation"; and (e) "I believe that the characters' situations are unfortunate." A mean index was constructed such that higher scores reflected upward social comparison ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .97$, $\alpha = .70$).

Affect. After reading the story, participants rated the degree to which they felt 15 discrete emotions from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) on Likert-type scales. Emotion measures were adapted from Barrett and Russell (1998). Items were *relaxed*, *happy*, *serene*, *content*, *excited*, *calm*, and *elated*, along with *depressed*, *tense*, *upset*, *nervous*, *stressed*, *fatigued*, *low*, and *sad*, which were reverse coded. Responses to these 15 items were averaged to create an index ($M = 3.23$, $SD = .89$, $\alpha = .89$).

Enjoyment and appreciation of story. Participants rated the degree to which they attained pleasure, experienced a pensive state, and derived meaning from reading the story. A total of 10 items were adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010) to measure these enjoyment and appreciation responses. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed two factors explaining 54.45% of the total variance: enjoyment ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.16$, $\alpha = .87$) and appreciation ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.12$, $\alpha = .86$).

Positive reappraisal of economic threat. After reading the story, participants reported the degree to which they reappraised the economic situation, focusing on job security. A total of 12 items were adapted from positive reappraisal measures from the Ways of Coping Scale (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and positive reinterpretation and growth measures from the COPE Inventory (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Responses to these items were averaged to create an index ($M = 3.79$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .91$).

Perceived control over the economic threat. Six items were used to assess participants' perceived control over the economic situation, focusing on job security, adapted from Pearlin and Schooler (1978). Participants rated their perceived ability to overcome economic challenges during the current period. Responses to the six items were averaged to create an index ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .81$).

Results

Manipulation Checks for Distinct Targets

A 3 (story conditions) by 3 (ratings of the targets) mixed-model repeated-measures ANOVA using a multivariate approach was conducted, with the conditions a between-subjects factor and the ratings a within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed a significant interaction for conditions and ratings (Table 1). Of the 18 possible comparisons of means (within rows and columns), all were statistically significant except for two comparisons. First, within the victim condition (column), participants' ratings for survivors and for outperformers were not different, suggesting that both of them were perceived as nonvictims. Second, within ratings for survivors (row), participants in both survivor and outperformer conditions did not differ, suggesting that both of them were perceived as survivors. These nonsignificant results reflect that particularly during a threatening period, both survivors and outperformers can be perceived as

nonvictims and as survivors. However, note that across the conditions (row), victim ratings were significantly higher for the survivor than for the outperformer condition. Likewise, within the outperformer condition (column), ratings for the outperformer were significantly higher than for the survivor. These results show successful manipulations of the targets.

Table 1. Manipulation Checks: Perceptions of the Three Targets.

Ratings	Conditions		
	Victim	Survivor	Outperformer
Victim	4.80 (.13) _{Bc}	3.75 (.14) _{Ab}	3.27 (.14) _{Aa}
Survivor	2.93 (.12) _{Aa}	4.65 (.13) _{Cb}	4.51 (.13) _{Bb}
Outperformer	2.71 (.11) _{Aa}	4.28 (.11) _{Bb}	5.40 (.11) _{Cc}

Wilks' $\lambda = .55$, $F(4,646) = 56.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Using Holm's sequential Bonferroni post-hoc test, within rows, means with no lowercase subscript in common differ at $p < .05$; within columns, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at $p < .05$.

Manipulation Checks of Stories Triggering Social Comparisons

An ANOVA was conducted on the index of social comparison as a dependent variable to ensure significant differences across the three conditions. As expected, participants who read the victim story perceived the victims as worse off than themselves ($M = 3.71_c$, $SE = .08$), and those who read the outperformer story perceived the outperformers as better off than themselves ($M = 4.98_a$, $SE = .08$), whereas perceptions of the survivor fell in between the two conditions [$(M = 4.55_b$, $SE = .08)$, $F(2, 324) = 69.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$].

Enjoyment and Appreciation of Stories

Two regression analyses were conducted to test H1 and H2. Within each analysis, the four demographic variables and self-esteem were included as controls (Table 2). Subsequently, perceived threat, story conditions (dummy coded, outperformer as the reference condition), and the two interactions were entered.

Table 2. Predictors of Enjoyment and Appreciation of Stories Featuring the Three Targets.

	Appreciation	Enjoyment
Gender	-.03	-.14
College location	.01	-.22 ⁺
Graduating semester	.05 ⁺	.05 [*]
Household income	.04	.01
Self-esteem	.06	.14 [*]
Perceived threat (centered)	-.10	-.37 ^{**}
Victim (dummy)	.53 ^{***}	-.40 ^{***}
Survivor (dummy)	.22	.12
Perceived threat × victim (dummy)	.34 [*]	.32 [*]
Perceived threat × survivor (dummy)	.29 [*]	.47 [*]
<i>R</i> ²	.13 ^{***}	.09 ^{**}
<i>F</i>	4.60 ^{***}	3.01 ^{**}
<i>n</i>	326	326

Note. Entries are unstandardized *B*. Gender was coded as male = 0, female = 1. College location was coded as other regions = 0, Seoul = 1. Graduating semester was coded as August 2014 = 1, February 2015 = 2, August 2015 = 3, February 2016 = 4, and so on.

⁺*p* < .10, ^{*}*p* < .05, ^{**}*p* < .01, ^{***}*p* < .001.

H1 predicted that those who perceive high threat are more likely than those who perceive low threat to appreciate a victim story over a survivor or an outperformer story. The analysis yielded significant interactions for perceived threat by victim (dummy) and perceived threat by survivor (dummy). The former interaction suggests that perceived threat was associated with greater appreciation of a victim story as compared to an outperformer story. Similarly, the latter interaction suggests that perceived threat was associated with greater appreciation of a survivor story as compared to an outperformer story. To provide detailed interpretations, a Model 2 in PROCESS macro that is equivalent to the current regression analyses was run and a plot was generated (Hayes, 2013, 2015). The macro results (Figure 1a) show that perceived threat positively and significantly predicted appreciation in the victim condition ($B = .25_a$, $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$). Likewise, perceived threat also positively predicted appreciation in the survivor condition ($B = .20_a$, $t = 1.81$, $p = .07$). However, perceived threat was negatively associated with appreciation in the outperformer condition ($B = -.10_b$, $t = -.97$, $p > .05$). Because the interaction for perceived threat by survivor (dummy) was not significant when the reference group was the victim condition (rather than the outperformer condition reported previously), the regression slopes between victim and survivor conditions were not statistically different. Given these findings, H1 was partially supported because although perceived threat increased appreciation of stories featuring victims (vs. outperformers), this was also the case for survivors.

H2 predicted that those who perceive low threat are more likely than those who perceive high threat to enjoy an outperformer or a survivor story over a victim story. Similar to the previous result of

H1, the regression analysis yielded significant interactions for perceived threat by victim (dummy) and for perceived threat by survivor (dummy). The former interaction suggests that perceived threat was associated with greater enjoyment of a victim story as compared to an outperformer story. Likewise, the latter interaction suggests that perceived threat was associated with greater enjoyment of a survivor story as compared to an outperformer story. Again, a Model 2 in PROCESS macro was run to provide detailed results (Figure 1b). The macro results showed that perceived threat negatively and significantly predicted enjoyment of the outperformer condition ($B = -.37_a$, $t = -3.73$, $p < .001$). However, perceived threat was not significantly associated with enjoyment of the victim ($B = -.04_b$, $t = -.40$, $p > .05$) and survivor conditions ($B = .10_b$, $t = .93$, $p > .05$). Because the interaction for perceived threat by survivor (dummy) was not significant when the reference group was the victim condition (rather than the outperformer condition reported previously), the regression slopes between victim and survivor conditions were not statistically different. Given these findings, H2 was partially supported because although low perceived threat led to greater enjoyment of stories featuring outperformers (vs. victims), this was not the case for survivors.

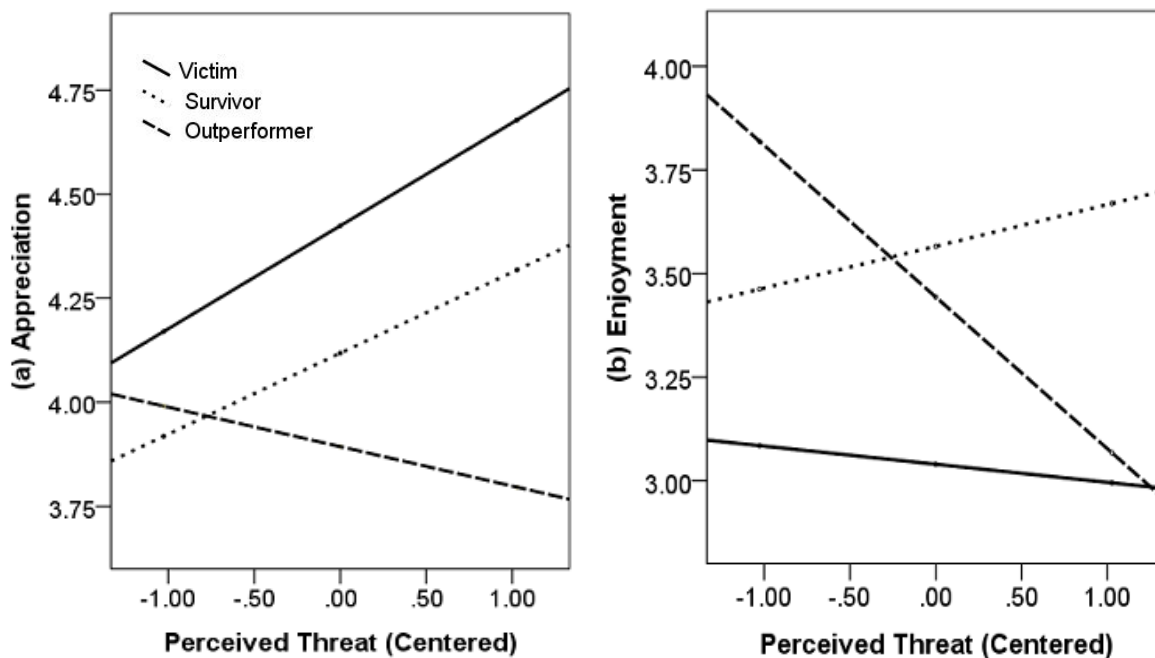
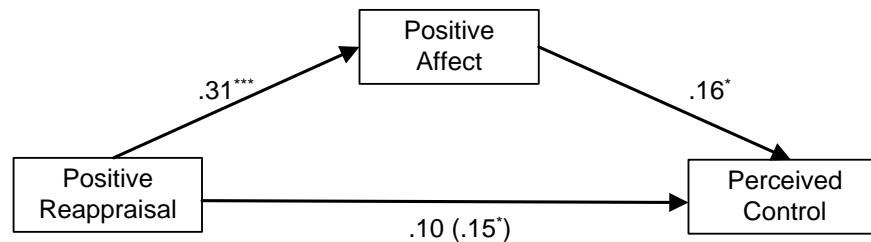


Figure 1. Interactions between story condition and perceived economic threat on (a) appreciation and (b) enjoyment of stories. Coping Outcomes of Reading Experience-Based Messages

H3 predicted that enjoyment and appreciation responses from reading three experience-based stories will increase positive reappraisal. The five control variables and enjoyment and appreciation responses were entered into a regression model to predict positive reappraisal. Results showed that the model was significant, $F(7, 319) = 40.56, p < .001$, with high explained variance, $R^2 = .47, p < .001$. Importantly, enjoyment ($B = .46, t = 11.61, p < .001$) and appreciation ($B = .12, t = 2.99, p < .01$) positively and significantly predicted positive reappraisal, supporting H3.

H4 predicted that positive reappraisal will affect perceived control over the threat through positive affect. To test H4, a mediation model was set up using Model 4 in PROCESS (Figure 2). Again, the five control variables were used as covariates, though they are not illustrated for parsimony. To test the indirect effect, bootstrapping procedures ($N = 5,000$ bootstrap samples) and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were employed. The results showed that the indirect effect was significant (estimated indirect effect $B = .05, CI [.0089, .1007]$), supporting H4.



Note. Entries are unstandardized B . Number inside a parentheses is a total effect of positive reappraisal on perceived control, *without* including the mediator. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2. Indirect effect of positive reappraisal on perceived control through positive affect.

Of interest, while still controlling for the five variables and using the similar procedures, each of the following two-way indirect effects was tested using AMOS. Results showed that the two-way indirect effect of enjoyment on perceived control through the two mediators (i.e., enjoyment \rightarrow positive reappraisal \rightarrow positive affect \rightarrow perceived control) was significant ($B = .03, p < .01$). Likewise, the two-way indirect effect of appreciation on perceived control through the same two mediators (i.e., appreciation \rightarrow positive reappraisal \rightarrow positive affect \rightarrow perceived control) was also significant ($B = .02, p < .01$). These findings suggest that enjoyment and appreciation responses from reading negative experience-related stories have beneficial coping outcomes.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how specific portrayals of economic crisis stories (with victims, survivors, and outperformers as distinct targets) impact the enjoyment and appreciation responses of college students perceiving varying levels of economic threat and how these positively valenced responses have health benefits, particularly in eliciting effective coping outcomes that allow students to regain a perception of control over the threat. By linking social comparison experiences to enjoyment and appreciation, the present study supports the idea that enjoyment and appreciation are key motivators of positive coping outcomes. Similar to prior research (e.g., Rieger et al., 2014), we found that appreciation and eudaimonic experiences, particularly from reading negative experience-related stories, may increase a sense of mastery through positive reappraisal and positive affect. However, contrary to prior research (e.g., Zillmann, 1988) suggesting that enjoyment and hedonic experiences (presumably resulting from consuming experience-*unrelated* messages) enhance well-being mostly focused on relaxation and detachment, the current study found that enjoyment (similar to appreciation) of experience-*related* messages has health benefits (see also Nabi et al., 2006; Nabi & Krmar, 2004).

Although we expected that only victim stories would induce appreciation among threatened participants, our results revealed that this was also true for survivor stories. Perhaps survivor stories were deemed very meaningful for threatened participants, even though they may not have engaged in downward social comparisons. This result is consonant with previous findings in the relevant literature. For example, Wirth, Hofer, and Schramm (2012) showed that both happy and sad endings of meaningful messages, corresponding to survivor and victim stories in the current study, can facilitate eudaimonic experiences. Likewise, Oliver and Bartsch (2011) contend that tragedy may not be a necessary condition for appreciation experiences. Indeed, when threat was heightened, both victim and survivor stories induced appreciation equally, and more than outperformer stories, but perhaps through different mechanisms: insight that others are in worse situations versus hope that people prevail even through difficult life moments. Therefore, future research should consider identifying and empirically testing these mechanisms.

On the other hand, when threat was low, individuals enjoyed outperformer stories, but not survivor stories. Perhaps these individuals perceived survivors as nonideal targets, as survivor stories did portray targets who initially failed to find jobs and then overcame the hardship. Such portrayals of failure may have triggered negative anticipations. This finding is inconsistent with excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 1971), which predicts greater enjoyment of survivor than outperformer stories because enjoyment can be further intensified after observing initial negative arousing events (failure) followed by positive arousing events (success). Thus, the finding suggests that excitation transfer may not occur when the arousing event portrayed is particularly relevant to readers' possible negative anticipation, which is worthy of further investigation. Alternatively, manipulations of outperformers and survivors were different, as were the characters' life circumstances. For example, while outperformers were portrayed as having proficiency in multiple languages and global work experiences, survivors were portrayed as steadily searching for relevant job information and learning foreign languages (i.e., they did not have the exact same attributes as those of outperformers). These distinct attributes in addition to life circumstances might have influenced unthreatened individuals' somewhat low levels of enjoyment of the survivor stories.

Future research should consider minimizing such possible confounding variables when designing the stimulus.

Given these findings, we may be able to conclude that threatened individuals showed (a) high appreciation and low enjoyment responses to victim stories and (b) low enjoyment and low appreciation responses to outperformer stories. While responses to these two types of stories were consistent with H1 and H2, threatened individuals' responses to survivor stories revealed, unexpectedly, both high appreciation and high enjoyment (though to a lesser degree for appreciation). Although previous literature acknowledges that enjoyment and appreciation are qualitatively distinct yet overlapping concepts (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011), it is unclear how enjoyment and appreciation together as mixed responses may affect specific coping outcomes through distinct mechanisms. If regaining perceived control is a final goal of coping with threat, media messages that simultaneously induce enjoyment and appreciation responses and to approximately the same degree may provide unique (or perhaps optimal) coping resources because these responses together (to a larger degree for enjoyment, as our findings suggest) lead to positive reappraisal that may facilitate perceived control through positive affective experiences. Indeed, our supplemental regression analyses with the same structure in Table 2 showed that survivor stories led to more positive reappraisal than the other stories. Future research would certainly benefit from manipulating three types of messages (i.e., that induce enjoyment alone, appreciation alone, and both of them relatively equally) and testing specific coping outcomes and their associated mechanisms to determine which type of message leads to a greater sense of mastery as a final coping outcome.

Several theoretical implications from the current study are worthy to address. First, along with the study conducted by Nabi et al. (2006), this research also demonstrates that media messages are not just tools that allow individuals to escape from unpleasant realities or alter to negative states in a pleasant way; they are also a useful means of coping with negative life events. Of note, although our study used news stories as the message type, the findings may apply to a multitude of experience-based message contexts, as there is growing overlap in the informational and entertainment value of media messages (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2007; Patterson, 2000). Importantly, beyond looking at emotional outcomes (e.g., positive affect as a final outcome) resulting from the messages consumed, the present research explores the cognitive underpinnings of perceived threat that might be altered through the positive experiences of enjoyment and appreciation from consuming negative experience-related media messages. Perhaps a heightened sense of mastery resulting from enjoyment and appreciation responses does not automatically translate into a resolution of chronic perceived threat but rather allows threatened individuals to sustain ongoing processes of coping with the threat.

Second, the current research theoretically applies the concepts of enjoyment and appreciation to experience-related messages and also reconceptualizes them as motivators that guide subsequent coping sequences rather than as final outcomes of message consumption. Findings of the present study have important health implications, suggesting that enjoyment and appreciation as positive evaluations of messages may impact message-related thoughts (e.g., gaining insight into a threat) that may alleviate a prevailing perceived threat. Likewise, this study did not regard positive affect resulting from message consumption as the cessation of prevailing distress. Consistent with Folkman's (1997) claim, although positive affect from consuming media messages may be short-lived and nonintensive, it perhaps functions

as adaptational significance during times of chronic threat. Thus, media messages that remind people of relevant negative situations are still able to facilitate coping by providing positive experiences. As noted by Taylor (1983), human beings have an impressive ability to withstand serious setbacks. To the extent that enjoyment and appreciation of messages provide useful therapeutic resources as shown in the current study, such messages can facilitate individuals' adjustment to threatening events.

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting our findings. First, prestory exposure and poststory exposure variables were measured in a rather straightforward manner (e.g., no filler items were included), posing demand characteristic risks. Related, although the stimulus design was novel and each story condition included three similar characters, future research should include multiple messages per experimental condition that can be collapsed into one at a later point (e.g., three different types of victim stories for a victim condition). Second, the present experiment did not include a control condition that exposed participants to a story unrelated to the economy. Consequently, it is challenging to accurately assess plausible motivations driven by hedonic concerns and distinct enjoyment and appreciation responses to stories that are not related to the financial crisis among those who felt low economic threat. Third, we inferred the type of social comparison process taking place (downward vs. upward) from participants' responses to stories with distinct targets. Thus, it is not clear simply from examining outcome variables whether such processes actually occurred. It would certainly benefit future research to ask participants to provide open-ended responses while reading stories with different targets to more precisely gauge the route through which individuals manage their negative experiences.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study contribute to our understanding of the beneficial therapeutic functions of media messages related to prevailing negative experiences. This study points out that the concepts of enjoyment and appreciation can certainly apply to experience-based messages and suggest important implications for health, particularly coping during times of chronic distress. Furthermore, the current investigation invaluablely sheds light on how mediated information can be packaged to more effectively impact social and personal good. This research takes an initial step into identifying the complexity of motivational mechanisms underlying message reception, as it offers insightful patterns of social comparisons in how individuals may use media messages for therapeutic purposes when coping with situational distress.

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Appendix: List of Measurement Items for Focal Variables

Perceived Threat

The current conditions in the job market are severe.
I am at risk of being a victim of the current job market situation.
I am worried that the current job market situation will have a negative impact on my job search.
The current job market situation is significant to me.
I do not perceive much threat from the current job market situation (R).
It is possible that I will not get a job.
I am safe despite the current job market situation (R).

Enjoyment (E) and Appreciation (A)

I had a good time reading this story (E).
I enjoyed reading this story (E).
I liked reading this story (E).
I found this story to be exciting (E).
I was moved by this story (E).
I found reading this story to be very meaningful (A).
This story was thought-provoking (A).
This story will stick with me for a long time (A).
I know I will never forget this story (A).
This story left me with a lasting impression (A).

Positive Reappraisal

I am relating this story to my situation and am reflecting about my life.
I feel empowered and would like to do something constructive in my life.
I should appreciate everything in my life, not take anything for granted.
I should re-evaluate my situation and try to build new perspectives on my life.
I feel exhilarated about my life and the fact that I have so many options in my life.
I see the current job market situation in a different light and am more positive about it.
I am looking for something good in what is happening with the current job market situation.
I am finding new faith.
I feel that I am changing and growing as a person in a good way.
I am able to accept the way things are going in the current job market situation.
I feel inspired to do something creative.
I am rediscovering what is important in life.

Perceived Control

I have little control over the current job market situation (R).

There is really no way I can solve some of my problems that have resulted from the current job market situation (R).

There is little I can do to change the current job market situation (R).

I feel helpless in dealing with the current job market situation (R).

What happens to me in the future regarding the current job market situation mostly depends on me.

I can do just about anything regarding the current job market situation if I really set my mind to do.