The Use of Media Entertainment and Emotional Gratification

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Abstract

The use of entertainment media is often assumed to be motivated by individuals’ desire to experience emotions. Entertainment audiences want experiences that make them laugh or cry, or keep them at the edge of their seats. But why exactly do individuals seek emotional media experiences, and what types of gratifications do they obtain from such experiences? An overview of research on emotional gratifications shows that emotions can be gratifying on different levels ranging from simple hedonistic gratifications to more complex gratifications such as the satisfaction of social and cognitive needs. An integrative framework is outlined that aims at a more systematic understanding of emotional gratifications, and their influence on media use.

Keywords: Emotions; media use; entertainment; affective factors

1. Introduction

The desire to experience emotions is widely considered to be key motivation for the use of entertainment media, be it in the form of movies, novels, TV programs, music videos, or computer games. A variety of emotions and other affective phenomena have been studied in the context of media use including empathy, suspense, humor, interest, erotic feelings, as well as negative emotions such as fear and sadness. But what exactly do people seek when they seek emotions? What kinds of gratifications do they find in the experience of emotions during media use?

This paper provides an overview of research on emotion-related gratifications in media use. As we will argue, the experience of emotions can be gratifying on different levels ranging from simple hedonistic gratifications to more complex gratifications such as the satisfaction of social and cognitive needs. In the second part of the paper an integrative approach is outlined that aims at a more systematic understanding of the heterogeneous research literature on emotional gratifications. The experience of emotions in media use is described as a motivationally complex situation that is characterized by convergent as well as conflicting needs. In particular, we consider the question how the complex gratification potential of emotions can be evaluated by media users in a holistic and intuitive manner. The concept of meta-emotion (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988; Oliver 1993; Gottman, Katz & Hooven,
1997) is proposed as a theoretical framework that may provide a more systematic understanding of emotional gratification processes in entertainment experience.

2. Research Overview

Scholars from different theoretical and methodological backgrounds have studied the role of emotions in individuals' media experiences, and they have proposed different explanations why emotions can be gratifying for media users. Our research overview proceeds on a wide notion of “gratification” that includes the use of this term in the context of the uses-and-gratifications approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rubin, 1983), but also goes beyond it in some regards. We assume that self-reported gratifications provide an incomplete picture of what motivates people's media choices. Emotions can be gratifying and motivate selective media use regardless of whether the person is consciously aware of that fact or not (cf. Vorderer, 1992; Suckfüll, 2004). Our understanding of emotional gratification explicitly includes rewarding media effects that have been studied within a selective exposure paradigm (cf. Zillman, 2000; Bryant & Davies, in press) as well as other related conceptualizations such as media enjoyment (Vorderer, Klimmt & Ritterfeld, 2004) and appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). In the absence of a theoretically elaborated definition of “gratification” we propose to use the term as an umbrella term for all those—gratifying, rewarding, enjoyable, etc.—aspects of behavior that explain why a behavior is consciously or unconsciously preferred over alternative behavioral options. In the following section we summarize the research literature that has dealt with this question. Building on extant research finding we will then propose an integrative framework.

*Mood-management.* Perhaps the most prominent account of why individuals enjoy the experience of emotions in media use is Zillmann's (1988; 2000) theory of mood-management. Mood management theory assumes that individuals prefer an intermediate level of arousal that is experienced as pleasant. For example, research conducted within this framework supports the idea that individuals who are bored and under-stimulated enjoy arousing media stimuli, whereas over-aroused or stressed individuals prefer soothing media stimuli. In addition to balanced arousal, mood management theory highlights the gratification associated with positive affective valence, and with the absorption potential of strong emotions that can help distract individuals from negative thoughts (for reviews, see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006; Oliver, 2003).

*Affective disposition.* Affective disposition theory (Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Bryant, 1986) draws attention to the role of viewers' moral judgments in predicting positively valenced media experiences. Based on the viewers' moral judgment of the characters depicted, positive affect is predicted to occur when “good” characters prevail, and when negative outcomes befall “bad” or disliked characters. Across a variety of genres, research has supported the assumption that viewers experience the greatest level of enjoyment when the portrayed outcomes are perceived as just or correct (Raney & Bryant, 2002; Weber, Tamborini, Lee & Stipp, 2008; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

*Excitation transfer.* The concept of excitation transfer (Zillmann, 1996) explains how negative affect experienced during suspenseful episodes when audiences are made to fear bad outcomes for liked characters can contribute to entertainment gratification, nevertheless. This concept assumes that residual arousal that stems from the experience of empathic distress can spill over, and can be reframed with positive thoughts and feelings when the suspenseful episode comes to a happy end. Thus, excitation transfer can give rise to euphoric feeling states that are characterized by high levels of both arousal and positive valence.

*Sensation seeking.* The concept of sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979) is based on an arousal framework as well. Other than theories of mood management and excitation transfer, however, it assumes that the excitement associated with novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences can be gratifying in its own right, that is, beyond an optimal level of arousal, and independent of positive valence. In line with this concept, Zaleski (1984) found that individuals with a strong sensation seeking motive preferred intense stimuli of both positive and negative valence over neutral stimuli. Further, sensation seeking has been found to predict specific patterns of media use including individuals' preference for horror films and other forms of media violence (Johnston, 1995; Sparks, 1986; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987).

*Modes of reception.* Besides research that has dealt with the role of affective valence and arousal in individuals' enjoyment of entertainment experience, more recent approaches have drawn attention to the role of emotions in the satisfaction of more complex social and cognitive needs. Research on modes of reception (e.g. Vorderer, 1992; Suckfüll, 2004; Gehrau, Bilandzic & Woelke, 2005; Appel et al, 2002) suggests that media induced emotions can be
functional for a variety of other goals in the reception process. For example, Suckfüll (2004) conducted qualitative interviews and a subsequent series of questionnaire studies concerning different kinds of involvement in film viewing. Her results showed that emotional involvement correlates with other modes of reception, especially with diegetic involvement (getting absorbed in the fictional world), socio-involvement (identifying with characters), and ego-involvement (relating the film to one's own life). There was also a weaker but positive correlation with elaboration (reading between the lines) indicating that emotional involvement can be helpful for the pursuit of a broader variety of goals in the reception process. Studies of experiential states in reading (Appel et al.; 2002) and music reception (Schramm, 2005) found somewhat different, but largely comparable results. Thus, it can be concluded that the experience of emotions can be functional in a number of other ways than just regulating emotions in terms of affective valence and arousal.

Intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation has been studied in the context of skill-demanding media activities such as reading or playing computer games (Groeben & Vorderer, 1988; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, & Grizzard, in press; Vorderer, Steen, & Chan, 2006). These authors agree that the balance between individuals' skills and the media offer's demands is essential to intrinsic motivation. If media-related skills are challenged, but not overcharged, a feeling of competence arises that motivates recipients to continue their media activity (cf. Vorderer et al., 2006). Forms of media use such as watching television or films are often considered as rather “passive”, and have not been related to intrinsic motivation until recently. However some authors (Mikos, 1996; Früh, 2002; Bartsch, Hübner & Viehoff, 2003) have suggested that coping with media induced emotions is a skill demanding activity as well and can lead to feelings of success and competence if the person manages to cope successfully—for instance if one manages to cope with the emotional challenges of a horror film.

Mood adjustment. Media-induced emotions can also be instrumental for the attainment of goals that go beyond the process of media use per se. Knobloch's (2003) concept of mood adjustment assumes that individuals use the media to adjust their moods to the demands of their current situation. If, for instance, a person has been provoked, and wants to pay back the provoker, an aggressive mood seems optimally suited to attain this goal. Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter (2006) were able to show that male participants preferred bad news that sustained their negative moods if they had been provoked and were promised an opportunity to pay back the provoker. This effect was absent in female participants, which the authors explained in terms of gender specific norms of anger expression. Women are not supposed to be aggressive, whereas it is often considered as “unmanly” not to pay back a provoker. For women it should therefore be more in accord with their goals to dissipate anger. In the case where no opportunity was presented to take revenge both genders preferred good news.

Gender socialization of emotions. The gender socialization of emotions has also been studied as a research topic in its own right. According to Oliver (1993; Oliver, Weaver, & Sargent, 2000) gender specific norms and values account for much of the preference for viewing sad films. As predicted, these authors found that women were more likely to enjoy “chick flicks” and “tearjerkers,” and to evaluate the feeling evoked by these movies more positively than men were. Oliver (1993) explains this in terms of social norms concerning other-directed forms of sadness such as empathy, sympathy, and pity. Our culture values other-directed sadness, particularly for the female gender role, whereas more ambivalent evaluations regarding such emotions exist for the gender role of men. Thus for women the experience of empathic sadness should be associated with self-enhancing thoughts and feelings, because it is systematically rewarded during their socialization. Oliver (1993) introduced the concept of meta-emotion to describe this tendency to think and feel positively or negatively about emotions. We will come back to this concept below. Another example of gender specific norms are Mundorf & Mundorf's (2003) observations on the gender socialization of horror. According to these authors, teenagers like to watch horror films, especially in mixed sex dyads, because horror films provide a suitable context for the display of gender-typed behaviors such as male courage and female need for comfort and protection. Consistent with this hypothesis, it was shown that both the enjoyment of horror film segments, and the attractiveness ratings of cross-sex companions varied as a function of the companion's display of gender-typed behaviors (Zillman, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986).

Relationship functions of entertainment. On a more general note, it has been suggested that media can serve social relationship functions on different levels: media can be used to connect with, or escape from real-life relationships, and can also be used to form parasocial relationships with media characters and celebrities. Qualitative research on the uses of television in general (Rubin, 1983), and among married couples in particular (Lull, 1990),
has revealed relationship functions, including for instance, communication facilitation, affiliation, social learning, and role enactment, but also communication avoidance and escape from real-life interaction.

**Parasocial relationships.** In addition to building and strengthening social relationships with others, media induced emotions may also serve to cultivate parasocial relationships with the characters, persons, or avatars on screen (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Klimmt, Hartmann, Schramm & Vorderer, 2003; Rubin & Perse, 1987). Unlike the premise of early theories (e.g., Rosengren & Windahl, 1972), such parasocial relationships do not seem to serve as a compensation for deficiencies in social life, but rather as a complementary source of social and emotional gratification (cf., Giles, 2002).

**Vicarious experiences.** Concepts such as transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), involvement (Vorderer, 1993), identification (Cohen, 2006; Igartua, 2009), and narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009) have dealt with the gratification of making vicarious emotional experiences. These concepts concur in assuming that viewers or readers of narrative media content tend to adopt the perspective of the characters, and tend to experience emotions that reflect their evaluation of events from the characters’ perspective. Although the primary focus of this line of research has been on the role of vicarious experiences in mediating persuasion effects, it has also consistently revealed that such experiences can be gratifying for media users (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000; Igartua, 2009).

**Downward social comparison.** Another function of character-related emotions has been observed in studies on downward social comparison (Mares & Cantor, 1992; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003). Individuals who are low in self-esteem typically prefer media offers featuring others who are worse off than themselves. In a study of Mares and Cantor (1992), elderly participants who felt lonely themselves preferred portrayals of lonely old people, whereas integrated participants preferred more optimistic portrayals of age. In a similar vein, Knobloch & Zillmann (2003) found that young people who are lonely or lovelorn preferred love-lamenting pop songs over love-celebrating ones. Apparently, media portrayals of others with similar problems can help individuals to cope with their own misfortunes and shortcomings.

**Eudaimonic motivation.** Finally, in addition to reframing distressing emotions in ways that are less threatening for their self-esteem, individuals may also strive to become better persons in the first place. The concept of eudaimonic motivation (Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Raney, 2008; Waterman, 1993) assumes that besides the hedonic need for pleasurable feelings and sensations, media use can also be motivated by individuals’ search for deeper insight, meaning, and purpose in life. In line with this assumption, early research from a uses-and-gratifications perspective has revealed more contemplative 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 has identified a motivational factor “self-development” that was characterized by individuals’ interest in viewing films to experience strong emotions and to understand how others think and feel. In a similar vein, the work of Cupchik (1995) highlights the distinction between a reactive mode of aesthetic experience that is based on rewarding feeling states of positive valence and arousal, and a reflective mode of aesthetic experience that is characterized by the experience of more profoundly meaningful emotions that can stimulate self-reflection and insight. In a series of studies, Oliver & Bartsch (2010), found three broad gratification factors that served to predict individuals’ positive evaluation of movies. Besides fun and suspense, a third factor appreciation emerged that was 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).

To summarize, entertainment research has accumulated an impressive body of theoretical and empirical work supporting the assumption that emotions can be gratifying for media users on different levels. On the one hand, emotions can be associated with pleasurable feeling qualities such as positive valence and arousal. On the other hand, emotions can be functional within the broader context of social and cognitive need gratification (cf., Bartsch, Mangold, Viehoff & Vorderer, 2006; Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold & Viehoff, 2008). As we have argued elsewhere, Bartsch et al. (2006; 2008), the gratification potential of emotions can be evaluated with regard to different concerns, and on different levels of complexity ranging from simple hedonistic needs to more complex assessments of the usefulness of emotions for personal goals, or their compatibility with social norms and values. Through the lens of this multi-level appraisal framework, entertainment audiences are not mere hedonists, mere goal rationalists,
or mere moralists. Rather, they seem to pursue all these concerns simultaneously, only to a varying extent and with varying priorities.

2. An Integrative Framework

Although the notion of non-hedonistic or delayed gratification may seem to imply that humans can only have one type of gratification at a time, research indicates that experiential and functional types of emotional gratification do not necessarily exclude each other. For example, Reinecke and Trepte (2008) predicted and found that the effects of mood management can outlast media exposure and can improve subsequent task performance. Likewise, results of Appel (2008) suggest that the experience of poetic justice in fictional entertainment may serve not only to induce positive affect but also to strengthen individuals’ belief in a just world. However, in other cases, different types of needs may be in conflict with each other. For example, vengeful maintenance of negative mood states through exposure to negative media content may conflict with mood-management and/or gender role expectations as in Knobloch-Westerwick and Alter's (2006) study.

With this complex interplay of emotional gratifications in mind, the question arises how media users are able to integrate their emotional needs and come up with a holistic evaluation of gratifications and inconveniences that can be associated with emotional media experiences. Appraisal theories of emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001) provide a theoretical framework that we think can be useful to advance our understanding of emotional gratification processes in media use.

According to appraisal theories (Scherer, 2001; Lazarus, 1991), emotions are the result of cognitive appraisal processes that evaluate situations with regard to personal goals, needs, and desires. Appraisal criteria that are relevant to emotion elicitation include the situation's novelty, pleasantness, and goal conduciveness, the person's coping potential, and the compatibility of the situation with social norms and self-ideals. These appraisal criteria are usually processed on a preconscious level, so that people are unaware of emotion eliciting appraisal process. What is consciously experienced is the emotional reaction that integrates the complex appraisal information and serves as a holistic appraisal outcome.

Drawing on this general model of emotion elicitation Mangold, Unz & Winterhoff-Spurk (2001) proposed that media use is a complex situation that involves multiple frames of reference for cognitive appraisal. First, emotion eliciting appraisals can focus on the media content—e.g. on a cruel horror scenario. Second, appraisal can focus on the reception situation—e.g. the viewer's situation of being comfortably seated with a friend in front of a TV set. Third, appraisal can focus on the emotions that are experienced during media use—e.g. the viewer can enjoy the experience of being startled by special effects, or the viewer can be concerned that the fear evoked by the movie might keep him or her from getting to sleep at night (cf., Wirth & Schramm, 2007).

The third frame of reference, i.e., appraisal of the viewer's own emotions, differs from the other two frames of reference in one important respect. Instead of external stimuli such as environmental situations, or media portrayals, the focus of appraisal is on the person's inner emotional state. In this case appraisal is not what gives rise to the emotion in the first place. The emotion is already there: It has been caused by appraisals of environmental situations, or their representations. Appraisal of one's own emotions is a secondary process that evaluates already existing emotions and gives rise to so called “meta-emotions” (cf. Oliver, 1993 Mayer & Gaschke, 1988; Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1997; Bartsch et al., 2008; 2010). Meta-emotions are evaluative thoughts and feelings that serve to evaluate the primary emotion. As we have argued elsewhere, (Bartsch et al., 2008), emotions can be appraised with regard to the same set of appraisal criteria involved in the appraisal of external situations: Is the emotion novel? Is it pleasant? I it goal-conducive? Is it controllable? Is it compatible with social norms and self-ideals?

If considered from such a multiple appraisal perspective, the emotional gratifications mentioned in the research overview bear resemblance with appraisal dimensions proposed by Scherer (2001) and other appraisal theorists. Emotions can be evaluated on the level of experiential qualities such as novelty and pleasantness (e.g., in terms of mood-management, sensation seeking, or excitation transfer). Emotions can also be evaluated with regard to intentional criteria such as goal conduciveness and controllability (e.g., in terms of mood-adjustment, social relationship functions, or the seeking of cognitive and emotional challenges and vicarious emotional experiences). Finally, emotions can be evaluated with regard to normative concerns (e.g., in terms of gender role expectations, social comparison, or eudaimonic self-reflection).
Drawing on the multiple appraisal approach of Mangold, Unz & Winterhoff-Spurk (2001), entertainment preferences can be understood as a spontaneous action tendency that stems from the holistic appraisal of the gratifications and inconveniences associated with the experience of emotions in a specific media context. The most basic action tendency of emotions is to approach or avoid the event that gave rise to emotion (cf. Arnold, 1960; Roseman, 2001). In the case of meta-emotion, this implies a tendency to approach or avoid the primary emotion (cf. Maio & Esses, 2001). Just as individuals can use primary emotions to make intuitive decisions concerning approach or avoidance of environmental situations, they can use meta-emotions to decide whether they should welcome, or reject a media offer's invitation to experience emotions (cf. Oliver, 1993).

3. Preliminary Findings and Outlook

Based on the above considerations, we (Bartsch, Viehoff & Mangold; 2010) conducted a series of studies using qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide an integrated assessment of experiential and functional gratifications that can be associated with emotional media experiences. To be able to study a larger number of possible gratification factors at a time, we employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative self-report methods that has proven to be productive in uses and gratification research. During the first phase of the research we conducted qualitative interviews to let respondents explain emotional gratifications in their own words and to sample natural language statements descriptive of such gratifications. In the second phase, we conducted a series of questionnaire studies using a pool of statements derived from the interviews. The studies involved different samples and rating tasks concerning movies and TV serials. The questionnaire data were then used to analyze latent dimensions in individuals’ self-report of emotional gratifications, to select items for scale construction, and to perform initial validation analyses concerning the expected relationship of emotional gratifications with measures of emotions, meta-emotions, and general evaluations of the entertainment offering.

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed two types of gratification factors in individuals’ experience of movies and TV series. Three of the seven factors reflect experiential qualities of emotions:
1) Fun
2) Thrill
3) Being moved

The fun and thrill seem to reflect such well-researched entertainment gratifications as mood-management (Zillmann, 1988) and sensation seeking (Zuckerman, 1979), whereas the factor being moved highlights the importance of the emerging research topic of sad and tender feelings in entertainment experience (Oliver, 1993; 2008). The remaining four factors reflect the functionality of emotional media experiences with regard to social and cognitive needs:
4) Thought-provoking experiences
5) Vicarious experiences
6) Social sharing of emotions
7) Acting out emotions that have no room in everyday life

The results concerning the functional factors highlight the distinction between the thought-provoking effects of emotions and the experiential gratification of feeling moved per se. However, given that moving and thought-provoking experiences formed a common factor in Oliver and Bartsch’s (2010) studies, more research is needed to follow up the relationship of moving and thought-provoking experiences. The factor vicarious experience bears resemblance with such concepts as transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), identification (Cohen, 2006; Igartua, 2009), involvement (Vorderer, 1993), and narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), thus highlighting the significance of these concepts as entertainment gratifications—an idea that has remained secondary in extant research to their role as mediators of persuasion effects. The factor social sharing of emotions seems to reflect relationship functions and social communication functions of media use as revealed, for example, in the work of Rubin (1983) and Lull (1990). Our results draw specific attention to the functionality of emotions in stimulating rewarding experiences of communication and sociability among entertainment audiences, a topic that has remained under-researched so far. Finally, the factor acting out emotions is reminiscent of Aristotle’s idea of catharsis (cf., Feshbach & Singer, 1971) that has become widely rejected in the face of massive evidence indicating that exposure to media violence tends to increase rather than decrease aggressive cognition and behavior (e.g., Bushman &
Huesmann, 2000). Interestingly, however, the acting out factor in our study was not related to the experience of anger. Rather, this factor was correlated to a set of “weak” or “vulnerable” emotions including fascination, poignancy, sadness, fear, and disgust.

Each of the emotional gratification factors was predicted by the experience of emotions and by positive meta-emotions, and served, in turn, to predict different aspects of positive movie evaluation. This pattern of results substantiates the assumption that, besides rewarding feeling qualities, entertainment can be also be functional in terms of social and cognitive needs that go beyond the experience of emotions per se. In line with our theoretical argument, the results suggest that the different types of emotional gratification factors are not mutually exclusive. The only negative correlation between emotional gratification factors occurred between fun and thought-provoking experiences. All other factors were unrelated or positively related, thus, highlighting the complexity of concurrent gratification experiences in entertainment media use.

At this early stage of the research, the most important limitation lies in the correlational nature of the data that limits our ability to draw conclusions about the causal relationship of the variables observed. As detailed above, the interpretation of results is facilitated in some cases by a body of experimental research that has established the validity of theoretical assumptions about the role of affective factors in entertainment experience. This makes it easier, on the one hand, to interpret the self-report data. On the other hand the self-report data can be used to identify areas that could benefit from more in-depth theoretical scrutiny and experimental research. Factors such as mood management and sensation seeking are very well researched, whereas other types of entertainment gratification seem to merit more attention and research efforts. In particular, the assumption that media induced emotions can be functional in stimulating self-reflection and conversation with others needs to be verified under more controlled experimental conditions before we can draw conclusions about the causal direction of effects implied in statements such as: “It was good to experience these feelings, because it makes me think about myself,” or “…because it inspires me to talk about the movie with others.”

With these limitations in mind, we think that entertainment research could profit from expanding its current focus on rewarding feeling qualities of emotion per se to the functionality of emotions in the broader context of individuals’ social and cognitive needs. More in-depth consideration of the functional roles of emotions may help advance our understanding of how media entertainment can not only provide its audiences with fun, thrill and sentimental feelings—but how it can also stimulate social and cognitive processes that can be associated with additional gratifications.

References


