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Chapter 4

Emotion and Entertainment

Abstract: Emotions are inherent to media entertainment experiences. As such, researchers have studied the nature of emotions in those experiences for as long as they have studied entertainment. In this chapter, we explore the many roles emotion may play in entertainment use. We begin by examining existing definitions of emotions, exploring different perspectives such as the dimensional and discrete emotion approaches. We then discuss theoretical frameworks that position emotion as a predictor of entertainment selection, response during entertainment reception, and outcome of entertainment exposure. We conclude by discussing burgeoning areas of entertainment and emotion research, including eudaimonia and elevation and the role of emotion in interactive entertainment.

Keywords: emotion, entertainment media, media selection, media effects

Nothing is perhaps more central to the human experience than emotions, those “internal, mental states [which represent] evaluative, valenced reactions to events, agents, and objects that vary in intensity” (Nabi, 2020, p. 163). At the same time, we are surrounded by media technologies and inundated with media entertainment content, which have become nearly as central to our lives. For most, it is virtually impossible to avoid media messages. As a result, media experiences and emotion are inextricably and reciprocally connected. Emotions drive us to select entertainment content, which in turn both portrays and elicits other or similarly related emotional responses.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the role of emotion during media entertainment experiences. We begin by identifying differing approaches to conceptualizing emotion. Then, we examine how emotion can lead to media selection. We follow by discussing the processing of emotions during media use and the consequences of exposure to emotional media content. Finally, we explore the interplay between emerging media technologies and emotion.

1 Discrete and Dimensional Approaches to Emotion

The study of emotion in communication research is often approached from one of two leading perspectives: the discrete or the dimensional. Each is discussed below, along with areas of compatibility between the two.

1.1 Discrete Perspective of Emotion

The discrete perspective (aka categorical theory of emotion) postulates that emotions can be classified into specific and mutually exclusive categorical states. Each classification has unique, underlying cognitive interpretations (i.e., appraisals; Schachter & Singer, 1962) that are causal antecedents to emotions. The cognitive appraisals that precede the experience of a discrete emotion influence action tendencies or adaptive responses (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Thus, the discrete perspective posits that there are causal links between specific appraisals and specific emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi, 1999). For example, anger is a negative emotion evoked when a demeaning offense is perceived (i.e., cognitive interpretation of the event or person), which then elicits an action tendency of retaliation to subdue the offending stimulus (Clayton, 2023; Harmon-Jones et al., 2013). Conversely, hope is a positive emotion experienced when there is a realization of a positive outcome when the odds do not greatly favor it (i.e., cognitive appraisal), which leads to the action tendency of greater commitment, coping, and perseverance (Lazarus, 1991; Nabi & Myrick, 2019). The identification of discrete emotions (e.g., happiness, anger, fear, sadness, and disgust; see e.g., Ekman, 1992) and their action tendencies is of theoretical and practical value to the study of entertainment because it predicts when specific emotions will likely occur (in response to specific elicitors portrayed in content) and what specific behaviors may subsequently be observed (see, e.g., Nabi, 1999).

1.2 Dimensional Perspective of Emotion

The dimensional perspective of emotion conceptualizes emotion as an affectively valenced response emerging from basic approach-avoid motivational processes in response to an evaluation of some object or stimulus (Bradley et al., 2001; Lang et al., 1995; Lang & Bradley, 2008; Lang et al., 1997). The dimensional theory of emotion is not in opposition to the discrete category (Clayton, 2023) but rather builds upon the discrete perspective. Indeed, the foundational research guiding the dimensional perspective is based on Russell's (1980) circumplex model of affect. This model identifies discrete emotions but further argues that those emotions are highly intercorrelated and can be organized in two-dimensional space separated into four quadrants coordinated around an "arousal" dimension (i.e., arousing-boring) and an "affective-valence" (i.e., pleasure-displeasure) dimension. Thus, specific discrete emotions can be classified as pleasure/arousing, pleasure/boring, displeasure/arousing, and displeasure/boring.

Building on Russell's (1980) circumplex model of affect is the notion of biological motivation derived from the evaluative space model (ESM; see Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Cacioppo et al., 1999, 2012), also called the dual-motivational theory of emotion in communication and psychological research (Clayton, 2023). ESM argues that underlying the valence dimension are two independent

and evolutionary-based motivational systems including the appetitive (approach) and the aversive (avoid) motivational systems (Bradley et al., 2001; Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Cacioppo et al., 1999; Lang et al., 1997). These motivational systems activate when humans encounter information in their environment, and then quickly and automatically guide an evaluation of the stimulus (i.e., the operations by which organisms discriminate threatening from nurturant environments) as either threatening (i.e., danger) or as providing opportunities. Thus, the ESM posits that positive emotional valence is linked with the appetitive motivational system (i.e., the system that activates when opportunities and rewards are perceived and evaluated in the environment), whereas negative emotional valence is linked with the aversive motivational system (i.e., the system that activates when there is unpleasant and threatening information in the environment; see Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Cacioppo et al., 2012). Moreover, the dimensional perspective of emotion posits that humans learn, over time, via classical conditioning that some information and objects, though not necessary to our survival, are positive and some are negative. To this end, research has shown that motivational reactivity to different types of mediated content largely depends on personality type (Clayton et al., 2019; Lang & Bailey, 2015; Lang et al., 2007). Thus, self-relevant information and learned associations can influence appetitive and aversive motivational activation and therefore generate individual differences in affective responses (Clayton, 2023).

1.3 Considering Both Perspectives in Research

Media entertainment scholars have examined emotional responses to entertainment from both perspectives (and we contend, should continue to do so). Indeed, both approaches are compatible and inform one another. For example, the discrete perspective provides greater nuance to assessing specific emotions, which can be used to identify antecedents to and downstream effects of those emotions. The dimensional perspective helps to identify specific motivational processes that can be assessed beyond self-report measures, for instance, through the use of psychophysiological measurement (Clayton, 2023). That is, a media psychophysiological study might observe specific patterns of responses that are consistent with approach motivational activation. However, what specific subjective emotions are being experienced beyond those indexing approach/pleasantness? Here, with self-report scales, researchers can parse which specific approach-activating, discrete emotion was experienced during message exposure. Thus, the researcher has data on biological imperatives from media content, motivational activation and valence responses, and the identification of specific discrete emotions and action tendencies. Using this approach, the discrete and dimensional perspectives of emotion can be complementary to the study of media theory, processes, and effects (see more below).

2 Entertainment Media, Selective Exposure, and Emotion Regulation

Emotions serve as a powerful motivator for the selection of media content. Humans are selective beings that desire to maximize pleasure while avoiding pain (Reinecke, 2016). To this end, they choose to arrange their environment to optimize positive mood states while reducing unpleasant moods. Media selection can play a role in the hedonic equilibrium sought by individuals.

According to mood management theory (MMT; Zillmann, 1988), the use of media content to manage moods is learned. At first, a person may not know what type of media messages will trigger a different mood state. Over time, through classical conditioning, mere exposure, or implicit memory, they come to realize and learn that certain content improves a bad mood or intensifies a pleasant mood, leading to similar media selection in the future. MMT identifies four characteristics of media that impact moods and, thereby, later media selection. The first is excitatory potential, or the ability to “increase the arousal component of the current mood” (Luong & Westerwick, 2021, p. 161). Secondly, semantic affinity refers to the similarity between the media message topic and the reason behind the current mood state. Third, hedonic valence describes the relative positivity or negativity of the message. Finally, absorption potential refers to the level of engagement inherent to the message (Luong & Westerwick, 2021). Over time, media users learn how different media characteristics impact moods, and they subsequently choose content in anticipation of similar impacts.

Where in the mood management process do emotions fall? Certainly, MMT explains how individuals choose content based on potential mood effects. However, moods and emotions are not analogous. Moods tend to be more enduring, nebulous, and stable than emotions, typically without a given cause (Beedie et al., 2005). For instance, a person may “wake up on the wrong side of the bed” and maintain a negative mood state for the entire day, with no identifiable reason why. Emotions, on the other hand, are relatively brief, clearly defined, fleeting, and volatile, resulting from a specified event or object (Beedie et al., 2005). Based on these definitions, MMT seems to argue that we utilize media to manage our long-lasting mood states, not fleeting or temporary emotional states.

Although moods are the primary focus of MMT, media selection can be used in the process of emotion regulation (Bartsch et al., 2008). According to Gross (1998), emotion regulation refers to “the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (p. 275). Bartsch and colleagues (2008) argued that individuals may use meta-emotions to determine whether they should engage with certain media. Essentially, as we learn the emotional responses we are likely to have to a given media text, we make appraisals about those expected responses. For example, horror movies cause fright, but audiences can also have an emotional reaction to the experience of fright (i.e., a meta-emotion).

Perhaps the person encountering a horror movie for the first time strongly dislikes the feeling of fear. In this case, they will likely avoid similar movies in the future. In contrast, if they enjoy the experience of fright, they may seek out further scares. To this end, McRae and Gross (2020) outlined five families of emotion regulation strategies that individuals routinely employ: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Most relevant here is situation selection, which involves individuals either approaching or avoiding situations that will elicit specific emotions. Similar to the strategies outlined within MMT, someone looking to change their emotional state may select media content that they believe will achieve the desired emotion.

Of course, media selection is not the only part of the media consumption process in which emotions play a role. Emotions are also key during the reception or use of entertainment, as well as in post-exposure outcomes.

3 Emotional Processes during Media Reception

The pursuit of pleasure and delight motivates much of our media entertainment use. That is, media entertainment use largely reflects our desire to experience enjoyment. Scholars have conceptualized enjoyment in many ways (e.g., evaluation, Raney & Bryant, 2002; attitude, Nabi & Krcmar, 2004; intrinsic need satisfaction, Tamborini et al., 2010); nevertheless, it is generally described as a positive emotional reaction to content. Variance in those reactions lead enjoyment to be an individual-level phenomenon, with situational motivations, interests, aesthetic preferences, personality factors, and subjective evaluations (among others) playing key roles. Further, enjoyment involves ongoing emotional processes occurring during media reception, as well as post-hoc, emotion-based judgments of the experience. The leading explanation of the enjoyment process with media entertainment is affective disposition theory (ADT; Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976), which explains the importance of our emotional reactions to characters (also see Chapter 9, this volume).

In simplistic terms, ADT predicts that enjoyment increases the more that characters experiencing positive outcomes are liked and the more characters experiencing negative outcomes are disliked. Conversely, enjoyment suffers the more that characters experiencing negative outcomes are liked and the more characters experiencing positive outcomes are disliked. Ultimately, ADT explains media enjoyment as a function of three emotional processes, each of which results in emotional experiences that vary in valence and intensity based on the narrative and on audience members' subjective reactions to it. First, when we initially encounter characters, we instinctively judge them in moral terms—as “friend” or “foe”—motivated by evolutionary needs to group ourselves with others for safety and well-being. Character liking increases with moral approval and decreases with moral disapproval. Secondly, the resulting affect-

tive dispositions toward characters trigger empathy. Stronger positive dispositions lead audiences to hope that liked characters will succeed and to fear that they will not (i.e., anticipatory emotions; see Zillmann, 2000). In contrast, the more negative the disposition, the less empathy (and more counter-empathy; Stotland, 1969) is experienced. Thirdly, the primary outcome that ADT explains is enjoyment, which has the emotional experience of pleasure at its core. Ultimately, the events and situations involving characters lead to a narrative resolution. If the narrative is resolved in a manner in line with our anticipations and desires, then more pleasure is experienced; if not, then less pleasure results. Thus, ADT explains that the emotional experience of enjoyment is a function of the intensity and valence of affective dispositions held toward characters and the ongoing and ultimate outcomes associated with those characters.

The emotional processes outlined in ADT are not the only ones experienced during media use. Related to affective dispositions and character liking, identification is “an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character” (Cohen, 2001, p. 261). When identifying with a character, audience members see the story world through the eyes of the character and—of particular importance to the current discussion—share the character’s emotional reactions to the unfolding events in the narrative. This is particularly the case during digital game play, when identifying with a character (or avatar) involves the merging of player and character, as the former often both adopts and creates the actions and motivation of the latter. Experiencing the emotions of a character through identification also facilitates enjoyment. Parasocial interactions and relationships (e.g., Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; also see Chapter 8, this volume) with media characters similarly promote enjoyment, whereas emotional responses associated with upward assimilative (e.g., hope) and contrastive (e.g., envy) social comparisons to characters (e.g., Nabi & Keblusek, 2014) may facilitate or hamper enjoyment respectively.

Narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) refers to the experience of absorption or immersion into story worlds, in which audiences vicariously experience those worlds as if they were real. Transportation facilitates emotional reactions; that is, when transported, audience members feel stronger emotions in response to narrative events. In general, transportation is described as a pleasant state, even if negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear) are evoked. The enjoyment of transportation is thought to come from the process of temporarily leaving one’s own reality behind (Green et al., 2004) rather than from the particular emotions experienced. The experience of presence (e.g., Lombard & Ditton, 1997) and narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008) are thought to involve similar emotional processes.

4 Responses to Emotional Media Depictions

Through the process of stimulus generalization, media users generally respond emotionally to media content in the way they do to the same events or situations in the material world. As a result, specific narrative and technical devices can elicit discrete emotional reactions: witty responses elicit joy, sudden noises elicit surprise, attacking monsters elicit fear. Each of these emotional reactions feed into the more general media-reception processes discussed above. For example, one scene containing a car chase can elicit suspense, which plays a role in the larger development of anticipatory emotions toward the characters involved. Scholars have examined discrete emotional reactions to a variety of specific depictions, including horror (see Tamborini, 2013), humor (see Nerhardt, 1970), and sexually explicit content (see Allen et al., 2007), to name just a few.

Recently, increased scholarly attention has been paid to eudaimonic entertainment experiences, which move audiences beyond “mere pleasure” toward (among others) the pursuit of meaningfulness, connectedness, and well-being (for an overview, see Raney et al., 2020). The simultaneous experience of both positive and negative emotions (i.e., mixed affect, bittersweetness, or poignancy; Bartsch, 2012; Oliver & Raney, 2011) is a characteristic outcome of many eudaimonic media experiences (Slater et al., 2019). Some eudaimonic experiences also involve emotional experiences associated with self-transcendence (Clayton et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2018; see also Janicke-Bowles and colleagues, this volume).

Self-transcendent emotions—elevation, gratitude, awe, admiration, hope, *kama muta* (moved by love)—are characterized by their other-orientation and are primarily elicited by factors outside of the self. This is in contrast to many hedonic positive emotions (such as happiness) that are generally related to the self or one’s own goals. Research has shown that experiencing self-transcendent emotions can lead to a host of positive outcomes, including altruism (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016), reduced stereotypical attitudes (Krämer et al., 2017), and interconnectedness (Janicke & Oliver, 2017). Scholars have examined elicitors of self-transcendent emotions across a variety of types of media content (e.g., Dale et al., 2017; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019). Dale and colleagues (2017) argued that self-transcendent emotions can be elicited by media containing portrayals of common elicitors such as moral beauty, skill or talent, and vastness (i.e., direct elicitors). Additionally, audiences can experience those emotions by viewing characters portray the emotions (i.e., modeled elicitors). For instance, seeing a portrayal of the Grand Canyon could directly elicit feelings of awe among audience members, as could watching a character experience (or model) awe at the vastness of the Grand Canyon.

Elevation is the most examined self-transcendent emotion within media entertainment to date. Considered a moral emotion, elevation is characterized by feelings of being moved, touched, and inspired and is elicited by witnessing moral beauty or acts of virtue, including kindness and acts of charity (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Research

has found that media-induced elevation is associated with increased nurturing behavior (Silvers & Haidt, 2008), feelings of intergroup connectedness (Oliver, Kim et al., 2015), increased optimism (Aquino et al., 2011), and increased helping behaviors (Schnall et al., 2010).

Another burgeoning area of media research involves awe. Awe is elicited by vastness, which can include both physical (e.g., sweeping views of the Grand Canyon, star-filled night sky) and perceptual vastness (Shiota et al., 2007). This vastness requires a need for accommodation as existing cognitive schema are challenged by the experience, and researchers have argued that “experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 297). Initial media entertainment scholarship on awe has focused on video games (e.g., Possler et al., 2018) and music (e.g., Ji et al., 2021), perhaps due to the unique perspective taking and settings afforded by video games (e.g., allowing players to instigate a first-person exploration of outer space) and the powerful emotional and physical responses elicited by music respectively. Recent work has categorized awe as a collective emotion, arguing that it encourages feelings of connection and an extended self-concept that can inspire individuals to participate in collective action (Wang et al., 2022). Furthermore, awe has been associated with improved mental and physical well-being (Monroy & Keltner, 2023).

5 Emerging Media Technologies and Emotions

New media technologies emerge on a near-constant basis, some of which fundamentally change the ways in which users interact with and consume entertainment media. The role of emotion during interactive media use is particularly salient. Although digital games and other interactive media are not “new” *per se*, the degree of sophistication involved in contemporary fare has increased at a phenomenal rate, allowing players and users unprecedented control over mediated environments. As a result, rich narratives—particularly in digital game spaces—heavily demand cognitive and emotional processing (Oliver, Bowman et al., 2015).

Interactivity makes digital gaming unique. Unlike “traditional” media in which audiences are relatively passive observers of events, digital games allow for effectance, or “the satisfaction of having imposed an effect on the environment” (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006, p. 137). In other words, players can have a unique emotional state that occurs when they enact some change in the world of the video game; these changes are not possible in non-interactive spaces. Because digital games are varied in scope and nature, so are the emotional responses to them. Games can be used for emotional regulation. They can evoke emotions, including fear (with a horror game) or even guilt when a player commits immoral acts (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018). Further, a great deal of research has explored the connection between violent games and negative emo-

tional states associated with aggression (see Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019). As digital games continue to evolve, no doubt research into how emotions are situated in the gameplay experience will as well (also see Grizzard & Francemone, 2018).

Of course, digital games are not the only interactive media—simulations and spaces within virtual reality also maintain a level of interactivity that may offer new opportunities and challenges for the future of study into entertainment media and emotions. For instance, it is possible that we could experience strong emotions differently in virtual environments, with these spaces possibly even heightening our emotional experiences (see Day, 2015). Further, new and experimental media styles have emerged that may challenge current understandings of how users experience emotion with entertainment media. For instance, *Kaleidoscope*, a television series released to Netflix in January 2023, featured episodes that can be viewed in any order. Netflix reportedly plans to release the episodes in a random order for each viewer, completely changing the way individuals experience the narrative (Bacon, 2022). This nonlinearity marks a change from more “traditional” forms of media use and may disrupt (or transform) the role of emotion in the processing of media messages.

6 Conclusion

Media entertainment content and technologies are and will continue to become even more diverse. As a result, the emotional experiences that we have with those contents and technologies are incredibly diverse as well. In many ways, given a long-standing bias toward behavioral and cognitive outcome in the field, the study of emotion and entertainment is still in its early days (Nabi, 2020). Nevertheless, in this chapter, we have merely scratched the surface of how we experience emotions in the process of consuming entertainment media. Our hope is that it encourages and inspires others to join in this important work.

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