

What's So Special About Entertainment Media and Why Do We Need a Psychology for It?: An Introduction to the Psychology of Entertainment Media

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The title poses a reasonable question. Is there anything unique about entertainment media that warrants a different way of thinking about people's way of thinking? More to the point of the book, is there anything unique about entertainment media that might impact the extent to which the information it conveys has a persuasive effect? Certainly, if current theories of persuasion can just as easily (and accurately) account for effects that occur within entertainment media (e.g., TV programs, films) as they can for effects that occur between entertainment media (e.g., advertisements), Occam's razor would lop off the unneeded new theory devoted to entertainment media.

So what is the answer? To quote Ed Grimley, "It's difficult to say."¹ On the one hand, as Marcia Johnson points out in her forward to *Narrative Impact* (Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002), there are quite a lot of theoretical constructs that can account for certain effects of entertainment media (e.g., situation models, accessibility, source monitoring; Johnson, 2002). On the other hand, as Brock, Strange, and Green (2002) also note in that same volume, current dual processing theories of persuasion, which primarily address rhetorical persuasion, have trouble accounting for certain narrative persuasion effects. In fact, chapters in this book (cf. Chapters 8, 9) make the point that people typically process entertainment (narrative) and promotional (rhetorical) information differently. Consequently, it seems plausible, if not

¹Ed Grimley was a character played by Martin Short on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*.

likely, that the ways in which entertainment and promotion have an effect on audiences are correspondingly different.

Nevertheless, this book is not equipped to answer the question of whether we need a psychology of entertainment media. Rather, it is intended to continue the scientific conversation about the nature of entertainment media and how they may impact the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviors of their audiences. Ideally, continued conversations on this matter would eventually lead to an answer.

This book is not the first to address the unique aspects of entertainment media. At least two other books come to mind. The first is Zillmann and Vorderer's (2000) *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*, and the second is the aforementioned *Narrative Impact* (Green et al., 2002). Although each of these books has some overlap with this volume, there are important distinctions. The Zillmann and Vorderer book looks principally at what draws us to entertainment media and what it is about entertainment that holds our attention, scares us, and makes us happy. As such, it is primarily concerned with the gratifications that media entertainment provides. The Green et al. book addresses the impact of narratives, or the stories we encounter via books, plays, television, and so forth. As such, it is in the end concerned with issues of narrative effects. Each of these books nicely complements the present volume. The key distinction between those books and the present one is the focus of this book on the blurring between promotion and entertainment. Specifically, what this volume attempts to understand is how entertainment or narrative is information processed and whether this processing is fundamentally different from the processing of promotional or rhetorical information. If so, what are the consequences of these differences in processing on the persuasive impact of both the entertainment aspect and the promotional aspect?

ROADMAP FOR THE CHAPTERS

The chapters that comprise this book are divided into three broad areas. These areas are the potential effects of embedding promotions within entertainment media content, the persuasive power of the entertainment media content itself, and individual differences in the interplay between media usage and media effects.

Part I: Embedding Promotions Within Programs: Subliminal Embeds and Product Placements

Part I is predominantly focused on what is arguably the epitome of what at least I think of as blurred lines: product placement in entertainment media. Product placement generally refers to the deliberate inclusion of brands in stories, usually in television programs and films (but see Chapter 6 for an example of placements in prose). However, this section starts off with a chapter by Matthew Erdelyi and Diane Zizak on subliminal perception and persuasion (Chapter 2). Although embedding subliminal stimuli in ads is not a direct example of blurring the lines (both

the subliminal and supraliminal stimuli are persuasive attempts), it is a perfect starting point for discussing the psychological processes that may underlie product placement effects. Erdelyi and Zizak provide a comprehensive review of the current status of subliminal processes in experimental psychology, discuss a number of laboratory studies that pertain to these processes, and then illustrate how common real-world phenomena such as jokes, art, and ads can be integrated within this framework. They provide a relatively new take (at least to consumer psychology) on what is considered subliminal and argue that contemporary experimental psychology has focused almost exclusively on degrading stimuli (to make them subliminal) through the use of gizmos—technological devices such as tachistoscopes—at the expense of what Erdelyi and Zizak term *psychological techniques* for degrading the stimulus. In doing so, they extend previous work on the surprisingly close association between cognitive theories of information processing and Freudian concepts such as repression, suppression, reconstruction, and defense, just to name a few (Erdelyi, 1985, 1996).

The remainder of Part I (Chapters 3–7) is devoted to issues regarding product placement. These five chapters are for the most part ordered from the more general to the more specific. In Chapter 3, John McCarty reviews the current state of product placements in film and television. He provides a general overview of the construct, discusses a number of prominent examples of the practice (some likely to be familiar to readers, some not), and reviews academic research on product placement. He then builds on that analysis to delineate some promising areas of inquiry that might help to spur future research on the topic. These areas include issues of salience, involvement, and product characteristics.

In Chapter 4, Sharmistha Law and Kathryn Braun-LaTour address one of the most perplexing issues in product placement research: how to measure the impact of placements. As Law and Braun-LaTour note (and as echoed in Chapters 3, 5, and 7), research on the effects of product placement has been decidedly mixed, even though industry touts numerous success stories, albeit mostly anecdotally. One reason they suggest for the mixed findings from previous research is an overreliance on recall and recognition as the key dependent measures. The authors note that the use of these measures imply (or at least should imply) a process that is for the most part conscious. However, drawing on recent research on learning without awareness, Law and Braun-LaTour suggest that making a distinction between explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) memory (Graf & Schacter, 1985) might be a useful approach to studying product placement effects. They offer a theoretical framework based on this distinction and discuss some of the findings of their own research to bolster their arguments.

In Chapter 5, Moonhee Yang, Beverly Roskos-Ewoldsen, and David Roskos-Ewoldsen also address issues of product placement and memory. However, they take a slightly different approach from Law and Braun-LaTour in that they focus as much, if not more, on earlier stages in information processing, in particular the comprehension stage. They argue that understanding what happens at the time

of viewing is essential to being able to accurately predict product placement effects. Building on the general notion of mental or situation models (Wyer, 2003; Wyer & Radvansky, 1999), they specifically use a landscape model framework (van den Broek, Ridsen, Fletcher, & Thurlow, 1996) to make predictions regarding the conditions under which product placement effects might be expected. They then present data from an experiment that tested some key assumptions of that model. They conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for product placement effects.

Namita Bhatnagar, Lerna Aksoy, and Selin Malkoc provide their take on product placement issues in Chapter 6. In particular, they focus on contextual factors, such as the fit between the program and the placed brand, the strength of the placement (i.e., number of brand mentions, foreground vs. background), consumer characteristics (e.g., awareness of placement, involvement), and characteristics of the medium (e.g., trustworthiness). They also provide something missing from all of the other chapters: an example of product placement in a novel. They discuss the reactions to such placements from readers (mostly negative) and draw implications regarding process from the differences in the contextual issues between novels and TV programs or film.

Finally, Susan Auty and Charlie Lewis (Chapter 7) conclude Part I by addressing a relatively underresearched product placement effect: the effects of placements on children. Auty and Lewis begin by briefly reporting the results of an experiment they conducted and then using those results to theorize on issues of explicit and implicit memory, mere exposure effects, and the relation of these constructs to choice behavior. Their approach differs slightly from the other product placement chapters, however, in that it focuses almost exclusively on effects on children. This is an important addition to the literature because most product placement research has been conducted with adults. Although the processes underlying product placement effects are not likely to differ as a function of age, the effects may differ because of cognitive development. Indeed, as Auty and Lewis note, the blurred lines between entertainment and promotion/persuasion may be even more blurry for children, who may lack sufficient sophistication to discern whether a plot scene involves product placement, assuming they even know what product placement is. Auty and Lewis's results suggest that product placements can indeed directly influence choice behavior in children, even in the absence of effects on memory. Moreover, issues of memory differ as a function of age.

Part II: The Programs Between the Ads: The Persuasive Power of Entertainment Fiction and Narrative

Part II steps away from attempts to persuade via promotion to persuasion effects of the media entertainment content itself. The first two chapters of Part II focus on general issues involving the interplay between visual and verbal information and the persuasive power of fiction, both part and parcel of what television and film entertainment provide. In Chapter 8, Bob Wyer and Rashmi Adaval address

how verbal and nonverbal (visual) information may interact in their influence on memory and judgment. They make a persuasive argument that visual images can have a substantial effect on how people process subsequent information they receive. This of course is the case when the visual information is relevant to the subsequent judgments, but the authors also argue that this effect holds even when the visual information has little to do with the subsequent information or judgments. They bolster their arguments by reinterpreting some of their prior work, as well as discussing new data, and discussing the implications of these findings for how entertainment media may affect the attitudes and behaviors of audience members.

In Chapter 9, Melanie Green, Jennifer Garst, and Tim Brock address the power of fiction in general, including nonvisual (e.g., novels) as well as visual narratives. They begin by identifying some of the fundamental differences between fiction and nonfiction, particularly in terms of how they are processed, and relate these differences in processing to issues of memory and judgment. They suggest that, contrary to conventional wisdom, research is accumulating suggesting that fiction may actually be more persuasive than nonfiction. They then go on to detail aspects of fiction that may contribute to this superior persuasiveness as well as boundary conditions for this effect.

The next three chapters shift the focus to the effects of television consumption on values, attitudes, and behaviors. In Chapter 10, L. J. Shrum, Jim Burroughs, and Aric Rindfleisch discuss theory and research on the cultivation effect (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The cultivation effect pertains to the positive relation between television consumption and the holding of beliefs and behaviors congruent with the television message. Shrum et al. specifically focus on the processes that may underlie this relation. They detail a model of how television information influences judgments of set size and probability and then draw on recently collected data to extend this model to the development of judgments such as personal values (in this case, materialism). They suggest that the way in which television information influences judgments is a function of the types of judgments that are made and how they are constructed and that television influences the different judgments in quite different ways.

In Chapter 11, George Comstock looks at a specific type of television effect, the controversial relation between violent television viewing and aggression. Comstock, however, does a number of things that are different from previous discussions on this topic. First, he discusses a number of meta-analyses, including his own work, that clearly show a positive correlation between exposure to violent television or movies and aggression or antisocial behavior. However, as he notes, the real issue is interpreting that positive correlation: Does it reflect a causal effect of television or some other causal mechanism? Comstock suggests that the case for television viewing being the causal factor is quite strong. He points to meta-analyses of experiments that show a very consistent (and very robust) effect on aggressive behavior. Even though certain individual studies may be critiqued for such things as construct validity and generalizability, the consistency of the pattern argues that television is the causal factor, particularly when coupled with

the equally consistent (though less robust in terms of effect size) survey (correlational) findings. Finally, Comstock makes one additional contribution. He suggests that, based on a reexamination of the data, dispositions such as attitudes, norms, and values are not a necessary link between exposure to television violence and aggression. Although the link has been found in a number of studies, it is also the case that direct relations between exposure to television violence and aggression have been observed. He then discusses the implications of this reformulation for the processes underlying media effects on aggressive behavior.

Although the effects of media violence on viewers is probably the best known media effect, there are in fact other effects of viewing television content. As Maria Kniazeva notes in Chapter 12, television programs convey a significant amount of information about consumption behavior. This information can serve as specific cues about what is considered normative, desirable, to be avoided, and so forth. The information may be relatively brand specific or it could be relevant to a general product category. Moreover, Kniazeva argues that, with respect to television effects, the academic literature (at least in marketing) has tended to focus almost entirely on the effects of advertisements, ignoring for the most part the effects of the programs between the ads. In her chapter, Kniazeva outlines the extant literature on non-advertising media effects and discusses the psychological processes that occur at various stages of processing (i.e., encoding, interpretation, retrieval). In doing so, she adds to the growing body of work on the processes underlying media effects.

The previous few chapters have focused on the effects of viewing particular content. In Chapter 13, David Schumann looks at the ironic flipside of not viewing or, at least, not viewing particular types of programs. Schumann explores the ramifications of market segmentation, particularly in regard to how it restricts exposure to diversity. Building on earlier work by Joseph Turow (1997), he develops a complex model of restricting exposure to diversity and, in doing so, provides a blueprint for an extended program of research into what until now has been a relatively ignored topic. He particularly notes that in targeting a consumer segment by pointing out the shared consumption activities of that segment, there is also an underlying inference that the group is different from other segments. Indeed, it is often in the marketer's interest to reinforce not only affiliation or aspiration groups and their favored brands and practices but also avoidance groups and what not to have and do (Lowrey, Englis, Shavitt, & Solomon, 2001). Schumann's model explores the antecedents and consequences of this practice.

Part III: Individual Differences in Media Usage and Their Role as Mediators and Moderators of Media Effects

Several of the previous chapters in Part II mention in some way that particular media effects are likely to vary as a function of at least some type of individual characteristic. The chapters that comprise Part III of this volume focus specifically on several of these individual differences. In Chapter 14, Tim Brock and Stephen

Livingston assert that one of these individual differences is the need for entertainment. They suggest that some people simply crave entertainment more than others. If so, then it seems possible that need for entertainment may moderate the effects of consuming such entertainment by determining how media are processed. As a first step in testing this proposition, Brock and Livingston present data on the development of their Need for Entertainment scale, detailing their efforts to develop and validate the scale items.

Cristel Russell, Andy Norman, and Susan Heckler take a similar approach in Chapter 15. However, rather than looking at individual relations with entertainment in general, Russell et al. explore the extent to which viewers may become connected with particular programs or characters. Specifically, they explore the extent to which individuals differ in such connectedness. They discuss their program of research that includes the development of a connectedness scale and the articulation of the antecedents and consequences of connectedness. They further assert that connectedness may serve as a mediator or moderator of television program effects.

In Chapter 16, Dara Greenwood and Paula Pietromonaco tackle the question of whether frequent viewing of idealized images of women in the media results in greater body dissatisfaction on the part of viewers, especially women. This is a particularly troubling issue because of the relation between body dissatisfaction and the development of eating disorders, such as bulimia. Greenwood and Pietromonaco follow a path very similar to that of Russell et al. Specifically, they suggest that some types of women may be more influenced by media images than others and thus may be more likely to develop eating disorders. They suggest that women's relational styles may moderate the extent to which the media images have an effect on those women. They discuss data from their research program that suggests an interaction among attachment styles, media perceptions, and body image concerns. They also discuss the ambiguous lines between fantasy and reality that are the subject of this volume and suggest that these blurred lines may indeed lead young women to manifest their attachment needs through body image concerns.

The last two chapters of Part III address a specific type of media entertainment, sports entertainment. In Chapter 17, Scott Jones, Colleen Bee, Rick Burton, and Lynn Kahle discuss the factors that make sports entertainment a unique medium for marketing communications. They look at the relationships that fans develop with sports teams and the consequences that may result from these relationships, including compliance, identification, and internalization. They then discuss some strategic implications of these relationships that might be of interest to marketers.

In Chapter 18, Steve McDaniel concludes the individual differences focus by looking at the relation between sensation seeking and the consumption of TV sports. McDaniel reviews research that has looked at the relation between sensation seeking and television viewing in general and then goes on to focus specifically

on recent research on televised sports. He details some of his own work that shows that sensation seeking is indeed related to such things as viewing violent combative sports (indeed, for both women and men).

ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA IS SPECIAL

As noted earlier, this book is not equipped to answer at least the second part of the question posed in the title of this chapter, namely, whether we need a separate psychology of entertainment media. However, this book does address the first part: What is so special about entertainment media? All of the chapters in this book provide a perspective on the nature of entertainment media and how it often blends with overt persuasion attempts, such as promotions. And virtually all in some manner speak to the issue of how entertainment media is processed, with the conclusion that media consumers do in fact tend to process entertainment (narrative) and promotional (rhetorical) information differently. This, if nothing else, is what makes entertainment media so special. And it is the premise of at least some of the chapters that this is also what makes it potentially so powerful. It should come as no surprise, then, that marketers would be interested in becoming part of that special processing rather than separate from it.

Perhaps that is fine. This book does not take a position as to whether the blurring of the lines between entertainment and promotion is necessarily good or bad. But in the interest of the free flow of information mentioned in the preface, it is hoped that the chapters in this book can at least contribute to more informed consumers who might then decide whether to provide their consent to be persuaded.

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