



Mood specific media use and emotion regulation: Patterns and individual differences

Dara N. Greenwood^{a,*}, Christopher R. Long^b

^a Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan, 1225 South University, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR 71998, United States

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines moods in which individuals are most likely to utilize various forms of entertainment media and the emotion regulation tendencies that are associated with such preferences. Results of a questionnaire study ($n = 229$) show that mood specific media use may be captured by three factors: turning to media in a positive mood, in a negative mood or in a bored mood. Findings also show that various forms of difficulty regulating emotion (e.g., feeling out of control when upset) predict media use in negative or bored moods only. More specific analyses show that music use in negative moods is predicted by both positive indices (e.g., reflection tendencies) and negative indices of emotion regulation (e.g., rumination tendencies), while television use in negative moods is only predicted by negative indices of emotion regulation. Results are discussed in light of the psychological needs that selective media use may serve.

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1. Introduction

As media content and forms continue to diversify and become more portable, individuals are increasingly able to tune their use of entertainment media to their perceived social and emotional needs. Indeed, researchers in both communication and psychology have documented the capacity of entertainment media to facilitate negotiation of both positive and negative moods (Larson, 1995; Moskaleiko & Heine, 2003). Scholars have also begun to identify individual differences in the capacity to regulate mood and emotion successfully (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Gross & John, 2003; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). The diverse ways in which individuals make sense of and respond to their emotional experiences have powerful implications for mental health and well-being (Gross & Muñoz, 1995). However, to date we know very little about how these kinds of individual differences map onto mood specific media use. Clarifying who uses which media in what kind of mood state is a first crucial step toward understanding whether media use may serve a therapeutic or self-defeating function for those with increased difficulty managing their moods and emotions.

The present study uses a self-report questionnaire to explore how existing differences in emotion and cognitive regulation tendencies predict media consumption patterns across positive and

negative mood states. Further, we investigate media forms (movies, television, music, magazines and video games) that are frequently utilized in positive and negative mood states, and take a closer look at the individual differences that predict negative mood specific use of television and music in particular.

1.1. Individual differences in emotion regulation tendencies

Individual differences in emotion regulation processes and their implications for emotional health and well-being have been steadily gaining empirical attention (Gross, 2007; Larsen, 2000). Although more broadly construed models of affect regulation strategies do not explicitly mention media use, it might be conceptualized as relevant to a number of different tactics, ranging from “self-reward” to “distraction” (Morris & Reilly, 1987) and cutting across both behavioral (e.g., self-reward and distraction techniques) and cognitive (e.g., relaxation and day dreaming) mood-focused repair strategies (Larsen, 2000). Although a recently devised self-report measure of affect regulation strategy (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004) includes one item specific to media use (“I watched TV, read a book, etc.”), one could easily imagine media use accompanying more general strategies, such as “I kept to myself, I wanted to be alone” or “I did something fun, something I really enjoy.”

Because media affords a highly flexible and personalized form of affect regulation (see, Larson, 1995; Zillmann, 1988), patterns of selective media exposure across positive and negative moods

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 734 647 9539; fax: +1 734 764 3288.
E-mail address: dgreenwd@umich.edu (D.N. Greenwood).

may tell us something valuable about individuals' general regulation tendencies and vice versa. To examine individual differences in emotion regulation that may predict mood specific media consumption, however, we first need to identify constructs of emotion regulation that may be most useful in establishing these links. Gratz and Roemer (2004) developed the Difficulty with Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) which measures six domains of emotion regulation difficulty. These subscales capture meta-perceptions of emotion ranging from feeling bad about the self for feeling upset (e.g., guilty, ashamed, angry) to having difficulty engaging in goal-directed or non-impulsive behavior, to perceiving negative emotions as overwhelming and indefinite. Although the DERS was designed for clinical use, it was validated on a college population. Further, prior research found that increased DERS scores were associated with the tendency to transport into media programs and experience imagined intimacy with fictional characters (Greenwood, 2008). It remains to be seen, however, whether difficulties in emotion regulation also predict individual differences in the frequency or form of media use when in a variety of moods.

Focusing more broadly on self-related thought processes, Trapnell and Campbell's (1999) Rumination and Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ) comprises two different subscales aimed at clarifying the conditions in which thinking about the self may be linked to positive psychological functioning and when it may be linked to self-consciousness and distress. Rumination is operationalized as perseveration on past events and an inability to inhibit recurring and potentially distressing thoughts about the self. Reflection by contrast is operationalized as appreciation for self insight and analysis—the brighter side of the self-focus coin. The present study will examine associations between individual differences in rumination/reflection and mood specific media consumption.

1.2. Mood and media use

A substantial body of research highlights the utility of and motivation, whether conscious or not, to use entertainment media to regulate mood. Pioneering work on “mood management” and media consumption by Zillmann and colleagues demonstrated that individuals' moods may often motivate selective consumption of media that improves bad moods or prolongs good moods (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002); alternatively, in some cases, individuals may choose and enjoy media that reflects and perhaps validates their current unhappy circumstances (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003). Regardless of the valence of media gratifications sought, however, it seems clear that media use has mood regulating appeal. A diary study of mood and media use found that individuals report more television viewing on the evening following an afternoon of negative mood (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Moskalenko and Heine (2003) found that watching television served to decrease perceived discrepancies between one's actual and ideal self, and that individuals spent more time attending to neutral television stimuli after experimentally induced failure (vs. success) feedback. The authors posited that television viewing may be used strategically by individuals who wish to escape aversive self-related feelings.

Larson (1995) similarly described how television may provide individuals with the opportunity to regulate negative emotions because it allows viewers to disengage from the self and helps to numb stress and anxiety. Music, by contrast, may provide a more nuanced opportunity to more fully process one's emotional experiences. Along these lines, Saarikallio and Erkkila (2007) documented an eclectic range of psychological, social and physiological regulation that music affords; citing music's capacity to speak to valence, intensity and clarity of emotions, the authors determined that Finnish adolescents use music to both control and regulate mood.

The present study will systematically assess the frequency with which music and television are utilized across both positive and negative mood states and will build on the existing literature by exploring whether individual differences in emotion regulation predict music and television use in negative mood states.

1.3. The present study

The primary objective of the present study is to examine whether individual differences in emotion regulation predict negative mood and/or positive mood specific media consumption. Because media may provide a means to shift, process, or deflect emotions for those who lack internal resources for regulating negative affective states, we hypothesize that difficulty regulating emotion and tendency towards rumination will be associated with an increased frequency of utilizing entertainment media in negative mood states. Less clear is how individual differences will predict media use in positive mood states. Positive moods are not typically captured by constructs of emotion regulation, although difficulty achieving and sustaining a good mood can be as detrimental to emotional health as difficulty containing and diffusing a bad one (Larsen, 2000). Thus, the question remains open: do individual differences in emotion regulation predict positive mood specific media consumption?

Next, we assess which forms of media (e.g., music, television, movies, magazines and video games) may be most commonly utilized in negative and positive moods. These associations offer insights about the kinds of media that are assumed to be most relevant to negative and positive mood regulation. In light of research outlined earlier suggesting that music is both versatile and appealing to young adults, it is hypothesized that music will emerge as the most commonly utilized form of media across both negative and positive moods.

Finally, because indices of emotion regulation difficulty focus exclusively on how individuals manage negative mood states, we take a closer look at patterns of negative mood specific media use and the emotion regulation differences that predict such patterns. Based on prior research (Larson, 1995; Saarikallio & Erkkila, 2007) suggesting that music may be more suited to emotional reflection and processing than television, we predict that music use in negative moods will be associated with greater emotion regulation capacity than television use in negative moods.

Although this research can be conceptualized within the uses and gratifications literature (see, Rubin, 2002), it is more aligned with mood management and selective exposure traditions (Zillmann, 1988) which stipulate that individuals select particular media environments in response (whether conscious or not) to various mood states.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 229 students (79% identified as female) in the Communication Studies Department at the University of Michigan. Participants either received course credit for completing the questionnaire or completed it as part of an in-class exercise. All participants completed pen-and-paper versions of the questionnaire in a group setting. Most participants completed the questionnaire in fewer than 30 min.

2.2. Materials

The questionnaire comprised a series of measures administered in the order in which they are described.

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