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Following the viewers: Investigating television drama engagement through skin conductance measurements



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ABSTRACT

This article describes an empirical study of viewer emotional engagement with the first episode of the television fiction series *Follow the Money* (DR, 2015), a crime melodrama. The study combines applied and academic audience research and investigates real-time viewer responses by measuring and analysing skin conductance (SC) responses as an indicator of emotional arousal. The article outlines a framework for analysing emotion and arousal in television viewer engagement. It then describes SC measurements and the difference between tonic and phasic measurements. Two primary SC measures that indicate emotional engagement are derived, i.e. average phasic skin conductance response and the average number of emotionally arousing events pr. second. In our findings, both of these measures indicate a slight linear upwards trend and qualitative data is brought in to contextualize the quantitative findings. The study demonstrates how SC measures, formal analysis, and qualitative methods can be combined and the article ends with an outline of how future studies might adopt parts of the research design to further integrate applied audience research, audience research in media psychology, and cognitive film theory.

1. Introduction

It is a common assumption that viewers are drawn to fictional entertainment because of the emotions evoked. Most studies of this phenomenon, however, are either largely theoretical or based primarily on viewer self-reports. This study outlines an empirical approach that operationalizes emotional gratification as real-time emotional arousal as part of an ongoing effort to integrate three related perspectives relevant for the overall domain of audience research: audience research in media psychology, cognitive film theory, and applied audience research. The study was a pilot collaboration between two audience researchers working at Danish Broadcasting Corporation ('Danmarks Radio', hereafter DR) and two researchers working predominantly within the area of cognitive film theory.

We begin by outlining the common research area of audience emotional gratifications with a brief review of key points from media psychology in order to synthesise a theoretical framework. We tie this framework to that of cognitive film theory with a focus on character engagement and emotions. We then outline the organizational context for audience research in DR and end the section by describing our operationalization, our research questions, and our hypotheses. The next two sections describes the methodology and main quantitative findings, which are followed by a discussion which brings in 1) findings from the qualitative component of the study and 2) commentary on the content features which are possibly central to eliciting and maintaining viewer emotions. We end by

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discussing some outstanding issues related to our chosen measures and segmentation procedures and outline areas for further research. We see our contribution as both theoretical and methodological: Most of our findings are tentative, but the study as a whole has implications for further work on media and emotional engagement in both applied and academic settings.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Entertainment and emotional gratifications: a tri-partite framework

Why do people watch television and what happens when they watch it? Many academic perspectives investigate these broad questions, but it has long been the consensus within psychology of entertainment that a main factor is the emotional payoff (see e.g. Bartsch, 2012; Tan, 1996, 2008; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009), as summed up by Bartsch (2012):

“Emotions are often assumed to be the heart of media entertainment, be it in the form of movies, novels, television programs, music videos, or computer games. Entertainment audiences want to have a good laugh, they want to be kept at the edge of their seats, or be moved to tears” (p. 267–68).

We will assume that this is true, both across media and in the case of television: People watch television entertainment to experience emotions, and successful television entertainment delivers these experiences.

To start, we will outline some fundamental assumptions from media psychology regarding emotions and entertainment (for reviews see Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010; Bartsch, 2012; Tan, 2008; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). Emotional engagement in television fiction plausibly involves at least three distinct levels of processes. The first is direct and immediate emotional episodes, experienced as pleasant or unpleasant emotions, such as laughter or excitement etc. The second level involves short-term re-appraisal by way of meta-cognitive and meta-emotional processes, which regulate emotion (Frijda, 1986; Gross, 1999; Lazarus, 1991): viewers may thus react positively or negatively based on their immediate preferences for, say, laughing or being thrilled or scared.¹ In addition to this, a third level involves a further re-appraisal of media-related experiences as particularly meaningful over the longer term, later in or after the viewing process. This third level is a more complex and longer-term process termed *appreciation* by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). The present study builds on this tri-partite framework of 1) primary responses, 2) short-term re-appraisal and 3) longer term, complex re-appraisal, but the focus is on the first level, i.e. primary responses as immediate and intrinsically gratifying emotional aspects of television viewing. More operationally, the study assumes that observed increases in arousal during television viewing are indicators of the aforementioned primary emotional responses, which form the basis for the latter two levels.

2.2. Arousal as an indicator of emotional gratifications

Arousal is generally seen as a key dimension of emotional responses. Although considerable disagreement exist within the study of emotion, one of the dominant models of emotions within media psychology (Ravaja, 2004) and arguably within psychology of emotions in general (see Russell & Barrett, 1999; Russell, 2003, 2009) is the two-dimensional model, which distinguishes between valence and arousal as the key dimensions of emotional experience. The present study is aligned with this dimensional model.

It may be readily observed that the common-sense meaning of entertainment implies positive valence, but it has long been argued that emotions with negative valence, e.g. sadness, may be experienced as pleasing through the short-term and longer term re-appraisal processes described in the model above. Several theories on mood management and sensation seeking also hold that mild arousal in itself, regardless of valence, is gratifying. Recent studies have investigated the relationship between arousal and emotional gratifications further and Bartsch (2012) has uncovered seven stable emotional gratifications, i.e. fun, thrill, empathic sadness, contemplation, character engagement, social sharing and vicarious release. All of these components except fun were found to correlate with increases in arousal – but it should be noted that Bartsch measured arousal through self-report and as a single aggregated score. Given the tri-partite model and these findings, one would expect arousal to be a plausible indicator of many primary emotional responses to audio-visual fiction. One might also hypothesize that retrospective arousal is connected to arousal states during viewing, in that later self-reports plausibly piggyback on similar, if not identical, arousing emotions experienced during the actual viewing. Thus, even though immediate arousal is not a precise indicator of specific emotional gratifications it is nevertheless a plausible indicator of both experienced emotions in general as well as emotional gratifications specific to engagement with fiction.

2.3. Character engagement as the main link from screen to viewer

Having outlined this framework for emotional gratifications, we will now turn to the issue of how and why these emotions arise. In this section, we will outline a theoretical approach to this issue based in cognitive film theory. This approach shares central concerns with media psychology but offers a particular take on fictional engagement which one might refer to as *the primacy of character, conflict, and emotion*: emotions are deemed central to fiction, and a key driver of such emotions are characters and conflict.²

¹ Bartsch (2012) distinguishes between what she calls direct and indirect gratifications, which accords well with Vorderer and Hartmann's (2009) distinction between primary appraisal responses and a secondary re-appraisal of primary responses.

² This perspective is not unique to cognitive film theory; this broadly Aristotelian approach to analysis of fiction is also dominant in modern day screenwriting literature (see Thompson (2003)).

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