Recently, the influence of affects and emotions in media exposure on the impact of media has become indisputable. Formerly, the emphasis was largely on cognitive aspects such as recall, learning, thoughts, and beliefs. The affective aspects were reserved for entertainment media, mostly limited to processes of involvement and gratifications (→ Involvement with Media Content; Entertainment, Effects of). Nowadays, the borders between entertainment and → news and information fare get blurred. Entertainment programs like *The Simpsons* and *Survival* claim to be reality-based (→ Reality TV), whereas news items and information programming increasingly make use of emotionalizing cues, such as personal anecdotes and zooming in on “crying faces” (→ Narrative News Story; Soft News). The Fox news broadcast of the invasion of the US army in Iraq in the second Gulf War, for instance, appeared like a → video game such as America’s Army, including the upbeat music. The blowing up of the World Trade Towers in New York (9/11) seemed a gruesome science fiction at first hand, whereas fiction-based TV shows like *ER* inform many on real-life hospital affairs.

Thus, two developments emphasize the importance of studying the role of affects in media exposure: (1) the media (i.e., program-makers) increasingly use dramatic techniques (→ Drama in Media Content; Hollywood); and (2) cognitive or information functions of the media increasingly coincide with affective and entertainment functions. Therefore, after defining affect, its role within the realm of media exposure will be discussed: in media entertainment, in → persuasion and commercial contexts, and across the → Internet.

**POSITIONING AND DEFINING AFFECTS**

Affect is often used as an even broader concept than → emotions, generally covering the various forms of emotional phenomena and used to distinguish an affective, feeling state from → cognition and thoughts. However, a strict separation between cognition and affect can hardly be hold from contemporary emotion psychology. The positioning of affect versus cognition dates back to Descartes, who proposed a strict separation of body and soul, which has ever since distinguished rationality and emotionality (Damasio 1994) and still excites heated debates among current emotion scholars. Today, however, the polarization of physiological change versus cognition as actually defining affect is seen as merely a matter of definition that depends on how strictly cognition is defined as purely rational thought and fully conscious. Most scholars now acknowledge cognitive appraisal perspectives, including evolutionary and neurobiological scholars (e.g., LeDoux 1996; Panksepp 1998; Barrett & Wager 2006 → Appraisal Theory). That is, a certain degree of understanding the situational meaning in relation to personal concerns is necessary for an emotion to occur. Thus, the recent loosening of positing affect versus cognition in emotion psychology parallels the blurring of the cognitive and information functions and the affective and entertainment functions of media fare.
Affect covers various concepts, such as moods, feelings, and emotions. Mood is often applied to an enduring affective state, characterized by being global and not clearly elicited by an external event. Moods are not felt as motivated by inner drives related to situational demands. Moods may also have a biochemical source (e.g., epinephrine) or may be experimentally induced, as in some media exposure studies (e.g., Lang 2000). Emotion is more clearly defined by a specific event, with a beginning and ending. It is the awareness of situational demands, personal concerns, action readiness, and often physiological change, along with hedonic quality. Emotions comprise the felt need to act or not to act, to serve one’s needs, goals, or concerns (Frijda 1986). Others define emotions as characterized by increased activity in the sympathetic nervous system due to vital implications of threats and rewards for the human system (Rolls 1999). Hence, when no personal concerns are touched by an event, no emotion will occur.

A crucial difference between affects and emotions is that emotions have an object and relate to meaningful events, whereas affects are rather free-floating and objectless (Russell & Barrett 1999). Affect refers to consciously accessible feelings and their neurophysiological counterparts. Thus, affect is usually reflected in varying degrees of pleasure-displeasure, or positive-negative affect, as well as (de)arousal or (de)activation. Furthermore, affects are conceptualized as longer-lasting phenomena than emotions.

Finally, the concepts of affect and emotion are used to refer not only to subjective experiences but also to (visible) behavioral expression (e.g., facial expressions, verbal and nonverbal behavior), especially in communication. However, it is important to note that experiencing (felt) emotions should be differentiated from the expression of emotions (depicted). For example, sadness expressed in a media message (e.g., tears) does not necessarily imply sadness in the observer (→ Nonverbal Communication and Culture).

**AFFECTS AND MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT**

Many media entertainment scholars have studied how people experience affects through entertainment products (Bryant et al. 2003; Bryant & Vorderer 2006). Actually, it is an odd phenomenon: why should we feel concerned with nonexistent characters? Zillmann and colleagues have developed various theories to explain affective responses to media exposure and why people seek such experiences. In short, they state that people selectively expose themselves to particular media programs in order to manage their moods; to keep up or restore pleasant states or to avoid negative affect (→ Mood Management). While being exposed, people get aroused by what they see or read, experience suspense, excitement, fear for the hero, etc. The relief of such arousal when the dramatic conflict is resolved causes a pleasant state (→ Excitation Transfer Theory). Because it is human nature to empathize with the sufferings of others, particularly loved ones (→ Empathy Theory), we feel empathic distress and fear for the fate of the sympathetic protagonist (and enjoy his or her victory), whereas we hope for the devastation of his or her rivals (→ Affective Disposition Theories).

Uses-and-gratifications theory states that we seek media exposure for various reasons, informative, social, affective, or dispersion seeking in nature (→ Escapism; Uses and Gratifications). Social comparison theory (e.g., Suls & Wheeler 2000) states that it helps to make ourselves feel better to look at others suffering (→ Social Comparison Theory).
This may also explain the phenomenon of “Schadenfreude” – pleasure at another’s misfortune. Furthermore, emotion psychology might explain why we seek to get affected by media exposure just for the sake of being moved – for the emotional experience itself. It is a basic human need to have emotions, because emotions set one into motion (“I feel, therefore I live”). Also, emotional competence is acquired through media exposure, which is important to cope with emotional encounters in everyday life. Finally, media exposure supports the social sharing of emotions, which is a basic human need. In the last century, our social world has extended to mediated worlds, thereby extending opportunities for emotional encounters.

Many media entertainment theories somehow evolved around getting involved with the characters, dating back to Aristotle’s notion of catharsis. Numerous concepts have evolved to refer to a process of affective bonding; for example, involvement, identification (similarity or wishful identification), parasocial interaction (Parasocial Interactions and Relationships), empathy (cognitive and affective), perspective taking, transportation (Transportation Theory), presence, and immersion. However, these concepts are often not very clearly defined and are difficult to separate from one another. Furthermore, the measurement of these concepts has often been blurred by liking for the character or program. Therefore, various scholars have proposed using an umbrella concept (e.g., emotional involvement) and further defining related concepts in terms of various degrees of emotional involvement/empathy and distance/detachment. Liking a character may then be defined as a tradeoff between involvement and distance (Konijn & Hoorn 2005). For example, in wishful identification the character is liked because it is distinct from the viewer or reader, whereas most involvement conceptualizations view only similarity as constituent for liking.

An implicit fallacy is the assumption that more involvement implies more enjoyment, thereby suggesting that disliking a character would entail disliking a program (Enjoyment/Entertainment Seeking). However, many examples may be given where characters are disliked, yet the program is liked – sometimes even because the character is disliked. For example, gruesome heroes in video games make games “cool.” The role of negative affects in (interactive) media exposure in optimizing enjoyment is an understudied area (e.g., why should we dispositionally like murderers?). Promising new perspectives integrate neuroscience into entertainment research (Weber et al. 2006). Future research may disentangle complicated affective processing of information in liking media fare – whether we like or dislike bad characters, we may still enjoy the program.

**AFFECTS AND PERSUASION IN COMMERCIAL CONTEXTS**

Affects within the context of persuasion, ads, and commercials (Advertising, Emotions in) have evolved as a field in its own right, mostly studying fear appeals and humor (Fear Induction through Media Content). Fear-inducing displays are mostly used in prevention campaigns, for example showing rotten lungs to reduce smoking behavior (Prevention and Communication). Furthermore, attaching sexual affect to commercial content is a well known phenomenon (e.g., sexy women selling cars or, more subliminal, masking the word SEX in a liquor label). Creating an association of positive affect with a product or service will generally lead to a positive attitude toward that product, thereby
increasing purchase behavior. The positive affect connected with fear appeals lies in the relief following advertised recommendations. The results of such affect-laden exposures, however, are mixed (Obermiller et al. 2005). One reason is that consumers may remember the affect-arousing image (e.g., the joke) but not the message. Also, the affect-laden images may not match with the advertised product (e.g., women and trucks). Furthermore, the affective appeal may not arouse the intended affect (e.g., laughter among adolescents instead of fear) or may not be relevant to the consumer (e.g., considering oneself not vulnerable).

Recently, there has been a substantial increase in interest in general affective responses and specific emotions to persuasive media exposure, because “emotions sell” – even negative affect seems more effective than no affect (Williams & Aaker 2002). An increasingly popular development is product placement – the deliberate embedding of commercial messages (e.g., brands) in entertainment programming (including video games); for example, actors drinking Coca-Cola and wearing Nikes, thus blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion (Shrum 2004). Even without deliberate product placements, television programs convey a considerable amount of information about consumption behavior; serving as guidelines for many viewers as consumers. Mixed results of studies in product placements suffer from methodological problems (e.g., not controlling for confounding factors).

A comparable format has been used in → entertainment education to convey pro-social and health messages (Singhal et al. 2004). Entertainment education is based on social learning theories in which the principal carriers are modeling and role models. Emotional involvement with characters in entertainment programming increases the likelihood of adopting a character’s lifestyle and emulating his or her behavior. The social sharing of entertainment (e.g., watching with friends) may further increase the affective response and the program’s effectiveness. Thus far, most research in entertainment education has taken place in “the field,” as it is popular in underdeveloped countries. Current attempts are being made, however, to develop learning environments in video games (serious games).

Future research may focus on the more general role of affect and emotional involvement, instead of discrete emotions, while processing ads, commercials, and promotion materials. Also, the role of negative affects should be further studied. Affective processing may prevail over cognitive processing, thus blurring the awareness of being exposed to commercial/persuasive materials. Affect may trigger heuristic processing of information, thereby inhibiting elaboration of arguments. Relatedly, emotions may inhibit or bias cognitive processing. Theoretically, an integration of media entertainment and persuasion research is a challenge for future scholars.

**AFFECTS ACROSS THE INTERNET**

Media exposures through the world wide web are another important source for evoking affect in its users. Not only is much traditional media fare exposed on the Internet, but newly invented offerings can also be found, such as online gaming and interactive TV-related response options. Furthermore, the Internet hosts a lot of mediated → interpersonal communication, often accompanied by affect (e.g., online romance or hate speech; → Mediated Social Interaction). Influential moves are occurring that deserve attention
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from communication scholars. An example is Pro Ana, an online virtual character promoting anorexia and self-starvation. Millions of adolescent girls worldwide follow “Ana” and show extreme levels of affective bonding through postings on related websites and blogs.

Role-playing games (Vorderer & Bryant 2006, 1–9) are an intriguing mixture of traditional media and technological innovation, allowing one to present oneself as a “fictional” character in virtual worlds and to create one’s own narrative. Some players even represent 50 different personalities online (keeping records of them offline). The “what if” scenarios and forced changes in perspective taking (e.g., Israeli prime minister versus Palestinian Authority in the game Peacemaker) are probably the main carriers of (educational) effectiveness. Furthermore, cybersex is an affect-arousing media exposure, holding a position somewhere between interactive pornography, sexually laden movies, and intimate affairs (→ Sex and Pornography Online).

Affective computing (Picard 1997) is yet another emerging research field, which focuses on designing affect in the communicative processes with computers to make the interaction more “life-like” or human-like. For example, embodied agents, avatars, or virtual humans are designed to enrich the computer-mediated communication processes (→ Avatars and Agents). Such human-like interface characters are also designed to detect the user’s emotions and to respond empathically. Virtual characters can be found in an increasing array of media fare on the Internet, including promotion and political campaigns, and are effectively used in a range of applications, such as in health-care, psychotherapy, and education.

For example, the virtual Laura was designed into a health-care system to motivate people to do physical exercises. Laura was most effective when she showed “emotional behavior” (Bickmore et al. 2005). Others found that “empathetic” characters were more trustworthy than non-emotional characters (Brave et al. 2005). Also, interesting parallels with media entertainment crop up. The FearNot! system was developed to teach children to deal with bullying behavior in schools through empathic engagement with the bullied child. In Façade, users interfere in the marital problems of a materially successful, young virtual couple, leading to emotionally laden conversations that change the course of the virtual couple’s lives. Clearly, fruitful cross-fertilizations between scholars in media entertainment, media psychology, and affective computing are awaited.

AFFECTS AND MEDIA INFORMATION PROCESSING

Affect and emotions play an important role on their own in processing the information derived from media exposure (→ Information Processing). Studies have shown the effects of emotions on → attention and recall of the news (Lang 2000; → Exposure to News; Memory). Others have found → selective attention (Brosius 1993) and → framing effects of emotion (Nabi 2003). Various scholars assume that affective processing limits the capacity to cognitively process the news, that emotions narrow one’s focus and affect the way information is stored in memory. When it comes to the role of affect in acquiring information from fiction (i.e., entertainment media), systematic studies are scarce. Studies in the context of narrative fiction (e.g., → cultivation theory) have already shown that fiction may lead to attitude changes equal to – and sometimes even greater than –
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those that result from nonfiction stories. However, these studies have hardly either focused on the role of affect and emotion or used audiovisuals in experimental designs to systematically study how affects influence information processing from fiction.

Mood inductions are generally used in psychology to study the effects on a person’s judgment of subsequent stimuli. One review concluded that feature films are most effective in evoking moods (Westermann et al. 1996). This and other information suggested that emotionalized viewers are more inclined to take fiction for real than are non-emotional viewers, especially when negative emotions are aroused (Konijn et al. in press). Affective processing of mediated information (e.g., through emotional involvement, mood induction, emotional framing, or otherwise) may constitute a decisive factor in adopting the represented (fictional) information and in incorporating the media message into one’s worldview. Because emotions are our “life-vests,” they tell us which events and what information should be taken seriously – mediated or not.

In all, affect plays a significant role in the selection, processing, and effects of media exposure. Future research should further detail how affective processing of media fare impacts the information gained from it; that is, how affective responses to media offerings modify the way in which the presented information is perceived, stored, retrieved, and valued, and becomes integrated into our real-life knowledge structures, whether fictitious (entertainment) or factual (news) media. Given the hybrid status of many current visual media messages, which creates ambiguity with regard to their “reality status,” studies in the role of affect are becoming increasingly important as they give us information on the underlying processes of the media’s power to influence people. This is particularly important given our current “mediated society,” in which we not only develop intimate relationships online, but also acquire our real-world knowledge in large part through mediated exposure, in which affects and emotions play a vital role to get messages across.


References and Suggested Readings


