
HEDONIC AND EUDAIMONIC ASPECTS OF MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to reflect the issues of affective and cognitive psychosomatic processes related to the reception of entertaining media products that result in hedonic pleasure and /or eudaimonic appreciation. It is based on the assumption that enjoyment of media entertainment is a multi-dimensional, complex experience that can be based on both hedonic and eudaimonic motivations. In order to achieve this goal, the authors pay attention to the theoretical outlines of psychological aspects of media reception while taking into account the complicated distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic experiences of the individual audience members. Therefore, the study defines the relationship between entertaining media products and individual, very specific emotional experiences as a complex set of diverse meanings, values and motivations. Taking into account the fact that affective and cognitive experiences related to perception of media entertainment can be pleasurable, funny, relaxing, exciting, but also deeply gratifying, inspiring, meaningful and self-reflexive, the authors conclude that eudaimonic aspects of media entertainment are experienced as meta-emotions resulting from individual (psychological), social and cultural context of media reception.

Keywords: eudaimonia, enjoyment, experience, pleasure, meta-emotion

1. Introduction

The study of individual aspects of the perception of media entertainment and the very essence of entertaining experiences arising from the contact with products of media culture is one of the biggest challenges that media studies face in the 21st century. From psychosomatic point of view, we have to pay special attention to individual effects of media entertainment such as excitation transfer, sensual stimulation and pleasure as well as consider their impact on inner conviction of individual audience members – on the system of moral and ethical values, experiences and education.

Reception of media entertainment products is based largely on feelings and emotional level of human perception. Ch. Barker states that the concept of emotion is not commonly associated with cultural or media studies, but becomes

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especially relevant in connection with studying psychosomatic aspects of the reception of communication content within a cultural context. An emotion is a manifestation of brain biochemistry which involves and evokes a lot of physiological changes. Many contemporary evolutionary theorists distinguish between the system of 'basic' emotions (sadness, surprise, disgust, anger, tension, happiness, fear) and 'new' emotions which arise from their combination (e.g. friendliness, caution, guilt, delight, anxiety). Emotions must be understood not only within the fundamentals of biology and evolution, but also in the wider context of cognitive mechanisms and appreciative functions. Every response of human body to a specific sensual impulse (e.g. pounding heart during a thrilling movie scene) forms a basis for a wide spectrum of emotions, which are organized and categorized by means of higher (cognitive) mental mechanisms. Emotions are subject to the social construction of reality – they reflect cultural differences and various social situations in which we can find ourselves [1].

As the entertaining products of media culture are the source of different experiences and emotions based on affective and cognitive mechanisms, identification of the 'heart' of entertaining experience which results from the contact between recipient and media product is a complex problem. Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld claim that psychological and neuroscience researches often use the concept of 'pleasure' as a general name for physically and mentally pleasant responses to a certain stimulus. However, in psychology of media and media studies the most frequent term used for analysis and explanation of recipients' positive reactions to media contents is 'enjoyment'. Attention is paid mainly to a problem of cognitive appreciation of affective responses that reflects an important connection between affective and cognitive systems of the human body. The term 'entertainment experience' is no longer seen as just an affective response to a certain sensual stimulus. This type of experience is a complex system of different, meaningfully interconnected subcomponents [2].

As far as enjoyment of media entertainment is understood as a result of a complex set of various physiological and psychological processes, Vorderer and Hartmann consider the right stimulation and finding balance between individual physiological human mechanisms to be the key aspect of enjoyment related to the reception of media entertainment. On the contrary, physiological imbalance which leads to the impairment of entertaining experience can be associated with disappointment or pain. Another essential condition is the achievement of a proper level of cognitive stimulation. It means that both internal mechanisms of a human body (e.g. body temperature, blood pressure, breathing rhythm) and external stimuli (colors, brightness, noise, picture dynamics) are equally important [3]. Therefore, media recipients select and then enjoy forms and contents of their mediated experiences on the basis of sensual and physiological stimulation that is pleasant for them. Finding a proper 'balance' between sensual and physiological stimulation can be seen as a factor which intensifies enjoyment of media entertainment.

Taking into account these facts, we work with a basic assumption that media entertainment is a complex phenomenon which, on the one hand, brings

us hedonically oriented pleasant feelings of relaxation, sensual enjoyment, emotions (pleasure, excitement, laughter), but on the other hand it has a significant influence on cognitive part of the recipient's personality (religious beliefs, moral and cultural values, seeking a sense of one's existence, a feeling of inner fulfillment). For this reason, in compliance with current development trends in psychology of media entertainment, we also turn attention to the issues of so called 'eudaimonic' forms of enjoyment of media entertainment which appeal mainly to cognitive mechanisms of media reception.

2. Theoretical outlines of psychology of media entertainment

Lately, studying the cognitive dimensions of enjoying media entertainment oriented otherwise than hedonically has begun to attract closer attention of involved experts. Theoretical conceptions that reflected the nature of relationships between media audiences and entertaining media texts back in the 1980s and 1990s focused specifically on positive emotions and hedonic motivations related to selection and consumption of media contents. These development tendencies were transferred into the formulation and successful empirical verification of two best-known theories – mood management theory and affective disposition theory.

According to Bryant and Miron, 'the mood management theory' proposed by Zillmann has found its methodological support in selective exposure theory. Mood management theory claims that recipients actively seek pleasant stimuli that are supposed to reduce manifestations of bad mood and maintain and even intensify good mood. This fact can considerably influence the selection of entertainment. Excitement-seeking is typical of those people whose lives are full of monotonous daily routines – they tend to seek exciting forms of entertainment connected with portrayals of sex and violence. On the other hand, entertainment has the capacity to provide more than excitement or thrills. Individuals who daily experience stress, fear of competition and uncertainty usually look for peace and comfort linked to more relaxing, less mentally and emotionally demanding forms of entertainment [4]. However, in both cases recipients strive for maintaining the amount of stress and excitement at a desirable level.

The most significant contribution of this theory to current studies of enjoyment of media entertainment is related to the recognition of differences in recipients' everyday lives and attention paid to them. Individual reception practices connected with enjoyment of entertainment products largely depend on common activities of these recipients. Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld further comment on the essence of Zillmann's psychological mood management theory and point out its effort to explain the process of selecting entertainment products in accordance with recipients' constant effort to manage their moods. However, the authors also say that this theory is only a generalized statement that cannot be seen as a universal 'rule'. The theory only focuses on audience members and their tendency to manage good mood and does not take into consideration the fact that some recipients may want to maintain a negative mood [2, p. 391-392].

This paradox leads us to the conviction that even a simple description of the motivation for seeking media entertainment (not to mention its full understanding and explanation) is an extremely complicated problem that cannot be reflected just in the sense of hedonic essence of media entertainment.

Similar statement applies to the so called ‘affective disposition theory’ discussed by Vorderer, Klimmt and Ritterfeld. This theory illustrates the overall experiential response of media recipients during the reception of a media product. It follows the ways by which recipients watch characters (real or fictitious) and form opinions on their morality as well as morality of their actions. As a result, the recipient creates a certain ‘affective disposition’ towards these characters [2, p. 391]. In other words, the intensity of entertaining experience increases if likeable protagonists and characters favored by the audiences reach their goals.

Busselle and Bilandzic share similar views through the concept of ‘narrative engagement’. The authors argue that an entertaining experience can be evoked by any emotions including those that cannot be defined as positive, e.g. sadness. The recipient’s engagement with a story – his or her emotional response to a specific media narrative – results in enjoyment of the product. The more attractive and interesting the story is, the more intense enjoyment recipients can experience [5]. Igartua and Barrios mention other approaches which reflect mainly hedonic tendencies of media recipients, such as empathic identification with various types of characters or heroes, Zillmann’s ‘excitation transfer’ (consumption of thrilling media contents is popular because we expect a gratifying completion of the stories) and the notion of “narrative transportation” discussed by Green, Brock and Kaufmann who assume that reception is gratifying if audience members – in the very moment of consumption of entertaining media content – intensively ‘absorb’ the story [6].

All above-mentioned theoretical perspectives are strongly hedonic and based on the assumption that media audiences seek and receive specific entertainment products on the basis of their own desire for fun and amusement, which means that they also virtually exclude the existence and possibility of other than pleasant entertainment experiences. Therefore, these outlines, as well as many other theoretical conceptualizations, focus on specific, mostly positive responses to media entertainment and do not leave us enough space for studying the psychosomatic aspects of media entertainment within a complex system of motivations and a wide range of emotions. Nowadays, theoretical and empirical approaches to the essence of media entertainment direct their attention also to experiences that are not positive in traditional sense of the word. Although primarily sad or depressing, these specific experiences are still able to bring the audiences intense and desirable emotions.

3. Hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of media entertainment

Recently, the possibilities of studying mixed or more precisely ambiguous affective responses to media entertainment have been attracting a closer

attention of interested media theorists and researchers. An arousing interest in the issues that refer to multi-dimensional nature of psychological aspects of consuming media entertainment leads to the revision of existing theories, thoughts and propositions or the formation of new opinions and assumptions which allow us to achieve better understanding of individual reception practices. These tendencies turn attention to non-hedonic forms of media entertainment that lead to a wider range of affective and cognitive gratifications.

Vorderer and Hartmann work with the concept of meta-emotion. According to these authors an enjoyable reception experience can be defined as a combination of reaching psychological and biological balance and desirable cognitive challenge. If the recipients find media entertainment too trivial, or on the contrary too complex, they can lose their interest in it. The reception of media entertainment results in primary (positive or negative) emotions. Meta-emotions arise from re-evaluation of the ways by which a specific media product responds to the motivations of audience members such as mood management and need for self-realization. This implies that enjoyment arises at the meta-level. The recipients re-evaluate their primary emotions to find a correspondence between these emotions and intentions that lead them to the selection of a particular media entertainment product. In this sense, enjoyment of media entertainment can be referred to as a meta-emotion [3, p. 544-545]. Oliver and Bartsch share similar views. Their opinions are largely based on the arguments that Oliver published in 2008 – she thought about a wide spectrum of relations associated with entertaining experiences assuming that even though the main reason why media recipients seek entertainment is desire for pleasure, there are also audience members who use entertainment as a discourse space for contemplations upon human nature and the meaning of life. Oliver and Bartsch suggest calling this form of entertainment experience ‘eudaimonia’ [7]. These kinds of gratifications represent a certain contrast to hedonic delights.

Distinguishing between hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of human life refers to two different philosophical traditions cultivated in Ancient Greece – hedonism and eudaimonia. According to Henderson and Knight, hedonic tradition was mainly represented by Aristippus, Epicurus, later Bentham, Locke and Hobbes. This approach is based upon the conviction that people naturally long to experience pleasant delights and emotions and avoid pain. Eudaimonic tradition is already present in the ideas held by Plato and particularly Aristotle. Henderson and Knight add that eudaimonic understanding of happiness is rather objective than subjective and eudaimonic philosophy poses the question why we are happy rather than the question whether we are happy or not [8].

A significant contribution to the existing set of knowledge of other than hedonic forms of entertainment is the study by Ryan, Huta and Deci, published in 2008. The authors propose a model of eudaimonia based on the functionalist self-determination theory connected with four types of motivation – 1. Fulfilment of intrinsic desires and values (personality growth, relationships, community, health) rather than concentration on extrinsic desires (wealth, fame, image); 2. Behaving in autonomous, volitional, or consensual ways rather than

in heteronomous or controlled ways; 3. Conscious and deliberate conduct; 4. Behaviour which satisfies basic psychological needs – competence, relatedness, autonomy [9]. R. Tamborini et al. deal with the problem of conceptualization of media entertainment on the basis of the extent, within which a media product can satisfy the needs of the recipient. They use the above-mentioned self-determination theory in their contemplations on eudaimonic dimension of media communication, particularly the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy. The authors support their arguments by specific findings about computer game elements (e.g. additional gaming devices such as motion controllers) thanks to which the players (users) experience more intense feelings of competence. The authors eventually come to a conclusion that enjoyment of media entertainment can be better understood in the sense of the general concept of need fulfilment. Lower-level needs are connected with hedonic preferences; higher-level needs are connected with the so called eudaimonic interests [10].

Oliver and Raney focus on hedonic and eudaimonic motivations in selecting media entertainment. Hedonic preferences are connected mainly with the pursuit of enjoyment, eudaimonic gratifications lay emphasis on the pursuit of meaningfulness. The authors argue that hedonic pursuit of entertainment can be understood as the need for something subjective or more precisely physiological (affect), while eudaimonic entertainment preferences represent searching for the meaning of life, they refer to personal growth and self-expression. The selection of media entertainment which cannot be explained in the sense of hedonic motivations (e.g. popularity of ‘sad’ films) is thus associated with receiving mixed affective responses related to thinking about deeper meaning of one’s own existence and looking for answers to abstract questions about human life [11]. Oliver, Hartmann and Woolley deal with the concept of ‘meaningful entertainment’. According to the authors, media contents based on tragic stories that make recipients feel sad and sorry can also be considered as entertaining (e.g. moving dramas, TV programs aimed at charity). Many of them turn our attention to heroes who represent power, courage, wisdom and self-sacrifice. These aspects also include portrayals of the crisis of human existence, our ability to face serious threats, illnesses, poverty or discomfort. Similar media products embody the ideals of humanity, triumph over the power of nature, human dignity and moral integrity, although they often end tragically [12]. Thanks to these remarks and findings, we are able to reconsider the paradox related to popularity and enjoyment of tragedies depicted by the media. These types of media entertainment may not be primarily associated with positive (enjoyable) experiences, but certain members of the media audience are able to define their true value at meta-emotional level.

Entertainment as a source of happiness, relaxation and excitement does not always carry deeper meanings. Most entertaining products are therefore pleasurable, delightful, pleasant to watch, read or listen to, but not deeply meaningful. According to Oliver and Bartsch, ‘meaningful’ entertainment refers to the reception of ‘higher artistic value’. The authors define entertainment

experiences based on higher level of self-reflection as ‘appreciation’. Appreciation of media entertainment usually leads to impressions and experiences which are stronger, more intense and therefore even more persistent [7]. Knobloch-Westerwick et al. also work with the notion of ‘appreciation’ as an explanation of most emotional responses to contacts with ‘sad’ forms of media entertainment which often gain enormous popularity among the audiences – e.g. tragic film stories. Psychological research suggests that close relationships are amongst the most important sources of happiness and a feeling of fulfilment. Portrayals of tragic fates (fictitious or non-fictitious) are able to strengthen our pro-social values which provide these types of relationships with stability and meaning by celebrating the value of ‘undying love’, friendship and sympathy even in situations of ultimate agony and suffering [13]. On the other hand, Oliver and Hartmann claim that the pursuit of ‘sad’ films does not necessarily refer to a specific desire to experience sadness itself. It is rather a desire to see media entertainment which is contemplative, poignant or reflective on life meanings and questions regarding the human condition. For example, movies that fulfil the eudaimonic needs of their audiences evoke mixed affective responses such as poignancy, tenderness, ‘feeling moved’ or ‘being touched’ as well as cognitive responses – ‘contemplativeness, introspection, meditation’ [14].

Another term that is associated with the eudaimonic reception of media entertainment is ‘elevation’. Algoe and Haidt define ‘elevation’ as an emotion that is evoked by acts of philanthropy, gratitude, fidelity, generosity and other strong displays of virtue. This emotion leads to intense physical feelings – “a feeling of dilation or opening in the chest, combined with the feeling that one has been uplifted or elevated in some way” [15]. According to Oliver, Hartmann and Woolley, ‘elevation’ manifests itself in an emotional response to sad films in which protagonists display courage and face suffering, dramatic stories that celebrate human values, or serious romances put emphasis on the power of love and its influence on strengthening the human spirit. The notion can also cover negative aspects of affective responses to the above-mentioned types of media contents (e.g. sadness, anxiety). Oliver, Hartmann and Woolley also notice that not all sad movies necessarily present ‘elevation qualities’ – relentless and horrific dramas, e.g. *Full Metal Jacket* may be highly valued and appreciated, but they do not result in feelings of inspiration, warmth, or heightened desire to be a better person, as displays of moral excellence are not necessarily prominent characteristics of their protagonists [12].

Current research results, terms and opinions related to hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of media entertainment are seen as important findings that help us fully and properly understand the changing preferences and motivations of the media audiences. According to Bartsch, we also must take into consideration the changes in media entertainment consumption which arise from the changes in human values during particular phases of life. The author stresses the need to pay attention to specific phenomena such as attractiveness of repulsive, horrific or emotionally moving experiences sought by teenagers and

young adults or (so far relatively overlooked) problems of social and cognitive entertainment gratifications sought by older recipients [16]. Hofer, Allemand and Martin, who share similar views, state that older recipients appreciate emotional goals, emotionally fulfilling relationships and meaningful life purposes more than young adults. Emotional experiences of this kind provided by media products are therefore particularly valuable to older recipients who even tend to seek them more often. As our lives go by, our preferences related to the selection of media entertainment change as well as the ways we consume and interpret these kinds of media contents [17].

Taking into consideration the knowledge of psychology of media entertainment, we can state that each one of the above-mentioned theories, although focusing only on a certain aspect or type of psychosomatic reception practices, broadens an existing set of knowledge and enables us to continuously deepen our understanding of phenomenon of media entertainment. ‘Mood management theory’ proposed by Zillmann and his colleagues explains entertainment preferences in the context of hedonism. It also makes us think about such paradoxical phenomena as ‘sad’ entertainment and its popularity (e.g. sad songs, tragic movie dramas, TV programs portraying ‘hard fate’ of other people). Entertainment experience does not necessarily need to be positive, at least not on the basis of primary emotional response. Mood management is not just motivation for seeking experiences that help us to stay in good mood. It is rather a reflection of actual psychosomatic needs felt by individual recipients that are directed either towards reinforcing the feelings linked to good mood or maintaining current frame of mind, positive or negative. ‘Affective disposition theory’ draws our attention to the parasocial relationships between the audience members and real or fictitious media personas. It works with the assumption that if we like a particular person (celebrity, hero) and the story ends in their favour, our level of enjoyment of such stories is more intense, stronger.

Both of the above-mentioned functionalistic theories have been empirically verified and applied to a wide spectrum of reception practices, segments of media audiences and types of media contents. However, there are some limits to these theories, obvious in connection with the need to study the ‘eudaimonic’ entertainment experiences that appeal to different parts of our identity (thinking about the meaning of life, belief in the power of mankind, fostering moral and cultural values). Oliver and Hartmann summarize these problems by putting an emphasis on the importance of studying other than hedonically oriented aspects of media entertainment. According to the authors, this newer approach directs attention to seeking entertainment for pleasure, maintaining good mood and relaxation, but to the same extent it takes into account the deeper meanings which can be related to enjoyment of media entertainment. We need to realize that focusing on eudaimonic feelings of appreciation does not negate the importance and meaning of hedonic pleasures. These kinds of gratifications represent another dimension of reception experiences shared by the media audiences [14].

4. Conclusions

On the basis of the given outlines and remarks, we point out that the reception processes related to enjoyment of media entertainment are highly individual. Specific media content can be interpreted in terms of ‘appreciation’ (e.g. thinking of the meaning of life, self-reflection, strengthening the beliefs in human values and qualities), but also as a short-term pleasure, as many members of the media audiences are not able or willing to catch its deeper meaning. Therefore, this fact has to be considered in any research aimed at individual preferences related to the selection of media entertainment while taking into account emotional, affective and cognitive aspects associated with particular recipients. As Solík, Višňovský and Lалуhová observe, media products can foster very diverse sets of values: cognitive (epistemological), semantic, heuristic, diagnostic, inspirational or motivational [18]. Considering all the findings and suggestions mentioned above, we assume that media entertainment is able to carry these values in all their diversity and complexity, presenting associated meanings and interpretations as well as feelings of enjoyment, appreciation or elevation that result from individual, but socially and culturally constructed reception mechanisms.

Enjoyment of media entertainment thus can be linked to emotions which are positive, but in some cases also negative, at least from the perspective of primary affective responses (cry, anxiety, and anger). They refer to the differentiation between hedonic (primarily physical, pleasant, gratifying) and eudaimonic (primarily meaningful, contemplative, moral, inspirational) experiences. Meta-emotional level of media entertainment reception examined by Vorderer and Hartmann determines whether an audience member enjoys and/or appreciates the overall experience or not. This means that negative immediate emotions (cry, anger) can also result in feelings of appreciation, pride, belief in good and the power of humankind. This tendency is particularly evident in perceiving fictitious audiovisual works. If a likeable, morally strong hero dies for the good of others, a recipient may feel sadness or anger, but on the other hand, this personified portrayal of selflessness and moral strength can also evoke positive secondary emotions – appreciation at the meta-level. However, Oliver and Hartmann see eudaimonic aspects of media entertainment also as potentially stressful, disturbing, since meaningful experiences are strongly associated with portrayals of people in times of crisis. Tragedies, dramas and serious problems of human life can be very engaging – they remind us that life is temporal, imperfect, destructive, chaotic and far away from any theoretical ideal. Many recipients define such thoughts as negative and therefore unpleasant and unwelcome [14].

Even though the psychological, cognitive and affective contacts with media entertainment do not necessarily evoke positive responses, the arousal of positive emotions (pleasure, delight, laugh, happiness, relief) is usually a primary motivation which leads the recipients to the selection and perception of entertaining media contents. According to Pravdová, the primary goal of media

entertainment is to attract the audiences and trigger particular emotional states (laugh, tears, pension, anger, satisfaction, temporary forgetting, relax, etc.) and it functions as a system of interpretation of social reality, as everyday communication ritual [19]. These tendencies are also transferred into production and distribution practices implemented by media producers – propagation of audiovisual cultural products via transmedia narratives, multimedia forms and material elements of lifestyle (books, computer games, television production, music, fashion, theme parks, and toys). This implies that mainstream media production principally focuses on providing hedonic (physical and material) pleasures [20]. The processes of reception of media entertainment are extremely individual and hard to generalize. The nature of feelings, experiences and emotions that are associated with media entertainment reception is reflected in our social and cultural identity and our contacts with everyday reality.

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