Enjoyment: At the Heart of Media Entertainment

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Peter Vorderer
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This article suggests an integrated view of media entertainment that is capable of covering more of the dimensional complexity and dynamics of entertainment experiences than existing theories do. Based on a description of what is meant by complexity and dynamics, the authors outline a conceptual model that is centered around enjoyment as the core of entertainment, and that addresses prerequisites of enjoyment which have to be met by the individual media user and by the given media product. The theoretical foundation is used to explain why people display strong preferences for being entertained (motivational perspective) and what kind of consequences entertaining media consumption may have (effects perspective, e.g., facilitation of learning processes).

Strong empirical evidence indicates that the motivational basis of human activity relies on two rather independent systems: a so-called approach system and an avoidance system (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Activation of the approach system results in pleasure, whereas activation of the avoidance system leads to pain (Berridge, 2003). Research in psychology and neuroscience most often uses the term "pleasure" to describe agreeable reactions to experiences in general. With the exception of Bosshart and Macconi's (1998) elaboration of the construct entertainment as a "reception phenomenon" (that includes various forms of pleasures), most communication researchers have used the term *enjoyment* to describe and explain such positive reactions toward the media and its contents (e.g., Miron, 2003; Raney, 2003; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Tamborini, 2003).

Originally, *pleasure* was defined merely as an affective response to given stimuli (Fechner, 1876). However, as subsequent neuroscience research has revealed evidence of the importance of cognitive appraisals for affective responses (e.g., most recently, Roseman & Evdokas, 2004), there is increasing support for the notion that cognitive and affective structures are not at all independent from each other. In fact, informa-

tion processing seems to involve affective cognitive circuits in the neural structure of the human brain simultaneously (Davidson, 2003). Moreover, pleasurable experiences are best understood not as a single monolithic process but rather as a set of differentiated subcomponents. These subcomponents include physiological, affective, and cognitive aspects that are heavily intertwined (Davidson, 2003). Because there seems to be no reason to believe that the nonmediated experience of pleasure (as often studied in psychology and neuroscience) fundamentally differs from a mediated experience (primarily investigated within the field of communication), researchers should view enjoyment as a phenomenon that consists of more than affective components alone. We therefore propose to conceptualize media-related enjoyment as a complex construct that includes references to physiological, affective, and cognitive dimensions.

In doing so, we also identify enjoyment as the core of media entertainment (conceptualized as an experience, see below) and thereby connect it to a research area of growing importance for communication theory as individuals in modern societies devote remarkable amounts of time to entertainment experiences. Without any doubt, there are also other forms of enjoyment that lie beyond what may be called media entertainment, but when we look at what entertainment means for those who use the media and expect to be entertained by their content, it is enjoyment that we most often find.

The pursuit of fun appears to be the dominant theme of modern cultures, and as there are virtually countless ways to "be entertained," huge industries concerned with the production, distribution, and retail of entertainment products have evolved (Wolf, 1999). Although historically most forms of entertainment revolved around live-action events that occurred directly in front of the audience, for example, gladiator battles in ancient Rome or horse racing in British stadiums (cf. Zillmann, 2000b), today mass media channels are the central providers of entertainment production and distribution. In addition to live-action products that are still a popular format (e.g., broadcasts of sports events), the mass media offer a broad variety of entertainment opportunities (cf. Sayre & King, 2003). Over the past few decades, the demand for such opportunities, at least in the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and increasingly also in Asian countries, has increased for various reasons.

First, there has been a steady improvement of the economic situation in many households, allowing for more frequent and more expensive investments in media (entertainment) products, both in terms of hardware (e.g., wide-screen TV sets) and software (e.g., video games). Second, the mass media in general have penetrated more and more domains of daily life in the "information society." As different media are used in more varied situations and contexts, their utilization for increasingly entertaining purposes is a logical consequence (consider, for example, the development of the mobile telephone from a simple medium of tele-

communication to a multifunctional "fun device"), and media entertainment still seems to be on the rise. Driven by technological advancements in consumer electronics (e.g., home cinema, broadband internet, video game consoles), cross-media tie-ins or linkages of media content (e.g., the *Star Wars* films and ubiquitous merchandise), and multidirectional integration of media corporations (e.g., Microsoft), the range of available entertainment products will widen further in the future, and there is no indication of a decline in audiences' appetite for new entertainment experiences (Wolf, 1999).

More recently, communication theory and research have begun to face the surge in media entertainment and have intensified efforts to identify and explain the numerous dimensions that can be observed as psychological correlates of the aforementioned developments (Bryant, 2004; Vorderer, 2003). However, the phenomenon itself, that is, the individual experience of being entertained, as regarded from a psychological point of view, stills needs to be fully clarified and understood. This holds true despite the fact that the study of entertainment has been identified as one of the most important challenges currently faced by communication theory and research in the 21st century (Bryant, 2004). In addition to necessary theory-building in the field of basic research, applied work is needed as well, since the enjoyable "packaging" of media messages in new forms or genres has also displayed a significant increase. "Infotainment," "Edutainment," and "Entertainment Education" (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 2002) are keywords used by current research to describe this process, in which the integration of entertainment and learning reaffirms the role of communication as an enabler of social change, as well as emphasizes its task of serving the greater public good (cf., e.g., Slater, 2002; Vorderer & Ritterfeld, 2003).

Because media entertainment—and media enjoyment at the very heart of this experience—have become so crucial in multiple domains of communication and daily life, we must formalize our understanding of it by using a theoretical framework and basic foundations. This article proposes a rather broad conceptualization of media entertainment (and of media enjoyment, thereby), one that would be capable of integrating various theoretical approaches to its understanding from the user's perspective and also serves to advance the explication of a general, unified paradigm along with empirical research to substantiate it.

The Complexity of the Entertainment Experience

From the user's point of view, entertainment has been understood not so much as a product (a film, a show, a book, etc.) or as a feature of such a product but rather as a response to it (cf., Zillmann & Bryant, 1994),

i.e., as the experience one goes through while being exposed to the media (cf. Vorderer, 2001). At the core of this entertainment experience, most researchers have located certain characteristics that are usually linked to positive terms such as *pleasure*, *enjoyment*, and even *delight* (cf., e.g., Bosshart & Macconi, 1998; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). A closer look, however, reveals that many media users, who are "caught" in such a state, show a wide array of different experiential responses and expressions: Going to the movies and being exposed to feature presentations often provides experiences of both, suspense and relief, interchangeably, over rather short intervals of time. Reading a novel can be delightful and enjoyable but also depressing shortly thereafter. Watching TV can cause self-reflection, or a sense of "escape," or sometimes even both at the same time. Playing a computer game is usually challenging and rewarding but may also be frustrating and humbling. Listening to a symphony can be analogized to a roller coaster ride, as many listeners experience extreme and/or oppositional sensations such as joy and melancholy. In fact, most entertainment experiences in which we engage so often and deliberately seem to offer complex, dynamic, and even multifaceted experiences. Achieving a pure description of this process, let alone an explanation, presents a tremendous challenge for researchers in the field of communication and in related disciplines, as they all seem to have little in common and show a great diversity of appearances.

This explains why most of the scientific descriptions and explanations of entertainment available today have focused and elaborated on prototypical cases. For example, one sophisticated psychological theory that attempts to explain the process of selecting entertainment products, mood management theory (MMT; Zillmann, 1988a, 1988b), explains the selection of entertainment vis-à-vis the users' constant desire for mood regulation. In doing so, the theory asserts that media users will attempt to maintain only positive moods, when in fact people in their daily lives sometimes seek and attempt to maintain negative moods as well (cf. Parrott, 1993), contradicting the theory's explanation of selective exposure. The same holds true for affective disposition theory (ADT; Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 1994), which illustrates the overall experiential response of viewers throughout the duration of being exposed to a media product. The theory precisely differentiates between various steps media users go through while engaging with the media, for example, while watching a movie. ADT focuses on the audience's observation of characters in action, which leads to an assessment of the morality of the characters' actions and to the development of affective dispositions toward these characters (Zillmann, 1994). On the basis of a hedonistic model of humans, it predicts that entertainment users are basically driven by a desire for cheerfulness or fun in their media usage, thus also neglecting the complexity of possible and different experiences that stem from and accompany any exposure to an entertainment product.

There are of course alternative theoretical conceptualizations in communication and in related disciplines that describe specific cognitive and affective processes that are assumed to occur while people are exposed to media products. What has been said about MMT and about ADT, however, applies to all of them likewise as they usually depict one specific response without accounting for the complexity of the various manifestations. For example, there is a still-growing body of literature on parasocial interactions and relationships between media users and media characters (Hartmann, Schramm, & Klimmt, 2004; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985) that describes in detail various responses to the media that occur on the user's side, when she or he is or feels addressed by a media character or persona. But just like the aforementioned psychological theories of entertainment, this school of thought has not been able to cover the wide range of different responses people may show in respect to one particular media product or persona at a time.

Another example is the notion of *escapism* that attempts to explicate how media, particularly narratives presented through media, may provide some sort of transient mental retreat for users who feel uncomfortable in their actual lives and social worlds (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Katz & Foulkes, 1962). Likewise, this research does not explain what those users who escape through exposure to a narrative get in exchange for this. Is it only a momentary distraction from the burden of everyday life, or is there some compensating experience into which media users deliberately immerse themselves?

Still another example points to current research in the area of *presence* (Lee, 2004; Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Research on this so-called sense of being there describes in great detail what happens in the mind of media users, particularly users of new media, when they are "absorbed" by some interesting content, "transported" to a fictional place and time, and feel as if they interact with individuals who don't really exist outside the mind of the user. Through this research we already know what helps this "sense of non-mediation" to occur, and we have even learned about the effects that presence might have on learning. However, our understanding of users' entertainment experience itself, as well as the connection between presence and entertainment, falls short because we do not have a sufficient understanding of all that entertainment includes (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003).

One particular and maybe contradictory if not disputed aspect of the entertainment experience has been studied in more detail. That is Oliver's observation that some (primarily female) TV users prefer sad movies over those that promise to cheer them up (Oliver, 1993; Oliver, Weaver, & Sargent, 2000). Interestingly enough, this notion that TV users may seek what is usually considered to be a negative mood is very much in line with findings about the selection of music (cf. Schramm, 2003;

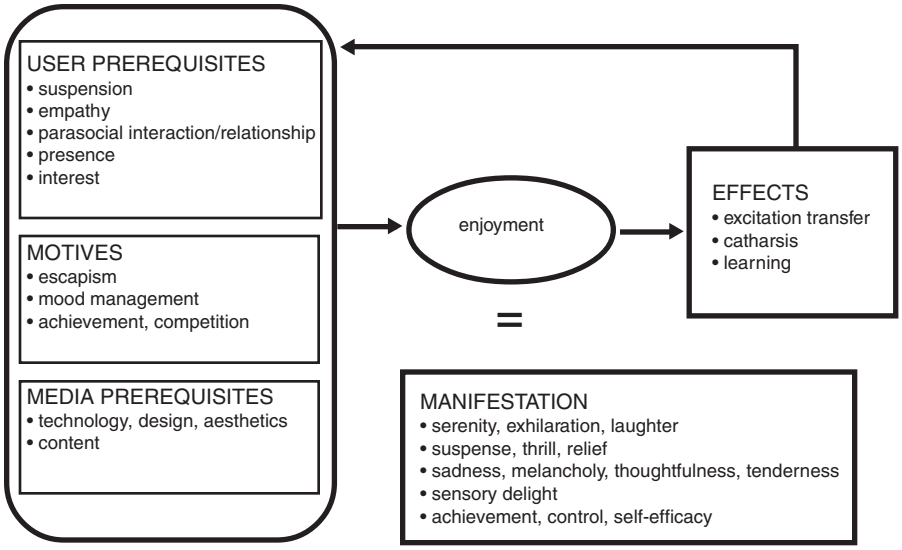

Figure 1. The Complexity of the Entertainment Experience

Vorderer & Schramm, 2004)—that is, that some users, at least in certain situations, seek a more complex experience than the one described by the various theoretical approaches mentioned above. How does this relate to the common portrayal of the media user as a constant fun-seeker? The questions remain unanswered: Are users' attempts to immerse themselves in such complex experiential states actually part of what has been called entertainment, and if so, how does this relate to the enjoyment and pleasure entertainment usually provides?

A Model of Complex Entertainment Experiences

Taking into account both the daily observations of what entertainment often means and provides for its users and the various theoretical approaches mentioned before, we will now lay out a broader conceptualization of entertainment that at this point remains rather speculative and is therefore still in need of empirical support. However, this model is meant to serve only as a tool that might assist in developing hypotheses intended to be tested in the future.

The Core of the Entertainment Experience

So far, we have speculated that at the core of the entertainment experience there is a "pleasant" experiential state that we term enjoyment, which includes physiological, cognitive, and affective components. Often users reach only a rather moderate magnitude of this enjoyment per se, but there are, under certain conditions, also extremes. This is in line with Zillmann's (1988b) assumption of media users as hedonistically oriented agents. In contrast to his notion, we suggest that the enjoyment

the audience feels may also, but certainly doesn't have to, be based on what can be termed "negative emotions" such as sadness felt when watching a tearjerker, feelings of melancholy while listening to music, or being anxious while watching a TV show.

In these cases, the fact that these responses are still broadly defined as enjoyment can be explained by the notion of "meta-emotions" or "metamoods" (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988). These meta-emotions occur as individuals reflect upon their feelings and evaluations and respond affectively to their initial responses. In other words, there are situations and circumstances in which most individuals experience unpleasant emotions on the object level. Nonetheless, they also experience appreciation, pride, and even enjoyment on a meta-emotional level, a state that from an outside perspective appears to be all but desirable. They do so, however, because such a metaresponse may be useful in achieving other goals, appropriate for a particular situation (e.g., sadness at a funeral), or simply functional as they are serving a specific purpose (cf. Parrott, 1993).

In most cases, however, this experiential state is simply felt as a pleasant one (also on the object level), which is why it so often served as the prototypical example for descriptions and explanations of the entertainment experience.

Manifestations of the Entertainment Experience

How does enjoyment through media entertainment products manifest itself in human thinking and feeling, that is, on the physiological, cognitive, and affective levels mentioned above? In other words, how do we observe it? In fact the most frequent of these manifestations have already been studied in communication and in psychology:

- We find serenity, exhilaration, and, as a behavioral component, laughter as a manifestation of enjoyment through comedy (i.e., through those media products that are meant to amuse; cf. Zillmann, 2000a);
- There is suspense—that is, thrill, fear, and relief as the most frequent response to drama (Knobloch, 2003b; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000);
- There also is sadness, melancholy, thoughtfulness, and even "tenderness" when it comes to melodrama or love songs (Oliver, 1993; Vorderer & Schramm, 2004);
- Sensory delight or pleasure of the senses can be found in cases of aesthetically appealing media offerings (Cupchik & Kemp, 2000; Sparks & Sparks, 2000); and
- Finally, a certain sense of achievement, control, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Grodal, 2000; Klimmt & Hartmann, in press) is associated with playing computer games (as an example for interactive entertainment).

None of these manifestations are determined solely by the media product. They all occur as a deliberate individual response to a specific offering. They are, however, to some extent predictable, as they are common

and often habituated responses to various media products. None of them are requisites for a response to be considered entertainment, nor is this list in any way complete. Individual users may respond quite differently from one another, and even one particular user may exhibit various responses at different times. All of these manifestations, however, are consistent with our idea of entertainment as an experience, although they do not need to occur all at once or in specific combinations. They are simply examples, though probably the most frequent and common ones, of what we may observe if someone is entertained by the media.

Prerequisites on the Media User's Side

When examining the cause behind the occurrence of the entertainment experience and its manifestations on the part of the media user, it becomes obvious that there are several prerequisites, the most prominent of which we will discuss more fully. Each of these conditions may appear in combination with any other one in a given situation, but at least one of them must be present in order to feel entertained by the media.

First, from the study of literature and the act of reading, we know that the ability to appreciate a fictional world requires the reader's willingness and ability to suspend disbelief (Vorderer, Wirth, et al., 2003). Without such a temporary suspension of disbelief, no one would be able to enjoy a fictional narrative. Naturally, the reason behind this process is that the reader needs to perceive the events described in the narrative as if they were "real," despite being obviously "unreal." This is the only way for the user to develop and sustain hope for the success of a protagonist or fear of the actions of the evildoer in the narrative. Any doubts about the realism of the fiction, therefore, immediately prevent the entertainment experience.

Secondly, and equally important as suspension of disbelief, is the requirement that media users care about the characters who are featured in the story. If the users feel an affinity with the characters who are either in peril or who may be achieving success, they share, at least to some extent, the characters' feelings about what they are going through. This sharing of emotions with characters in a story has been called empathy (cf. Nathanson, 2003), and Zillmann (1991) has elaborated a psychological theory on empathy, which he applies to the use of entertainment in particular. Research shows that the degree to which individuals empathize with a character varies with two factors: their ability to empathize and their readiness to do so. Several studies have also demonstrated that there is also a gender difference in the extent to which people empathize with characters, and that this is at least partly responsible for differences in selection of entertainment programs (Oliver et al., 2000). So, although suspension of disbelief is necessary in order to accept a fictional story as real, empathy is a prerequisite to liking or disliking the protagonists or antagonists in the story (Vorderer, Knobloch, & Schramm, 2002). In fact, we may summarize this by saying that there would be no

possibility of entertainment if users could not develop hope and fear in reaction to the fortune and misfortune of fictional characters (Zillmann, 2003).

A third condition, one that at first seems similar to empathy, refers to the audience's capability and desire to relate to the characters and personae featured in media products. These personae may or may not be fictional, and could be the news anchorman, game show host, or the main character in a drama. There is some empirical evidence showing how important all of these agents are, particularly for TV viewers. This research measures, for example, how much the audience likes to interact, either mentally or emotionally, but sometimes even by openly responding and speaking back to them, and bond with these personae. Since the work of Horton and Wohl (1956), these interactions have been called *parasocial,* and we speak of parasocial relationships when bonding occurs independently from an actual exposure, that is, in between different episodes of a show or while watching various movies with the same actor or character (Giles, 2002; Hartmann et al., 2004; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). We also know that these parasocial interactions foster and trigger media consumption because viewers wish to "stay in touch" with those they like to see on the screen. They take them as real and feel as if they engage in personal interactions with them, because the camera angle provides the audience with the illusion of being addressed directly. Hence, in many cases, it is these personae or, more precisely, the audience's interactions and personal relationships with them, that create enjoyment.

Another key prerequisite to the occurrence of entertainment is the user's sense of being there, that is, of being transported to the site of the action, actually being there along with those who participate in the action. This sense of being somewhere else while actually facing a screen has been examined more intensively only in recent years, coinciding with the arrival of new, more interactive and thereby supposedly immersive media. Various conceptualizations of this process have been offered, ranging from involvement, via immersion, flow, transportation, and absorption, to presence, which has become the most common and comprehensive term for this sensation of nonmediation (Biocca, 2001; Lee, 2004; Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Again, without the user's capability and willingness to be present somewhere else and with somebody else, the occurrence of enjoyment or entertainment, or both, is highly unlikely, if not impossible.

The fifth and final prerequisite we would like to mention here is the media user's interest in a specific topic, problem, or knowledge domain. If TV viewers, for example, do not have any interest in a given topic or domain, and therefore resist involving themselves with a particular issue, it will be difficult if not impossible to entertain them, no matter how the program is presented. If, however, the program provides information

that fits the viewer's interests, viewers will respond to such programs openly and willingly, and entertainment is much more likely to occur.

In sum, enjoyment as the core of media entertainment experience not only manifests itself in many different ways but also depends on the audience's readiness and ability to suspend disbelief, to empathize with the characters at play, to engage in parasocial interactions and relationships with the personae, to be present somewhere else and with somebody else, and to have an interest in what the media presents. Some of these conditions have also been studied as consequences or as responses to media programs. We regard them as prerequisites, as entertainment seems impossible if the media users are unable or unwilling to provide them. As mentioned already, each of these conditions may appear in combination with any other one in a given situation. Also, additional conditions are likely to be found and, given more empirical evidence, certainly will be added in the years to come. We assume that at least one of them must be present at a given at a time in order to feel entertained by the media.

Prerequisites on the Media's Side

If we look at what the media need to provide to make an entertainment experience viable, there are two prerequisites in particular that have been identified, albeit within two different and almost independent academic traditions. Disciplines like (electrical or computer) engineering have focused on technology and aesthetics, whereas the humanities (with disciplines like literary or cultural studies) have dealt with the personal relevance or meaning that media content may have for its users. It goes without saying that we cannot cover these two traditions here in any commensurable and adequate way, but only highlight a few positions. It is most important, however, to point out that the areas studied within these traditions are as important as those we pointed out earlier, and despite the fact that disciplines usually explore only one side of media entertainment, an understanding of the entire entertainment experience most obviously requires both.

The significance of technological, aesthetic, and design features for the usage of, the response to, and the impact of media has been studied carefully, for example, regarding usability or more generally in the context of audience research. Researchers have investigated the effects of screen size on viewers' feelings of presence for quiet sometime (cf., e.g., Lombard, Reich, Grabe, Bracken, & Ditton, 2000). More recently, the *interactivity* of the media, that is, its potential to let the users not only select but also modify what they are exposed to, has received a great deal of attention (Vorderer, 2000). Of course, this also applies to entertainment: Does entertainment benefit from interactivity? More specifically, is the entertainment experience intensified when the user plays a more active role in the unfolding of a narrative, as observations of computer game players may suggest? Or does entertainment rather suffer

from interactivity because the viewer can no longer remain a passive witness to tragic events evolving on the screen? Empirical research about entertainment and interactive TV suggests an interaction between those technological features and user characteristics: Viewers with greater cognitive capacities seem to enjoy a movie that they can interact with more than when they watch it in a traditional way, whereas those who lack the respective capacities are more likely to experience strain and enjoy a noninteractive movie more (Vorderer, Knobloch, & Schramm, 2001). In any case, the user alone does not decide whether exposure to an entertainment product will lead to an entertaining experience. The media, the technology, and particularly the interaction between the media and its user also determine whether the response will be more or less entertaining.

It is not, however, only the technology, the aesthetics, and their interaction with user characteristics that play a key role for the entertainment experience. It is also the content of the media product and how the content is presented (e.g., by a certain selection of topics, a particular portrayal of characters, etc.) that may lead to a program that is meaningful to the user. A given viewer with specific prerequisites who is exposed to a product with a certain level of interactivity that he or she appreciates might be entertained in one case and bored in another in which only content, or the meaning of the content to the viewer, differs. Not everyone likes comedy or drama, nor does a person who usually likes it enjoy all of it, or enjoy it all the time. Although viewers tend to prefer specific genres, and although some of these preferences interact with the viewers' personalities (Weaver, 2000), it is almost impossible to predict the success of an entertainment product based on this alone. Each individual film, book, or TV show presents a topic, whether or not it is meaningful to the audience, in its own particular way. The extremely high failure rate of Hollywood productions and entertainment TV programs in the U.S., although official statistics are unknown, demonstrates this peculiar situation. As a consequence, the entertainment industries have apparently adopted a pragmatic trial-and-error method by which they try to avoid "mistakes" of the past, but they certainly do not know why audiences like or dislike particular media products or components of them. Within academia, for example, within literary studies, some have tried to understand why a certain topic and a particular way of dealing with this topic may be of relevance to a particular reader.

It is interesting to note that the empirical study of literature has in fact not only observed but also measured how readers, and more generally, media users, respond to a specific narrative emotionally and thereby has shown that narratives may elicit very individual feelings, thoughts, and memories in readers (cf., e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Oatley, 1994). Not only do technological features of the products and user prerequisites interact with each other (see above)—content interacts with the personality and the user prerequisites mentioned above as well.

These are just a few, although so far the most thoroughly studied, conditions for an entertainment experience to take shape. They demonstrate that many aspects must come together to entertain a media user. One aspect we have not yet dealt with is the user's readiness, willingness, and intention in general—his or her motivation to be entertained. This part of the model of the complex entertainment experience has also received some attention within communication and psychology, which is why we introduce the most important concepts and theories about it below.

Motives to Be Entertained

Human action is sponsored and directed by motives—states that individuals aim to realize. One question becomes apparent when we regard entertainment as an experience and observe that individuals seek entertainment with increasing frequency and time: Why do they do so? What motivates them to spend their time with entertainment products, what do they consider causes of their behavior and action? Reasons they might identify do not have to be identical with the causes and conditions we have identified before. In asking for motives, researchers wish to uncover the reasons that media users themselves identify as causes of their action, regardless of whether the reasons identified are the actual causes. Again, the variety of such motives is far too great for us to cover completely. We will point out only the three most often discussed and most extensively elaborated.

One possible motive for seeking entertainment may be the media users' temporary interest and desire to escape from the social world in which they actually live. This tendency of escapism has been identified particularly to attract those individuals who live substantially underprivileged lives. Katz and Foulkes (1962) have pointed out that the mass media in general are expected to serve the public's need to distract themselves from their social lives and to escape into the dream-like world of the media. What they clearly had in mind was a world of entertainment that, once entered, could fulfill wishes and dreams for those who believe in them while using the media. More recent theoretical conceptualizations have differentiated between various forms of escapism (Henning & Vorderer, 2001). It has been argued, however, that escapist desires apply not only to specific clusters of society but to all individuals. From this point of view, users seek entertainment because it provides a temporary withdrawal from everyday life. Although entertainment has the potential to serve everybody, that is, the privileged as much as the underprivileged, situational variations exist that may lead to a stronger or weaker desire for alternative worlds. Phases of boredom and deprivation, for example, may trigger a more sustained search for entertainment than other times and circumstances.

Another motive, which has been elaborated by Zillmann (1988a; 1988b) to describe the selection of entertainment programs, is very simi-

lar to the escapist one. It also has elicited the most empirical research (Knobloch, 2003a), that is, the motive to regulate one's own moods by modifying one's own stimulus environment. As entertainment offerings are one part of such environments, the individual selection of them is an appropriate and obvious way to enhance or perpetuate an already positive mood. Based on knowledge they have previously gained about the mood-regulating effects of entertainment programs, individuals select programs with a specific hedonic value and with a certain potential to absorb them for their immediate needs (Zillmann, 1988a; 1988b). Zillmann and Bryant (1994) demonstrated repeatedly that subjects who were bored had a stronger interest in comedy that those who were excited. This drive to enhance one's well-being seems to be so strong that it may even take long and complicated "detours" to finally achieve mood management: Mares and Cantor (1992) found that some elderly viewers would even choose to watch a rather depressing movie instead of a cheerful one. They explained this selection by the viewers' wish to compare themselves with others who are worse off, a process often initiated by individuals to gain some self-supporting information about oneself (Wills, 1981). Although Mares and Cantor initially argued that this social comparison motive competes with the mood-managing motive, the effects of both processes are actually the same: As the viewers in the Mares and Cantor study were able to regulate their own moods in a positive way by going through a temporary phase of "downward comparison" (Wills, 1981) with a media character, they finally managed to enhance their own moods just as they would have had they only sought mood enhancement by exposing themselves to a positive program.

Although escapism and mood management are easily applied to traditional entertainment offerings such as movies, TV, books, and music, the selection of interactive entertainment products often seems to be initiated by a very different motive, one that appears to be more closely related to achievement than to relaxation or idleness. Users of traditional entertainment products usually seek an enjoyable experience without aspiring too much or investing too much of their energy and ambition. Interactive users, on the other hand, rather strive for competition and achievement and choose products that promise to challenge their abilities. This can be seen best with computer games where the skill level may be configured according to the player's competence and sometimes even adjusts automatically to the ability and experience of the player. Although escapism may play some role in an individual decision to select and play a computer game, mood management hardly appears to be the reason a player would identify as the motive that triggers and guides his or her actions. The wish to be challenged, though, to compete with others, with a program, or even with one's own previous achievements (i.e., score) is probably the single most important motive for interactively entertaining oneself (Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2003). Al-

though any notion of achievement might be the death of entertainment through traditional media, the lack of achievement and competition seems to be the death of interactive entertainment experiences (Klimmt, 2003; Vorderer, 2000). This particular understanding of interactive entertainment can be and already is used to help children and adolescents more easily learn what they otherwise would not be willing to learn: As many school-children do not mind competition within the context of a game, they might as well learn some instructional texts in order to enhance their chances in the competition and thereby incidentally learn what they have been offered (cf., e.g., Ritterfeld, Weber, Fernandez, & Vorderer, 2004).

Again, these three motives may not necessarily occur and lead to the respective behavior or action simultaneously. At the same time, they may also function in various combinations. They will be supplemented by other motives as additional evidence reveals additional factors involved in the selection of a specific entertainment program. We must also keep in mind that these are the reasons as they appear to the entertainment users themselves. When it comes to explaining user actions or even their particular selection of entertainment products from a researcher's (third person) perspective, it will certainly be necessary to combine those motives with the prerequisites identified above. That is to say, that the enjoyment that lies at the heart of the entertainment experience is a product of numerous interactions between motives to be entertained and conditions of this experience on both the media user's and the media's side.

We should also note that these conditions, and the various interactions between them, may only help to describe what is selected. These conditions do not explain why users seek entertainment in general, that is, independent from a specific offering in a particular situation, as this is a more fundamental question. One approach with which to answer this fundamental question is the notion of entertainment as play. Vorderer (2001) has suggested a conceptualization of the entertainment experience as a form of play because it shares the most important characteristics with play. It is intrinsically motivated and highly attractive, it implies a change in perceived reality, as players construct an additional reality while they are playing, and it is frequently repeated (cf., Oerter, 1999; Vorderer, 2001). What potentially follows from this notion of entertainment as play is the possibility to explain entertainment more generally. It is possible to answer the question of why individuals are willing and ready to spend so much time with this sort of activity by using theories, models, and hypotheses that have already been applied to our understanding of children's playing successfully. For example, both Ohler (2001) and Steen and Owens (2001) have independently used the perspective of evolutionary psychology to reconstruct children's playing in general and the understanding of pretense in particular as a

crucial feature and skill for the survival of humans. From this point of view, it appears as if we humans have simply not given up what was once so important to our survival, although we do not really need it anymore. This explanatory approach to people's constant wish for entertainment does not compete with but rather frames the above mentioned notions and theories about the selection of specific entertainment products (for more detail, see Vorderer, Steen, & Chan, in press).

Outcomes and Consequences of Entertainment

Given the importance of immediate and long-term effects and consequences of entertainment and the amount of public controversy and concern the issues raise, it is surprising how little research has been conducted, let alone how very few theoretical concepts have been developed regarding this part of the process. We will mention only the three most important domains of study—excitation transfer, catharsis, and learning.

Again, it was Zillmann (1996) who developed a theory to explain the excitatory effects that usually follow one's exposure to entertainment. The bottom line of excitation-transfer theory is the observation that the physiological arousal accumulated during exposure, particularly to drama or action movies, does not drop immediately, but sinks rather slowly at the end of a movie. The high level of arousal that remains is interpreted by the viewer in light of new circumstances, namely the happy ending of the narrative. Therefore, the arousal is linked to positive cognitions, which results in euphoria. This transfer of excitation from a negative to a very positive condition is the mechanism that underlies the experience of relief or even salvation that can be observed in many media audiences. It even accounts for the innumerable entertainment users who are willing to suffer from suspense and other rather unpleasant experiences throughout exposure in order to enjoy such a magnitude of relief afterwards. Whether this is the most appropriate and useful explanation for such physiologically based effects of entertainment usage or not, it only refers to very short-term or even immediate effects of exposure to entertainment. Whether this media usage affects the thinking, feeling, and consequent acting of users in a more sustainable way, whether they are "cultivated" by the entertainment products in a more fundamental sense, remains an open question.

This also holds true for another theoretically conceptualized effect, one that has been called catharsis. In contrast to excitation-transfer, a rather recent theoretical advancement, the notion of catharsis has had a very long tradition that began with Aristotle's idea of the purging and purifying effect that a Greek tragedy could have on its audience. Theorizing about catharsis continued though the 1970s and 1980s, when the expectation of a potentially cathartic effect of an aggressive act led to psychological experiments about the connection of frustration and aggression. Researchers continue to discuss and scrutinize catharsis today,

as we observe a reconceptualization and rehabilitation of a truly historical idea. Scheele (2001) brought the scientific community's attention back to the fact that Aristotle's understanding of catharsis comprised two significantly different dimensions, that is, the purging and the purification. Although all of the research conducted within the Psychology of Aggression has shown very little evidence for the usefulness of the purging component, little or no empirical research has explored the purification component as an effect of media usage and entertainment. This, however, may change as scholars increasingly study not only the undesired but the useful effects of entertainment.

One the most important of such useful effects of being entertained is comprehension and learning. Until recently, the assumption that learning, knowledge acquisition thinking, differentiating, and the like might benefit from being entertained, would have sounded exceptional (cf. Vorderer, 2001). As intrinsic motivation has been studied more systematically and more rigorously, and as our understanding of the effects of positive affects on individuals' information processing increases (cf., Pennebaker, 1995), the possibility that individuals may think and learn best in states of positive affect becomes more reasonable. Programs in entertainment education (cf. Singhal & Rogers, 2002; Singhal et al., 2004) assume that media users are more willing to learn and understand what is presented to them in the context of a program that is entertaining. Additionally, longitudinal experimental studies can now show that children's regular watching of specific entertainment programs contributes "substantially to preschooler's problem-solving abilities and flexible-thinking skills" (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 35).

Finally, it is assumed that all of these effects and consequences feed back on the prerequisites of and the motives for entertainment that have been identified in our model, making it a repercussive system.

Applications of a Complex Model of Entertainment

We finally would like to point out the usefulness of our rather broad conceptualization of entertainment as experience by describing the process of selecting and enjoying four prototypically different entertainment products and by indicating how exposure to these products may impact their users' thinking, feeling, and acting. We have chosen those four products, in particular, to illustrate how broad the scope of entertainment is and the variation with which different entertainment experiences may unfold.

Consider a reader who is seeking entertainment in a thriller, and it soon becomes apparent that enjoyment lies at the heart of the entertainment experience. Driven by a general motivation to simulate certain experiences that are otherwise difficult to realize, this reader might select

the latest book by John Grisham because she seeks some distraction (escapism) from the routine of her daily life. She is ready to suspend disbelief about how unlikely somebody like the hero of her book might be in the social world. She fears that the villains who threaten her hero might succeed, and she hopes that this same hero will finally triumph against all odds (empathy). It almost feels as if she were "there," at the place and time where and when the action takes place. As the story unfolds and her hero is repeatedly challenged but manages to stay on top nevertheless, she goes through phases of suspense and relief. This provides her with several joyful moments, as she has not expected the positive outcome (excitation transfer). In the end, little remains. She has not learned much, but she enjoyed every minute of the experience, even those that someone observing her reading would have thought were stressful because she appeared so anxious to get through them.

Quite different from this example is the experience of the regular viewer of the NBC show *ER*. This is a person who seeks to enhance her moods (mood management) by confronting herself with those who are much worse off. The show is produced, cut, and designed in a way that appeals to her own sense of pace and makes her feel as if she is right where the uninterrupted action takes place. The characters are shaped so that she can care about Carter and disapprove of Dr. Romano (parasocial relations). Because she has long contemplated going to medical school herself, the challenges the doctors and the students in the show face are all-important and meaningful to her. She is not only willing but actually eager to confront the respective moral dilemmas with which the cast is confronted. Therefore her enjoyment of the show manifests itself primarily in thoughtfulness and melancholy, sometimes even tenderness toward specific characters. Not only does she learn something from the show about the life in an emergency room, she also feels a cathartic effect in the sense of purification; that is, she feels growth as a human being by what she experiences during exposure.

The final example is of a high school kid who plays a violent video game. This kid is motivated by the desire to escape his daily life, which is dominated by problems in school and at home as he seeks competition with others and wants to know how good he can be at this. The game is designed so that he needs to interact with it continuously, and the aesthetic features are very appealing. Good and the Evil are shaped rather prototypically so that he has no problems in allocating his sympathy and being empathic with his peers in the game. He feels a strong sense of presence, which actually makes him forget how much time he has already spent playing this game. He clearly enjoys the game because he gets some sensory delight, but most of all because he feels control and efficacy over the events that unfold. After many hours of playing, he might realize that there is not that much that remains, but he might say that this is the best way of entertainment that he can get.

These three examples should demonstrate how different the process of being entertained may be for different users, at different times, and with different products. It should elucidate how diverse the motives and conditions are (some on the user's and others on the media's side) that constitute the enjoyment that lies at the heart of entertainment. This is meant to draw a broader and more complex picture of what entertainment means to us. What now needs to follow from this conceptualization is an empirical research program that not only tests single hypotheses but also substantiates, validates, and modifies our understanding of the entire pattern of entertainment, its condition, and its effects.

Authors

Peter Vorderer (PhD, Technical University of Berlin) is a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California. Christoph Klimmt (PhD, Hannover University of Music and Drama) is a research assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication Research, Hannover University of Music and Drama. Ute Ritterfeld (PhD, Technical University of Berlin) is a research associate professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California.

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