

Is the Media a Positive or Negative Influence on Happiness?

Desiree Guerrero
Brendan Beatty
Leslie Meyer
Courtney Marks
Justin Gibbs

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This paper investigates the influence of American media (i.e. news, programming and advertising) on individual happiness. This topic is controversial because the American media has evolved into one of the world's most influential institutions that not only provides a range of coverage from global happenings to entertainment, but constructs knowledge of things that could help or hinder one's own sense of happiness. The various sectors of media can provide content that increase feelings of positive affect while simultaneously promoting values and establishing images of the norm which can create feelings of negative affect that contribute to life dissatisfaction. For example, news allows for people to stay up-to-date and informed about current events in their local areas as well as the rest of the world. But, the news tends to incorporate more tragedy and suffering than joy and good-fortune in their publications. Advertising of pharmaceuticals and broadcasting of health issues may increase an individual's potential to be happy through health, but advertising of material goods that one may or may not be able to access or afford may increase the standards against which one assesses him/herself. Programming gives people an escape and provides entertainment, yet it often portrays idealistic situations and lifestyles. Do the images and socio-cultural scripts found in media content dictate higher or lower levels of life satisfaction? Does the media provide a net positive or net negative affect on individual happiness?

News

News, as an aspect of the media, has the capability to both positively and negatively affect happiness. The influence of news on happiness seems to illustrate a paradox: access to news information is positively correlated to happiness according to many studies documented in the World Database of Happiness, but the content and nature of news material tends to cause unhappiness on many levels due to its negativity (Smith and Wilson 2002, Kaplan 2008, Kromidas 2004, Hodgetts and Rua 2008). The discrepancy demonstrated by the dual face of exposure to news media can be explained, in part, by the 'hedonic paradox' described by Daniel Nettle in his book *Happiness* (2008: 154). Applied to the media, the paradox explains that simply searching for happiness in the news, one is less likely to find it. More plausible perhaps, is the contradiction between the positive feelings experienced by access to information and those experienced upon digesting the content and messages portrayed.

The mere presence of information via newspapers and television broadcast is clearly positively correlated with self-reported happiness as described in multiple studies conducted by Ruut Veenhoven in the years between 1993 and 1999. In each of these studies, the objective was to explore the relationship between happiness and mass media attendance. The strongest correlation was observed in the relationship between happiness and information, as measured by literacy, newspaper circulation, and television receivers (Veenhoven 1999). Furthermore, the amount of television sets per capita had the most positive correlation with happiness (Veenhoven 1996), followed by summed score of daily newspapers and radios (Veenhoven 1993) and then by newspaper circulation alone (Veenhoven 1999). From these data, it can be assumed

that information itself is the most positive influence of happiness from the news media, followed in succession by television, radio, and newspapers.

However, while having access to such information may result in a gain of happiness, the information itself may not. It's no mystery that the majority of news content is negative; the evening news is overwhelmed with reports of violence, international tension, death, and suspicion. The very present plethora of depressing accounts of current conditions takes its toll on its viewers. In a study investigating children's comprehension of television news, researchers found that children are easily able to recall television newscasts that made them feel upset. Older children not only better understood the information communicated, they were also more frightened by it. The study also found that the amount of television news viewed by children was positively correlated with their perceptions of criminal activity; children who watched television news regularly tended to have higher measures of perceived crime (Smith and Wilson 2002). In an investigation of public reaction to traumatic visual images, E. Ann Kaplan (2008: 5) proposes violent images in the media-driven consumer culture are forming a "trauma culture." Kaplan exemplifies the negative effects of disturbing visuals with use of images of South African poverty and the Vietnam War. The researcher hypothesizes that such exposure may lead to desensitization and "habituation to catastrophe" (Kaplan 2008: 7). The news content does not alone influence viewer unhappiness; the presentation of information has a marked effect itself. Maria Kromidas (2004) wrote on the news media representations of September 11th and its effect on fourth-grade students. She concluded that news coverage fueled a dramatic growth in racism toward all things "foreign," but especially toward cultures of the Middle East and western Asia (Kromidas 2004: 16). The report suggests that news media bias is "creating a culture of fear" in the United States (Kromidas 2004: 15). Similarly, research on media coverage of sexual abuse highlights the discrimination of men in light of mass coverage of pedophilic activities (Hodgetts and Rua 2008). The increased concern for children's safety while interacting with non-parent males is influenced by the media's portrayal of child abuse at the hands of male criminals. Here, the news media has generated a stereotype that causes irrational suspicion of the male gender as a whole.

When determining the net effect of news media as a whole on individual happiness, the benefits of sheer availability of information as demonstrated by Veenhoven's research may not outweigh the detriments of exposure to violence, suffering, paranoia, and heightened suspicion in headlining broadcasts. The advocates of negative news have strength not only in numbers but also in depth-of-affect analysis by investigating more the personal impacts of news content (as compared to news access, which can be achieved by simply having a newspaper handy). In the case of the news, ignorance just may be bliss.

Programming

Humor, action, drama, and reality are just several of the genres in media programming that capture the masses of viewers' attention. Viewer-relatable personalities shape the ideal behavior of the public to create a sense of envy. This envy raises the standards of societal culture, giving the public motivation for better well-being harnessing a greater societal satisfaction (Zillman, 2000). Additionally, story lines

provide viewers an opportunity to experience situations otherwise unattainable in their lives. Media programs hold the power to victimize the culture's moral and fiscal standards in taking advantage of their impressionable audience. When experienced in balanced doses, this trendy cultural questioning is outweighed by the positive attributes programs provide: societal goodness and idealism. Media programming, when consumed in a balanced lifestyle, can improve the level of personal and societal happiness.

Media programming is truly consumed during the leisure time available to individuals. A labor-less mindset automatically has innate indications of relaxation, a form of enjoyment for many that contributes to the appreciation of television programs. The nature of being in leisure mode previews the mood of happiness and in consuming media programming or most notably watching television increases that mood of happiness (Hills 1997). The degree to which the happiness increases is related to the societal experience integrated within the media programming – programs which display greater social interaction also create greater personal happiness. Michael Papa of Ohio University conducted a study where he exposed an Indian Village to a radio soap opera. Nearly half of the people surveyed listened in a group, crediting the social interaction as a source for greater enjoyment of media programming. This form of social entertainment promotes learning in a community environment. (Papa 1998) Exposure to media programming enhances personal happiness in the context of leisure mindset and even more so when consumed in the company of friends.

Situational happiness can be derived in viewing media programming which has the power to affect psychological attitudes. In situations of viewing fictional high stressed scenarios, the viewers understanding becomes one of personal negative emotions. The triggering of negative emotions by this program is the result of analytical processing where the viewers connects the program with real life detrimental experiences (Murry 1996). The same process occurs for viewers of a positive scene where they feel positive emotions that often lead to happiness. What is interesting is when a viewer does not have a personal connection with the program; then their natural reaction is to enjoy the program for its viewing pleasure (Murry 1996). Viewership of programs may be related to the individuals' extroversion tendency toward the parasocial. In doing so the individual finds his/her social contacts in the program they view (Hills 1998).

Just as the actual program has the power to influence viewer's moods, the mood from viewing also has the power to influence consumer decisions. Living in a capitalistic society, the power of money is ingrained in every form of media we witness. Those analytical feelings from viewership transfer over to the advertisements witnessed (Goldberg 1987). Happiness from a positive program creates for a positive viewing of the advertisement. In turn this results in greater influence for the advertisement. The result of negative viewing on a person can have mixed results depending on outside factors beyond the program (Murry 1996). Programs will focus their programs to either be enjoyed in the presence of others or provoke positive emotions. Either of these outcomes, as has been illustrated, will likely create happiness and continual viewing. A happy viewer is a returning viewer and in the world of television that means greater income.

While it is undeniable that television programming illicit feelings of positive affect from viewers with enjoyable programming, this form of passive entertainment actually decreases long-term levels of happiness in viewers. We can argue that television programming is linked to higher levels of materialism and contributes to processes of adaptation [to past income and consumption levels] and comparison [with the income of others]. Thus, we can make the claim that heavy television viewing is related to lower levels of life satisfaction (Frey 2005). This idea is supported by theories of income-happiness paradox (Bruni and Stanca 2008) and social comparison. Bruni and Stanca (2006) explain how television is one of the most important agents of socialization that gives us a definition of what our goals should be. When we are constantly bombarded with images of wealthier, "happier" people, we choose to believe that their happiness depends on material consumption and shift our aspirations and expectations. Shrum reports that "consumers often use information from television to construct perceptions of social reality including the prevalence of affluence" which is misleading and may affect the way viewers think of themselves and their position in society (2005: 473). According to the studies by Bruni and Stanca, television leads "individuals to underestimate the relative importance or relational goods for their life satisfaction and, as a consequence, to over-invest in income-producing activities and under-invest in relational activities" (2008: 511).

The thin body type portrayed in American mass media creates exaggerated social pressures to conform to this idealized physical appearance which promotes body dissatisfaction (Harper 2007). Harper proved that exposure to this body type has a "small yet consistent effect on women's well-being by producing general declines in mood and body satisfaction and an increase in weight anxiety" (2007: 655). It contributes to the self-objectification of women and with the application of social comparison and symbolic interactionist theories, one can argue that such depictions send a message that females are merely objects evaluated by physical appearance and sexual capacities.

These false perceptions are attributed to the cultivation theory in which television consistently sends distorted images of reality in which viewers translate to be true. Programming is filled with socio-cultural scripts that limit freedom of thought and provide misleading cues on how we are supposed to interact with each other. Shrum explains how heavy television viewing has been linked to "greater perceptions of the prevalence violence, perceived danger, greater anxieties and fearfulness...greater faith in doctors, interpersonal mistrust, heightened perception of the prevalence of divorce, prostitution, drug/alcohol addiction and ownership of expensive products" (1998: 448). Therefore, these fears and anxieties lead to feelings of unhappiness and even discriminatory behavior.

Consumption of television programming can be premeditated by various negative motivations such as loneliness or escapism. Television viewing serves as a refuge for unhappy people to engage in fantasy situations rather than dealing with harsher realities. Frey (2005) cites addiction, lack of self-control and mis-predicting utility (future costs and immediate benefits) as reasons for heavy television consumption. Bruni and Stanca have found extensive evidence that "television viewing has a profound impact on relationships within the family" and friends that leads to less communication, interaction and participating in social and relational activities that are beneficial for life

satisfaction (2006: 510). Robinson and Martin claim that television *does* cause people to be *less* happy since it is a "pleasurable enough activity with no lasting benefit, and it pushes aside time spent in other activities – ones that might be less immediately pleasurable, but that would provide long-term benefits in one's condition" (2008:570). Frey et al concluded that heavy TV viewers report lower satisfaction with their financial situation, place more importance on affluence, feel less safe, trust others less and think that they are involved less in social activities than their peers" (2005 :305). Based on all the evidence, we found that consumption of television programming has significantly more negative consequences on life satisfaction, well-being and happiness than positive ones.

Advertising

Americans today are privileged to more advertising than just about any other nation in the world. Any consumer on the hunt for a material necessity must go no farther than their own living room. Any item one could ever want is literally at the fingertips of every American at all times, all the entertainment or material goods anyone could ever want through the pervasiveness of advertising in all media. Advertising is everywhere a person can look in America and it gives us a constant chance to help us find whatever it is we need.

Evidence has even surfaced that implies that advertisements can actually improve people's moods. A study conducting by the national Chengchi University in Taiwan revealed that participants who were feeling sad had their mood improve after being exposed to positive commercials for assorted products. It turns that those smiling faces and catchy jingles might be more infectious than anybody could have imagined, essentially: "relief from negative mood can be relieved by exposure to advertising" (Chang 2006). Also, most companies have found that "association with humor enhances product evaluations and product choice" (Strick 2009). This means that those commercials are literally designed to make you laugh and bring you enjoyment, it is intended that they brighten your day and make you happier than you were previous to witnessing them. One misconception that has been used to give advertising a bad name is that it is always used to promote someone to spend money on a product. For instance in Indiana, an advertising campaign was held to increase awareness to combat addictive gambling practices (Najavits 2003). Think of the people whose lives were made much happier after being treated for their addictions and their livelihoods protected. In Massachusetts, the "click it or ticket" campaign has been utilized to encourage safe driving practices. Ads against drunk-driving have also been widely used throughout the country to raise awareness and help people avoid getting behind the wheel of a car after consuming alcohol. Perhaps the best example of this is the "Truth" ad campaign against cigarettes. A 2005 study showed decisively that "youth in markets with higher levels of campaign exposure had more negative beliefs about tobacco industry practices and more negative attitudes toward the tobacco industry" (Hershey 2005). Smoking has been one of the largest causes of cancer and death worldwide in recent history and this study shows that it be effectively combated through advertising. Advertising can be a powerful tool for increasing the well-being of a society.

The bottom line is that advertising is simply a tool. Like any other tool, it can be used to do to accomplish both bad and good things depending on what exactly it is that

is being advertised. It is simply showing people opportunities to obtain possessions or change their behavior or attitudes, advertisements can be viewed as a good thing in general for bestowing opportunities on the general public that they would not otherwise be aware of.

Advertising carries great influence and power over the audiences it caters to and therefore greatly impacts society. Evidence has shown that advertising has a negative impact on human well-being and happiness. Advertisements most often present idealized images of people, products, and lifestyles, leading consumers to feel inferior to the perfected images and situations that are 'normalized' by the ads. Many of these ads convince us that buying certain material goods, or looking and acting a certain way will guarantee happiness and lead to a life of perfection. The symbolic interactionist theory can be applied to better explain how people oftentimes refer to advertisements to help them shape their identities and view of the world.

People are known for their desire to acquire more goods. This desire has been nurtured by society because consumer expenditures help to sustain economic growth and provide many companies with profits each year (Richins 1995). This has raised Americans' standards of living, but also is associated with very negative consequences such as envy and discontent (Richins 1995). In Richin's article, there are three features of such idealized images: they depict highly desirable circumstances that can only be achieved by a few members of society, they present an edited version of life, and they use technology and special effects to make the images appear more perfect or ideal than they otherwise are (Richins 1995). The presence of idealized images in advertising leads to self-comparison with those images and leads to an "upward shift of consumers' expectations or reference point for the standard of living they believe they should have" (Richins 1995). When consumers realize that they do not have or cannot achieve 'the good life' that is depicted in the advertisements, they experience feelings of inferiority and discontent.

Many of the idealized images that are used in the media portray 'thin-and-beautiful' images (Yamamiya et al. 2004). Researchers have found that 94% of female characters in television programs are thinner than the average American woman, and such female characters are those whom the media frequently associate with happiness, desirability, and success in life (Yamamiya et al. 2004). This idealization of thinness is positively correlated with dissatisfaction, social anxiety, depression, eating disturbances, and poor self-esteem (Yamamiya et al. 2004). In the research article by Yamamiya et al., it was found that even a 5 minute exposure to thin-and-beautiful media images results in a more negative body image state than does exposure to images of neutral objects, and a negative affect is experienced for at least 2 hours after the exposure (Yamamiya et al. 2004). Similarly, Thomsen et al. found that two of the most common dieting methods - restricting calories and taking diet pills - were influenced by the reading of women's beauty and fashion magazines (Thomsen, Weber, and Brown 2002).

Advertisements do not present an accurate portrayal of the product or idea they are promoting. For instance, advertisements for prescription drugs have substantial shortcomings and a negative bias when it comes to promoting the drug (Klotz and Ceccoli 2005). Oftentimes the benefits of the drug are emphasized, but the negative

side effects and cost of the drug are not explicitly or clearly mentioned. This idealizes the drug and leads people to desire it in order to benefit their health, yet they become dissatisfied and discontent when they realize that they cannot afford the drug or experience the side effects that make the drug not worth taking. The symbolic interactionist theory applies to issue. The symbolic interactionist theory discusses how people will have positive feelings when they receive affirmation from others about their own views and negative feelings when their ideas are not affirmed by others. People receive affirmation that if they simply take this pill or drink this beverage they will have a happy, healthy, perfect life. This affirmation gives the person positive feelings and so they become consumers of the product because they like the way the advertisement makes them feel.

Advertisements provide people with knowledge and information about products and services in society that may help them improve their lives. However, they also create unrealistic standards for viewers to compare themselves against. Despite the positive nature of some advertisements highlighted by Chang, overall they cause more dissatisfaction with oneself and one's life than they do provide positive feelings, as demonstrated by Richins. Advertisements are made to lure people into buying a certain product or make them feel as though they should adapt their lives to live a certain way. This is manipulative and forces viewers to feel unhappy and inadequate in their own lives.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists have started to recognize the potential of American media as a powerful influence on human behavior and emotions as well as a more collective indicator of social norms and ideologies. Television in particular has been a primary focus of media effects since its prominent usage and prevalence within American society has arguably shaped aspects of popular culture and lifestyles and provides visual cues that creates common understandings, perceptions of reality and expectations of societal standards. However, the media also has omnipresent dangers in regards to limiting the well-being of individuals. With the support of academic journals and supplementary studies, we can make the claim that heavy media consumption is more directly related with higher levels of life dissatisfaction rather than higher levels of happiness.

In the realms of news, programming, and advertising, mass media has proven to have both positive and negative effects on the happiness of Americans. The news can increase happiness with the ability to instantaneously retrieve information from around the world that enhances one's intellectual and cultural understanding yet leaves us with graphic and disturbing images of war, poverty and injustices that leave us with negative feelings of anxieties and despair. Programming provides us with intervals of diversely packaged entertainment that can arouse positive emotions and behaviors such as humor and laughter, but is simultaneously shaping cultural scripts and perceptions that may hinder well-being based on constructed false realities such as idealized body image, greater frequency of crime, violence, luxuries and discriminations. Certain advertisements can evoke positive affects with a catchy jingle, funny commercial or a profound message yet they cater to greater overall negative consequences towards life

satisfaction since they inevitably create needs and desires that focus on materialism. Based on all the evidence we gathered from related research, peer-reviewed journals and the conclusions of a range of sociologists, psychologists and cultural theorists, we can make the claim that media has an overall, net negative impact on happiness.

Though the media can function to make people temporarily happy, the evidence against such long-term positive effects is substantial. These trends are found within the previously discussed theories of cultivation [of a "trauma culture"], social comparison, symbolic interactionist and the income-happiness/hedonic paradox. This concept that media consumption can skew perceptions of reality is one that applies to our whole argument of how media affects individual happiness since unrealistic portrayals or expectations cultivated through media use can become a basis of disappointment for the consumer. The negative effects brought forth in each of the sections point to substantial and harmful evidence that media decreases individual levels of life satisfaction and cultivates greater misperceptions of the real world which, having an adverse effect on the productiveness and harmony of society.

If allowed additional time and space, we might focus on the effects of different media sources; we have clear evidence for the negative effects of television but have not deeply investigated the effects of the presence of radios or newspapers. These might prove to have distinctly different impacts on individual happiness.

Summary of Literature Reviewed Based on Nature of Argument

Media Aspect	Positive Effects	Negative Effects
News	Being able to access information makes people happy (Veenhoven).	Bias in news broadcasts creates a fearful bias in viewers, particularly children (Kromidas).
		Emphasis on crime and suffering enhances viewers' perception of local crime (Smith and Wilson).
		Violent images in the news are a source of unhappiness for viewers and create a familiarity to catastrophe (Kaplan).
Programming	Humor, action, drama and reality programming provide entertainment which evokes positive affects and temporary feelings of happiness (Zillman)	Consumption leads to higher levels of materialism and life dissatisfaction due to the income-happiness paradox which induces adaptation and comparison using peoples represented by TV programs as an inaccurate, reference group (Bruni and Stanca)
	Consuming programming media is a form of leisure which increases one's mood toward happiness (Hills)	Cultivation theory argues that television conjures false perceptions of reality that lead to higher levels of life dissatisfaction. Over representations of luxury, crime, violence, divorce, scandal and misrepresentations of gender, ethnic, racial and occupational roles can lead to fears, anxieties, biases that shape general attitudes and behaviors and can harm our perceptions and interactions in the real world. (Shrum, Harper)
	Viewing television in groups is a form of social entertainment which leads to increased levels of happiness (Papa)	Television viewing subtracts time from more relational leisure activities and engaging in social relationships which are proven to increase levels of happiness (Grey, Robinson and Martin)
Advertising	Catchy and uplifting jingles elevate viewers' moods (Chang)	Advertising portrays idealized images of people, products, and ideas which leads people to compare themselves to these images, leading to feelings of inferiority and unhappiness with their own lives (Richins).
	Advertisements may expose viewers to self-help causes such as anti-smoking campaigns and gambling/ domestic abuse help lines (Najavits and Hershey)	Such images portray people as thin-and-beautiful and create negative self-images, depression, anxiety and other negative feelings especially in young women (Yamamiya et al).
		Many advertisements do not disclose all information about the product that they are promoting such as side effects which commonly seen in drug advertisements (Klotz and Ceccoli).

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