

Stress, coping & your TV-viewing habits explored:

A cross-cultural study about the
psychological motives for TV-viewing
related to stress, coping strategies & well-being

A

Doctoral Thesis Booklet

by

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A brief summary about the relationship between television use and psychosocial variables

There were several attempts to discover the associations between television viewing motives and psychosocial variables. Previous research has verified links between the concepts of television use and psychological predictors (Conway & Rubin, 1991), life satisfaction (Bruni & Stanca, 2006; Benesch, Frey & Stutzer, 2006; Espe & Seiwert, 1987), stress (Anderson, Collins, Smith & Jacobvitz, 1996; Greenwood, 2008) and personality traits (Babocsay, 2002; Cole & Leets, 1999; Finn, 1997; Kósa & Vajda, 1998; Weaver, 2003).

The typologies for viewing motivations were discussed, which are characterized by two distinctive dimensions such as ritualistic and instrumental TV-viewing dimensions (Rubin, 1983, 2002). Rubin (1984) described ritualized TV use as a more *important* viewing experience, while instrumental television use is a more *involving* viewing experience. This typology is based on human needs (Kim & Rubin, 1997) while the media use of a person in general is shaped by the social and psychological origins, which is a basic assumption of the uses and gratifications model (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974 in Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1997). Only a few available studies have tested this assumption empirically (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985 in Rosengren, Wenner & Palmgreen, 1985).

However, the studies of television viewing and life satisfaction reveal that the findings are inconclusive (Finn & Gorr, 1988; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rubin, 2002; Schreier, 2006 in Bryant & Vorderer, 2006) and more research is needed in this field. Furthermore, it is no overstatement to say that stress is a common feature of modern social life (Almeida, Wethington & Kessler, 2002). Both stress and television viewing are *omnipresent* in our lives (Folkman, 2001 in

Halonen & Davis, 2001; Moskalenko & Heine, 2003) and people often turn to media in times of stress (Greenwood, 2008; Pearlin, 1959) and therefore television use is frequently referred to as a *coping function* from everyday tension and frustration (Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Prior studies found opposing results on whether television use is increasing or decreasing stress levels (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Kim & Rubin, 1997; Ruggiero, 2000) and this research paper aims to address this gap as well.

Last but not least, the associations between television use and coping strategies have until now only been hinted at within the coping and mass media literature (Dahlquist, Söderberg & Norberg, 2008, Greenwood, 2008; Minnebo, 2004, 2006). By exploring the role of TV as a *therapist* it may help viewers to understand how they cope with personal problems while current media theory that has yet to fully benefit from the insights available from the research on specific motivational and emotional experiences.

Aim of present study

The major aim of the present study was to find out whether coping strategies, life satisfaction and stress levels of students in different nations are significant predictors of television viewing motives. The number of studies looking at the relationship between motives for mass media use and coping behavior is rather scarce, although there is reason to believe that coping efforts shape media use (Minnebo, 2004, 2006; Schmitz, Alsdorf, Sang & Tasche, 1993). Several arguments justify such a research effort. First, the way a person is dealing with stress comprises a psychological concept that has its origins in certain needs and habits, which in

return are likely to influence television use. Studies have shown that stress is altering television use (Anderson et al., 1996; Zillmann, 1988). Second, coping strategies are linked to a person's personality (Suls, David & Harvey, 1996) while personality has been related to television use previously (McIlwraith, 1998; Weaver, 2003). So there is a possible link between coping strategies and television use that has not yet been fully explored. Third, the concepts of television use and coping research have not been differentiated empirically but rather confused and used as a synonym. For instance, the brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997) contains one item that refers to television use specifically. This item is considered to measure an avoidant coping strategy that keeps a person from thinking about the problem. Previous cross-cultural research has shown that low or moderate stress levels among students can lead to constructive coping whereas students with high stress levels exhibit more avoidant coping strategies (Oláh, 1995). This implies that avoidant coping styles are related to negative mood states. The theory of mood management (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) is linking mood states to media use. The authors (op.cit) found that people are regulating their media use in order to minimize negative feelings and thoughts. This predicts that stressed people use television for lowering their arousal level or as a distraction from negative affect. The link between coping strategies and television use and the above mentioned assumption has to be clarified because television viewing may also be indicative of a problem-focused coping strategy, where a stressed person is watching television in order to gratify his or her information-seeking need how to handle the problem.

Hypotheses

Now follows the formulation of the hypotheses of this present study based on the reasoning above:

- H 1** – **Instrumental** television viewing motives will be positively related to:
 - (a) TV-affinity
 - (b) parasocial interaction, and
 - (c) post-viewing cognition
- H 2** – **Instrumental** television viewing motives (i.e. information-seeking, social interaction) will be positively related to **active, problem-focused coping strategies** (i.e. planning, use of instrumental support).
- H 3** – **Instrumental** (i.e. information-seeking, social interaction) as well as **ritualistic** (i.e. companionship, escape) television viewing motives will be positively related to **active, emotion-focused coping strategies** (i.e. denial, use of emotional support).
- H 4** – **Ritualistic** television viewing motives (i.e. escape) will be positively related to **avoidant coping strategies** (i.e. mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement).
- H 5** – There will be more **cultural characteristics** between television viewing motives and coping strategies for the American and Hungarian sample than the Israeli, Norwegian and Swiss sample, since prior research has shown (e.g. Mediametrie, 2007) that Americans and Hungarians are watching more television than the other target populations.
- H 6** – **Higher** levels of **life satisfaction** among students will predict **entertainment** and **relaxation** viewing motivation, whereas **lower life satisfaction** levels will predict **escape** viewing motivation.
- H 7** – **Higher stress** levels among students will predict **escape** viewing motivation.

Methodology

Measures

The questionnaire contained standardized and well-known scales such as:

- Television viewing motives scale (Rubin, 1981, 1983)
- Media involvement scales including:
 - TV affinity scale (Rubin, 1981; Perse, 1994 in R. Rubin, Palmgreen & Sypher, 1994)
 - Parasocial interaction scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987a)
 - Post-viewing cognition scale (Rubin & Perse, 1987b)
- Life satisfaction scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985)
- Perceived stress scale (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983)
- Brief coping orientations to problems experienced (B-COPE) scale (Carver, 1997)

The questionnaires used in this research were originally in English and they were translated into Hungarian for the Hungarian sample in order to ensure that the students fully understand the questions. A translator with a degree specializing in psychology terminology was contacted at the Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest. She translated the questionnaires into Hungarian and an impartial teacher, who blindly back translated the questionnaires into English, further checked the translation. Some scales like the life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985) and the perceived stress scale (Cohen et al., 1983) have already been translated into various languages and therefore the Hungarian versions of these scales were downloaded for free from the website of the authors and used in this survey.

Participants

The participants were adult students, living in their home country. The survey was filled out by **656** Hungarians, **264** Israelis, **188** Norwegians, **270** Swiss and **54** Americans, so altogether by **1432** University students. 78% of the sample was female. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 years and the mean age of all participants was 24.3 years (SD = 5.55).

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered by e-mail to selected Universities and students, living in their home country, who were able to access the online survey at www.surveymonkey.com for a time period of 6 weeks in the spring of 2007. The following sampling strategies were employed to circulate the online survey among the five samples:

- A number of deans, professors, teaching assistants and University Department secretaries were contacted by e-mail in order to ask for their help in forwarding an e-mail cover letter with an URL link to their students' e-mail address. This ensured complete freedom of choice to participate as well as confidentiality and anonymity. The e-mail cover letter with an URL link to the online survey was forwarded by e-mail by these institutions to the selected students. Placing the URL link of the survey into the e-mail cover letter allows the respondent to simply click with their mouse on the URL link and to be re-directed to the survey site where they can consequently fill out the questionnaire.
- Another effort was made to solicit the participation of students by asking site administrators of University homepages in Hungary (Eötvös Lorand University), Israel (Tel-Aviv, Haifa and Bar Ilan University), and Switzerland (Zurich and Basel University) to place a link to the online survey instrument on their website.

Results

During the data analysis, the television viewing motives were considered as dependent variables and the other psychological variables were regarded as independent variables. The Pearson and multiple regression analyses revealed statistically significant support for the proposed hypotheses. The findings offered modest support for the relationship between active coping strategies and instrumental as well as ritualistic television viewing motives. At the same time, the results provided significantly strong support for the links between *first*, instrumental viewing motives (information-seeking and social interaction motives) and media involvement variables such as TV-affinity, parasocial interaction and post-viewing cognition; *second*, between lower life satisfaction and escape viewing motive ($\beta = -0,227$, $p = 0.001$); *third*, between higher stress levels and escape viewing motive ($\beta = 0,240$, $p = 0.001$); *fourth*, between avoidant coping strategies (such as mental and behavioral disengagement) and escape viewing motive ($\beta = 0.161$, $p < 0.001$ and ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.001$ respectively); and *fifth*, that there were nation-based differences in the associations between motives for television viewing and coping strategies, which included positive and negative associations for the American students, only positive relationships for the Hungarians, Israelis, and Norwegians, whereas the Swiss sample had only negative links. The results in this study confirmed prior research as well as added new data to the existing literature.

Discussion

The goal of this research paper was to expand the knowledge of the interrelationships between motives for television viewing, life satisfaction, perceived stress and coping strategies. The

findings of this study suggest that television use is important in everyday life among adult students from different nations. Television consumption (use not content) can be related to lower life satisfaction levels and higher stress levels. These findings supported the two hypotheses that students with lower life satisfaction levels or higher stress levels are more likely to watch television for escape reasons. Moreover, the results confirmed that the escape viewing motive is associated with the avoidant coping strategies of mental and behavioral disengagement. This indicates that watching television for escape reasons may represent a form of coping. In addition, the current findings supported that the relationship between TV-viewing motives and copings behavior is different among nations. The students in America, Hungary, Israel, Norway, and Switzerland displayed different television viewing motives while these motives were related to coping reasons as the links between TV-viewing motives and coping strategies revealed. This is suggesting that coping strategies can be predictive of TV-viewing motives in different nations. The study has confirmed that TV-viewing as a coping strategy is situation-dependent and short-termed (Schmitz et al., 1993), but a coping strategy that has been useful for a person will be used again in another similar situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Conclusion

This doctoral dissertation has highlighted and supported the conceptual relationships between television viewing motives, life satisfaction, stress levels and coping strategies. It has not only linked several concepts theoretically with each other but also extended prior research by examining the links between mass media uses and different indicators of psychosocial functioning. It has especially added new information to the

few available numbers of studies in television use and coping literature while on a second level it has examined this relationship in a cross-cultural setting. Though some questions remain open and for this reason, further research is necessary to examine these links completely.

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