The Social Implications of Enjoyment of Different Types of Music, Movies, and Television Programming

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This study investigated how information about an individual’s enjoyment of various genres of music, film, and TV programming could influence an observer’s expectations of that individual. An online survey of young adults found that the influence of information about another person’s genre preferences varied across genres. Enjoyment of some genres, including jazz music, film comedies, and television comedies, tended to raise expectations of the individual, whereas enjoyment of others, including heavy metal music, anime films, and television soap operas, tended to lower them. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to uses and gratifications perspectives as well as to previous qualitative research on audience reception.

Keywords: Media Genres; Sign Value; Uses and Gratifications

Researchers have identified a variety of motivations that audience members seek to gratify through mass media materials (e.g., Rubin, 1981, 2002). According to the uses and gratifications research perspective, some of these motivations are ritualized and medium-oriented (Rubin, 2002). A television viewer, for example, may watch several hours of programming every evening out of habit or to pass the time. The type of programming that he or she views is relatively unimportant in that the ritual of viewing can fulfill the motivation. Other motivations are instrumental and content-oriented (Rubin, 2002). They are more likely to be gratified by particular types of material than by others. A viewer who is watching television in order to have something to talk about the next day at work, for example, will probably need to seek out the new hit drama to gratify his or her goal rather than watch a rerun of a decades-old sitcom.
The work of cultural theorists suggests that media use may provide an additional gratification that is not addressed by the traditional typologies of media use motivations. Using mass media can function as a means of expression for the user. Particular types of media are thought to convey something about the status and social identity of the individuals who use them in the same way that particular types of shoes or brands of car can convey something about those who purchase them (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984/1979; Gottdiener, 1985; Hebdige, 1991). In other words, media have what semiotics and cultural theorists have called sign value (Gottdiener). This suggests that affiliating oneself with particular media materials by being seen to use and enjoy them can convey to others that one is allied with a particular lifestyle or attitude. One motivation for engaging with specific types of media content, therefore, can be to convey a particular image of the self to others or to reinforce this particular sense of identity to one’s self.

Although it has not been addressed extensively in quantitative investigations of media audiences, including those carried out within the uses and gratifications tradition, the sign value of particular types of media texts has implications for both the methodology and theory of this type of audience research. If one of the reasons that individuals choose to engage with particular types of media content is that it allows them to convey a particular self-image, then the specific images that different types of content are believed to convey will shape whether and how individuals use that content. Media that are seen to enhance one’s social reputation are likely to be used to different degrees and in different ways than those that are felt to make one look out-of-touch or unsophisticated. These associations may also shape how audience members report their use of certain types of media to researchers.

The current study investigated the sign value or social implications of a variety of different music, film, and television programming genres among the highly sought-after audience segment of young adults via a close-ended survey. In doing so, it sought to help refine practices of measuring media use as well as to lay necessary groundwork for additional research into the role of social factors in individuals’ use of mass media content.

Sign Values of Media Texts and Their Implications

The meaning that media genres can carry within a social context is illustrated by Mittell’s (2004) examination of television genres. He argues that genres are best understood as shared conceptualizations of categories that have been formed through the discourse of a variety of social actors including critics and audiences. Since genres emerge within a social context, genre categories are never merely descriptive. They come, he argues, “fully loaded” (p. 27) with political and social implications. Implicit in genre categories are assumptions about the audience and about the relative worth of the genre. For example, in an investigation of public perceptions of talk shows he found survey respondents to have a remarkably consistent vision of what talk show viewers were like. Typical viewers were seen as “bored, lonely, passive, and
lazy people with extra free time, mostly female and lower class, and not particularly educated” (pp. 108–109). Similarly, a focus-group study on audiences’ responses to fantasy and science fiction films found participants to share a vision of dedicated fans of these genres as “obsessed geeks with a shaky grasp of reality who go to conventions dressed up in costume” (Hall, 2006a, p. 19). In both these studies, what one watched was believed to indicate something about whom one was.

Other researchers have suggested that media users may deploy, either consciously or unconsciously, the social implications of media texts to convey particular images of their self and to reinforce their membership in specific social groups. For example, on the basis of extensive fieldwork investigating how teens use and display media in their bedrooms, Steele and Brown (1995) argue that teens appropriate specific media materials to express a particular image of their self. Displaying materials such as books or movie posters serves to “[telexgraph] to parents and friends the selves they are constructing” (p. 567–568). By showing off these materials, and thus suggesting that they enjoy or identify with the content, the teens are communicating a particular social identity to those around them. A similar and often-cited example is that of young people who seek out specific styles of music as a means of asserting their independence from their parents, expressing a sense of individuality, or conveying their feelings of identification with a specific youth subgroup (e.g., Arnett, 1995; Shuker, 2001, chap. 11). This work suggests that being seen to enjoy or engage with particular types of music, film, or television programming has the potential to be rewarding to media users because these activities function as a means of expressing or reinforcing aspects of their social identity.

When materials are believed to have negative social implications, however, individuals may feel it necessary to downplay their apparent involvement with the material by minimizing the time they spend with it, dismissing its importance, or emphasizing a socially acceptable benefit. For example, both Radway (1985) and Prameswaran (1999) found readers of romance novels, which are often viewed dismissively by non-fans, to emphasize what they felt to be the books’ educational potential. In her focus-group study regarding fantasy and science-fiction films, Hall (2006a) found that participants tended to minimize their engagement with materials that they felt had negative social implications. They were often reluctant to identify themselves as fans of science fiction and fantasy even when they professed great enthusiasm for specific films that could be classified as examples of these genres. The researcher suggests that the social implications of the genre may have shaped the way in which the participants engaged with and talked about the material. They did not want to be seen to take these genres too seriously because it could “make one seem like a nerd” (p. 19)(For similar examples relating to other genres see Hall, 2006b; Hill, 2005, chap. 5; Mittell, chap. 4).

Understanding what may contribute to an individual’s media use patterns is important for many reasons. One of them is that the type of material audience members select and the way in which they engage with that material is thought to shape the influence that media content may have on their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004; Steele & Brown, 1995).
Uses and gratifications researchers, for example, argue that audience members’ motivations contribute to the selection of particular types of media content and to how they involve themselves with that content. These factors, in turn, intervene in effects processes (Rubin, 2002). Avoiding particular types of material that are unlikely to gratify viewing motivations may inhibit some effects. Teens, for example, are unlikely to be affected directly by the lyrics of songs to which they never listen. Actively attending to a media text in order to gratify instrumental motivations may enhance some media outcomes and reduce others. Early work in this area, for example, found cognitive involvement in news reports to be correlated with emotional responses and with greater retention of information (Perse, 1990a; 1990b). Dual-process models of persuasion suggest that those who process a message more closely will be affected by different characteristics of the message than those who process less closely (e.g., Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Transportation theory (Green & Brock; Green et al.) also proposes that audience members’ involvement with a media text may shape whether and how they are affected by that text. This theory suggests that individuals who are emotionally absorbed in a media narrative are less likely to counterargue against the propositions implicit in a story and thus are more likely to adopt them. Similarly, Steele and Brown suggest that the influence of media on teen audiences can be either amplified or moderated by the selection and interpretive practices of these audience members. Essentially, each of these perspectives suggest that the way mass media influence their audiences’ attitudes, beliefs, and behavior are dependent upon what audience members choose to use and how they use it.

If the social implications of particular media texts contribute to whether individuals are willing to select and be seen to engage with particular types of media, it is important to have some sense of what the social implications of particular media texts are. A better understanding of how audiences believe their peers will evaluate their use of specific media genres can help researchers predict if and how these audiences will engage with these types of media. For example, knowing which media genres have particularly potent social implications would help researchers to identify when self-presentation motivations are most likely to affect individuals’ media use patterns. The goal of this study, therefore, was to investigate the social implications of enjoyment of different film, music, and television programming genres.

RQ: How does an individual’s enjoyment of specific media genres affect observers’ perceptions of that individual?

As an initial investigation into this topic, the current study focuses on the judgments of one particular audience group—young adults. One obvious advantage of working with this group is that they are readily available to academic researchers. However, they also represent one of the most highly sought-after audience segments (Story, 2007; Takahashi, 2001; Zeller, 2006). Much of the material created by the music, film, and television industries is designed to appeal to this group. Furthermore, the fact that college students are one of the most frequently studied research populations suggests that data about how different types of media genres are perceived within this group is likely to be particularly useful in the interpretation of previous research.
Method

Procedure and Participants

Respondents were recruited from undergraduate communication courses of two different years at a Midwestern, urban university. In exchange for a modest amount of extra credit, they were asked to complete an online survey designed to “investigate what sort of impression consuming particular types of media conveys to other people.” The respondents were assured that their answers were anonymous and were asked to pretend that they were taking a course at another university for the summer and had just been assigned a new roommate whom they had never met. They were presented with a list of music, film, and television programming genres and asked to evaluate how the information that their prospective roommate liked these genres would affect their expectations of the person. One hundred and thirty-one respondents completed the survey. Since the focus of the research was on young adults, the analysis was limited to the 108 respondents who were under 30 years of age. Seventy-one (66%) of the respondents were female. The relatively high proportion of women was consistent with the population from which the sample was drawn. Both the university at which the study took place and the department from whose classes the sample was recruited had more female than male students. The mean age of this subgroup of younger respondents was 23.19 (SD = 2.44). Seventy-one percent identified themselves as non-Hispanic White. Nineteen percent identified themselves as non-Hispanic African American, and 2% as non-Hispanic Asian. Three percent of the respondents identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. The rest of respondents indicated that they were of more than one race or of another race or ethnicity.

Measures

Respondents were asked to consider 19 different music genres, 11 film genres, and 10 television program genres that were selected on the basis of previous research (e.g., Hall, 2005; Perse, 1996). Respondents were asked to indicate whether the information that their new roommate liked a genre would affect their enthusiasm for rooming with the person on a 5-point scale that ranged from one (lower considerably) to five (raise considerably) with a marked neutral point of three (wouldn’t change). They were also asked to evaluate how this information would affect their expectation that the person would be interesting, smart, and cool on the same 5-point scale. The order of the genres was randomized for each respondent. Respondents were told to skip a genre if they were unfamiliar with it.

Preliminary analyses were carried out to determine whether the respondents’ judgments regarding their enthusiasm for their prospective roommate and their expectations that this person was interesting, smart, and cool could be treated as alternative measures of a single, overall judgment. For each of the four items, responses were summed across the genres within each medium. Then a series of principle components factor analyses was carried out. For each of the three media—music, film,
and TV programming—the analyses produced a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than one that accounted for at least 71% of the variance. Therefore, a scale measuring the social implications of enjoyment of each genre was created by calculating the mean of the four evaluation items relating to that genre. The scales retained their original range from one to five. The reliability of the social desirability scales for the music genres, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, ranged from .67 to .86. The range for the film genres was .63 to .83, and the range for the television programming genres was .67 to .87.

Analyses

In order to determine whether an individual’s enthusiasm for particular genres was felt to affect observers’ judgments of the individual, a series of single-sample t-tests were carried out to determine whether the mean of each scale differed significantly from the scales’ marked, neutral midpoint of three. A follow-up analysis, which consisted of independent-sample t-tests and single-sample t-tests with weighted cases, was then carried out to investigate whether gender differences within the sample threatened the generalizability of the results.

Results

The results of the single-sample t-tests comparing the social desirability music scales to the neutral midpoint are reported in Table 1. The table includes the scale means, the standard deviations, and the 95% confidence intervals of the difference between the observed mean of the scale and the midpoint of three. The means of 13 of the 19 music scales (68%) were significantly different from the midpoint in that the 95% confidence interval did not include zero. The means of the scales measuring the social implications of enjoyment of bluegrass, easy listening, folk, gospel, heavy metal, opera, and techno music were significantly below the midpoint, suggesting that enjoyment of these genres were judged to reduce expectations regarding the target person. In contrast, means of the scales relating to blues, hip-hop, jazz, pop, rock, and rhythm and blues (R&B) were significantly above the midpoint, suggesting that the enjoyment of these genres were judged to increase expectations regarding the target.

As can be seen in Table 2, the means of 8 of the 11 film scales (73%) were significantly different from the midpoint. Although the music genres were fairly evenly split in terms of the valence of their influence on observers’ expectations, enjoyment of most of the film genres were judged to enhance expectations. Only enjoyment of anime and fantasy films seemed to decrease expectations of the target. The confidence intervals of the scales relating to these two genres were significantly below the midpoint. Enjoying action films, film classics, comedies, documentaries, dramas, and thrillers, in contrast, were judged to enhance expectations of the target. The confidence intervals relating to these six genres were significantly above the midpoint.
Eight of the 10 television programming scales were significantly different from the neutral midpoint, as reported in Table 3. Enthusiasm for most of these genres seemed to enhance expectations. The genres that scored higher than the midpoint included action programs, comedies, documentary programs, dramas, news, and sports programs. The two exceptions to this pattern were soap operas and talk shows. The confidence intervals for these two genres were below the midpoint, indicating that they tended to decrease expectations.

Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents were women. Although this proportion is consistent with the population from which the sample was drawn, it raises questions about whether the results could be generalized to a population that was more evenly matched in terms of gender. Independent \( t \)-tests indicate that male and female respondents differed significantly in terms of some of the social desirability scales. As reported in Table 4, women were more negative than their male counterparts in their judgments about the implications of listening to heavy metal \( t(104) = 3.32, p = .001 \). Men were more negative about the implications of watching soap operas,
However, they were also more positive than their female counterparts in their judgments about the implications of listening to rock, $t(104) = 2.53$, $p = .01$, and of watching sports, $t(105) = 3.77$, $p < .001$. Women and men differed in their evaluations of the valence of listening to hip-hop music,

Table 2  Single-sample T-tests Comparing Film Social Implications Scales to Neutral Midpoint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>CI$_{95}$ of mean difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>3.35 (.68)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anime</td>
<td>2.56 (.80)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classics</td>
<td>3.26 (.68)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>3.69 (.67)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentaries</td>
<td>3.24 (.71)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramas</td>
<td>3.27 (.63)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>2.80 (.77)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>3.11 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>3.04 (.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sci-fi</td>
<td>2.94 (.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrillers</td>
<td>3.34 (.64)**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Scales ranged from 1 to 5 with a marked, neutral midpoint of 3.

$t(105) = −3.84$, $p < .001$. However, they were also more positive than their female counterparts in their judgments about the implications of listening to rock, $t(104) = 2.53$, $p = .01$, and of watching sports, $t(105) = 3.77$, $p < .001$. Women and men differed in their evaluations of the valence of listening to hip-hop music,
Women tended to report that listening to hip-hop would increase their evaluations, whereas the mean for men was just below the midpoint. Men reported that viewing romance films would decrease their evaluations, whereas women tended to report that this would increase their expectations. The opposite pattern was found in regard to science-fiction films, although the differences were smaller. The mean on this scale was above the midpoint for men, but below it for women.

In order to evaluate the generalizability of the findings to a sample that was more evenly matched in terms of gender, the responses of the male and female survey respondents were weighted to approximate a sample of roughly the same size as the original in which men and women were represented in equal numbers. The weight for men was 1.45, whereas the weight for women was .76. Then, single-sample t-tests comparing the social desirability scales to the neutral midpoint were rerun. The pattern of significant and nonsignificant results was the same as that of the original analyses reported in Tables 1 through 3. The most notable contrast was in the hip-hop scale, which was well above the midpoint in the original analysis. Although it was also significantly above the midpoint in the weighted-cases analysis, $M = 3.16 (SD = .81)$, the difference was considerably smaller and not as highly significant, $t(105) = 1.99, p = .05$.

**Discussion**

This study investigated the effect of information about an individual’s music, film, and TV programming preferences on others’ evaluations of the individual. The influence this information was found to have on others’ expectations varied by genre. Genres that tended to have a positive effect included jazz music, comedy.
films, and comedy TV programs, whereas genres that tended to have a negative effect included heavy metal music, anime films, and soap operas.

These findings illustrate the potential for phenomena that have been noted by several researchers who have carried out ethnographic or interview studies of media audiences. When audience members believe that a form of media they use has negative social implications, they may feel it necessary to downplay or minimize their use of the genre. The current findings document some of the social implications of media use patterns and emphasize the need for researchers to take these implications into account when interpreting their results. The use of genres that are seen negatively by an audience member’s reference groups may be particularly likely to be underreported, whereas use of genres that are believed to enhance social standing may be more likely to be overreported. Furthermore, some audience members may emphasize socially sanctioned motivations for using or enjoying genres that they believe might cause others to think poorly of them.

Even more importantly, however, these results can help elucidate a potential motive for media use that could help explain actual media consumption patterns. The ways in which an audience member’s use and enjoyment of particular types of media may function to communicate something about the audience member him- or herself has received relatively little attention in quantitative examinations of audiences’ selection and use of mass media. This work suggests that it may deserve further consideration. If one of the reasons that individuals use particular types of media is that these materials function as an expression of their social identity, then understanding exactly what affiliation for specific genres tends to convey is an important component of understanding both why audiences select the media they do as well as how they engage with their chosen material. For example, if media users vary in terms of the salience of self-presentation as a motive for their selection of particular types of media, then this salience is likely to predict exposure to particular genres. The current findings suggest that young people who are particularly attuned to what their media preferences convey about them to others, for example, may be particularly likely to avoid soap operas and to seek out comedy and jazz. The salience of this motive may also be associated with how the user tends to engage with the material. As noted above, previous uses and gratifications research has found that audience members’ motivations for using media tend to be associated with specific types of audience activity (Rubin, 2002; Rubin & Perse, 1987). This may also hold true for social-presentation motivations. Viewers for whom this motivation is particularly salient may either interpret materials that they consider to have negative social implications from a consciously critical stance or resist active engagement in these materials. For example, Hall (2006a) found that her focus-group participants had a negative perception of fans of fantasy-based film genres and suggests that the participants were reluctant to be seen to take these genres seriously for fear of being associated with this group. The current study also found that enjoying fantasy films was judged to have negative connotations. If enthusiasm for these materials is believed to be socially detrimental, some movie-goers may resist becoming too involved in them for fear of aligning themselves with a group that would harm their social standing.
Future studies may be able to account for more variance in audiences’ selection and enjoyment of mass media by taking both the social implications of the media and audience members’ tendency to respond to these implications into account.

The study has, of course, some limitations. This analysis does not address directly the origins of the social implications of media genres, which are likely to include both the promotional efforts of the media producers as well as the activities of the audience (Gotttdiener, 1985). Also beyond the scope of this analysis are the broader cultural implications of the social meaning of particular media genres, which have been argued to function to mark and to maintain social hierarchies (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984/1979; Mittell, 2004).

Other limitations include the relatively modest sample size and the sample composition. As is evident from the relatively wide confidence intervals, the primary analyses only had the power to detect relatively consistent or robust judgments about particular genres. In order to be discerned, the implications of a genre had to either be judged similarly by most of the sample or to be evaluated so strongly by a portion of the sample that it affected the overall group mean. This may account for the fact that the scale mean for several film and television programming genres that had been found to have negative connotations in previous research were not significantly different from zero in the current study. These genres included reality programs (see Hall, 2006b; Hill, 2005) and science fiction (see Hall, 2006a; Jenkins, 1992).

Another limitation is that the study focused on the impressions of a very specific population, albeit it one that receives considerable attention from both media producers and academic researchers. However, the social implications of particular media genres are probably not universal and different populations may respond to others’ media preferences differently. For example, although the follow-up analyses indicated that most of the results would be generalizable to a sample that was balanced between men and women, there was evidence of gender differences in evaluations of some media genres. Men seemed to respond more strongly than women to the information that someone liked rock music, television sports, and soap operas, as indicated by means that were significantly further way from the midpoint. Women reacted more strongly to the information that someone liked heavy metal music. There were also a few cases in which men and women differed in the valence of their judgments of the implications of particular genres. For example, men reported that they would lower their expectations in response to the information that a potential roommate liked romance films, whereas women reported that the same information would cause them to raise theirs. When the mean of a sample containing both men and women was evaluated, potential gender-specific social desirability implications were obscured. Men and women also seemed to vary in their response to hip-hop music. This genre tended to be judged as a positive influence by female participants, which accounts for the overall mean difference from the scale midpoint, but was judged to be relatively neutral in its implications by men. There were not enough respondents of color in the sample to carry out robust, systematic analyses of contrasts in the social implications of these media genres according to the observers’ race or ethnicity. However, consideration of the role that these factors may play in evaluations of the
different types of media, as well as a more detailed investigation of the role that
gender can play, would be worthwhile.

Finally, this study examined the social implications of genre preferences in the
absence of other information, which precluded the evaluation of the relative influence
of media preferences in comparison to other factors. It also precluded consideration
of whether the social implications of genre preferences may be moderated by other
characteristics of the target individual. The way others respond to the information
that a 20-year-old enjoys hip-hop music, for example, may vary from their response
to the information that a 60-year-old is a fan of the genre. Similarly, the information
that someone who is judged to be working class is an opera fan may have different
implications than the information that someone who is judged to be upper class
enjoys this type of music.

A promising avenue of further research would be to carry out a series of
experimental studies in which participants are asked to evaluate targets whose media
preferences were varied in combination with other characteristics. This would allow
for the investigation of the way other characteristics of the target person may mod-
erate the effect of media preferences on the judgments of different types of observers.
It would also allow for the evaluation of the strength of any impact media use has on
social judgments in relation to other factors. The current study, however, provides a
general overview of which media genres had the most potent social implications
within a sample of young adult viewers.

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