Fantasy and Imagination

In Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer (2005):

The Psychology of Entertainment

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

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Date of Submission 23 August 2004
The past three decades have witnessed a considerable increase in empirical research into the origins, contents, and effects of people’s fantasy and imagination. What exactly is meant by fantasy and imagination, however, often remains unclear. Many authors leave the concepts undefined and the definitions that have been given are not uniform. Moreover, the terms are often used without distinction, suggesting that they capture one and the same experience. This tendency to equate fantasy and imagination is found both in everyday life and academic circles.

Of course, fantasy and imagination overlap to some extent. Both activities require the generation of thoughts and in both activities associative thinking plays a role. However, there are at least two differences between the two activities. First, fantasy (including mental processes, such as daydreaming, internal dialogue, and mindwandering) usually takes place separate from the context from which the fantasy emerged. Fantasizing or daydreaming is a state of consciousness characterized by a “shift of attention away from an ongoing physical or mental task or from a perceptual response to external stimulation towards a response to some internal stimulus” (Singer, 1966, p. 3). According to this definition, one cannot be fantasizing and simultaneously be involved in a physical or mental task (Knowles, 1985). Imagination, by contrast, does not necessarily take place apart from an external context. Some authors even believe that perception or sensation of an external stimulus is an essential part of the imaginative process (e.g., Sartre, 1948). According to Singer (1999, p. 13) imagination is a “form of human thought characterized by the ability of the individual to reproduce images or concepts originally derived from the basic senses but now reflected in one’s consciousness”.

A second difference between fantasy and imagination lies in the degree of goal directedness. Although fantasies can sometimes be evoked deliberately, fantasizing is
typically a free-floating mental activity (Klinger, 1990). Imagination, on the other hand, is more often characterized by goal directedness. According to Lewin (1986, p. 51), typical examples of imagination are efforts to visualize the appearance of a monster described in a book, to ‘see’ a friend’s face or to ‘hear’ her voice when she is not around, or to give an accurate account of a movie just seen.

Changing Theories of Fantasy and Imagination

Fantasy and imagination have long been understood as a primitive and maladaptive aspect of human consciousness. Freud (1908, 1962) viewed fantasy as an attempted solution to a deprivation state or an underlying conflict. Moreover, he assumed that fantasy and imagination undermine people’s conscious rational thinking. Piaget, too, saw fantasy and imagination as an infantile form of thinking that will be given up during development in favor of rational and realistic thinking (Harris, 2000).

In the past decades, however, the adaptive function of fantasy and imagination have progressively been recognized (e.g., Klinger, 1990; Singer, 1999). Current theories agree that fantasy and imagination serve several important functions. Fantasy and imagination may enhance self-knowledge and self-understanding by helping individuals to clarify their thoughts and to stay in touch with their needs and feelings. They can promote decision making by allowing one to spell out the anticipated consequences of one’s choices. Finally, they can regulate moods and emotions, and relieve tension—for example by allowing individuals to relive the positive or negative emotions associated with previous experiences (Klinger, 1990).

Contemporary cognitive psychologists agree that human thought consists of two information processing modes that each have their own adaptive value (see, Epstein, 1994, for a review). Jerome Bruner (1986), for example, assumes that human thought can be ordered along two complementary dimensions, a paradigmatic and a narrative one. The paradigmatic
dimension involves logical and verbal thinking and its object is to test for empirical truth. Paradigmatic thinking seeks good argument, tight analysis, and falsifiable empirical discovery. The narrative dimension, in contrast, entails storylike, imagistic thinking and its object is not truth but ‘versimilitude’ or ‘lifeliness’ (p. 11). Narrative thinking seeks “good stories, gripping drama, and believable (though not necessarily true) historical accounts” (p. 13). Fantasy and imagination play an essential role in narrative thinking.

Another cognitive theory that acknowledges the functional importance of associative or imaginative thinking is Epstein’s (1994) cognitive-experiential self theory. Like Bruner, Epstein posits a distinction between two systems of information processing, rational and experiential thought. Rational thought is intentional, verbal, abstract, logical, and analytical. Experiential thought is automatic, effortless, concrete, and affect-driven, and it encodes reality in concrete images and narratives.

Epstein’s theory extends earlier dual-mode information processing theories by attaching importance to the role of emotions in the experiential system. This emphasis on emotion as an aspect of information processing dovetails with philosophical theories of imagination, which documented much earlier than psychological theories that cognitions, imagination, and emotions are closely connected. In his phenomenological essay “The psychology of imagination,” Sartre (1948) argued that the human imagination consists of two layers: a primary or constituent layer, which involves the formation of mental images in response to external stimuli, and a secondary layer, which comprises the affective reactions (e.g., love, hate) and motor reflexes (e.g., nausea, papillary dilation) to these mental images.

In summary, fantasy and imagination are progressively considered as essential characteristics of human information processing. From birth on, we are engaged in the construction of mental representations of environmental experiences and events. Once such representations are encoded for storage in the brain, they may be retrieved in rational
thinking, for example during logic reasoning. However, they also reappear in imaginative activities, where they may provide a rich source for creative products or simply for self-entertainment (Singer, 1999).

In this chapter, we review the literature on the relationship between exposure to media entertainment, and fantasy and imagination. We distinguish between three successive phases in which fantasy and/or imagination are related to the entertainment experience, namely before, during, and after exposure. Our review of the literature will be organized in three sections that correspond to these three phases. As will become clear later, most empirical research has focused on the function of fantasy and/or imagination before and after exposure to entertainment, whereas their role during exposure has received far less attention. As a result, our reasoning on the role of fantasy and imagination during exposure will be more speculative than our discussions about their role before and after exposure.

*Fantasy and Imagination Before Exposure to Entertainment*

The role of fantasy and imagination before exposure to entertainment lies in their potential to influence one’s selective exposure to media entertainment. Although we believe that both fantasy and imagination may affect people’s selective exposure to certain types of media entertainment, previous pre-exposure research has dealt only with fantasy as a predictor of selective exposure to entertainment and not with imagination. Three hypotheses have been proposed of how certain types of fantasy may cause changes in people’s exposure to media entertainment: the escapism hypothesis, the thematic correspondence hypothesis, and the thematic compensation hypothesis.

*Escapism Hypothesis*

According to the escapism hypothesis, exposure to media entertainment is stimulated by an overproduction of unpleasant fantasies. We have identified two versions of the escapism hypothesis, the thought-blocking hypothesis and the boredom-avoidance hypothesis. The
thought-blocking hypothesis argues that individuals suffering from many unpleasant fantasies watch more entertainment in order to drive away these unpleasant thoughts. The boredom-avoidance hypothesis argues that individuals suffering from a fantasy style called “poor attentional control” spend more time watching entertainment. Individuals with poor attentional control are easily bored and distracted, and hence experience a great deal of fantasies, mindwandering, and drifting thoughts.

Both versions of the escapism hypothesis have been investigated only in correlational research, in which the causal direction of the relationships could not be established. Consistent with the thought-blocking hypothesis, people with an unpleasant fantasy style watched more television (McIlwraith, 1998; McIlwraith & Schallow, 1983). It is unknown whether these people also watched more entertainment because only measures of general viewing were employed in studies investigating this hypothesis.

In line with the boredom-avoidance hypothesis, people suffering from poor attentional control watched more television in general and more entertainment programs in particular (Schallow & McIlwraith, 1986). News and informational programs were watched less frequently by these people. This latter finding is consistent with Schramm, Lyle, and Parker's (1961) proposition that news and informational programs are less likely to fulfill an escapist function than entertainment programs.

Thematic Correspondence Hypothesis

The thematic correspondence hypothesis argues that the themes people fantasize about directly influence the types of entertainment they prefer to view. It assumes, for example, that people select more violent or heroic entertainment contents if they have more aggressive or heroic fantasies. This hypothesis received support in a series of correlational studies (e.g., Huesmann & Eron, 1986). It is, however, an open question whether fantasy is the causal factor in this relationship because watching violent entertainment may also stimulate people
to fantasize more about such themes. An experiment by Feshbach and Singer (1971) and a causal-correlational study by Valkenburg and Van der Voort (1995) suggest that violent entertainment is the cause and violent fantasy the effect. However, because the evidence for causality is still scarce, it would be premature to conclude that the thematic correspondence hypothesis has been proven wrong. The fantasy-entertainment relationship may be reciprocal: Certain types of entertainment could stimulate corresponding fantasy themes, which in turn could stimulate interest in watching these types of entertainment (for a review, see Valkenburg & van der Voort, 1994).

**Thematic Compensation Hypothesis**

The thematic compensation hypothesis proposes that people select entertainment themes that reflect those types of fantasies that they cannot produce themselves. For example, individuals who are unable to produce arousing sexual fantasies may turn to erotica or pornography. This hypothesis is consistent with Freud’s (1908, 1962) assumption that one’s motivation for fantasies are unsatisfied wishes.

The thematic correspondence hypothesis presumes a negative relationship between fantasizing about specific contents and the viewing of corresponding program contents. However, the research to date has only shown null and positive relationships between exposure to specific media contents and corresponding fantasies. As discussed above, frequent viewing of aggressive media content goes together with more fantasies about aggressive and heroic themes. Frequent watching of erotic content is related to fantasizing about similar themes (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). These findings suggest that the thematic compensation hypothesis may not be tenable.

*The role of Fantasy and Imagination During Exposure to Entertainment*

Fantasy and imagination during exposure may influence cognitive and emotional involvement in entertainment. It is important to note that, whereas we assume *imagination* to
exert an important influence on involvement in entertainment, we do not believe that fantasy can exert such an influence. In the opening section of this chapter, we defined fantasy as a shift of attention away from an ongoing physical or mental activity towards a response to some internal stimulus (Singer, 1966). According to this definition, fantasizing is mutually exclusive to any other ongoing task or activity, and, therefore, cannot be combined with cognitive and emotional involvement in media entertainment.

In this section, we focus on the function of imagination during exposure to fictional media entertainment (i.e., film, drama, and other narratives). Unfortunately, however, research dealing with the entertainment experience has entirely ignored the role of imagination during exposure. In most books on entertainment published in the past decade, the entry ‘imagination’ does not even appear in the index. This lack of attention complicates our review because we cannot draw on existing hypotheses and research. As a result, we can only use cross-disciplinary knowledge that we have taken from, for example, emotion theory, films studies, and information processing theories.

The lack of research on the function of imagination during exposure to entertainment is remarkable because, in our view, imagination is an essential aspect of all cognitive and emotional processes related to the entertainment experience. If one wants to explain why we enjoy fictional entertainment and why we respond emotionally to fictional characters and events, one is necessarily led to examining the relationships between fiction and imagination, imagination and emotion, and emotion and fiction.

Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion

One of the most puzzling questions to entertainment and emotion researchers is still why we experience joy and other emotions in response to fictional entertainment, that is, to imaginary worlds that portray characters and events that have never existed and certainly are not existing now. Most traditional emotion theories assume that emotions can only be evoked
by stimuli and events that are appraised as real (Frijda, 1988, Lazarus, 1991). According to Nico Frijda’s law of apparent reality, “emotions are triggered by events appraised as real, and their intensity corresponds to the degree to which this is the case” (1988, p. 352). This emotion law rules out the possibility that people can experience emotions while being exposed to imaginary events in fiction.

However, we are all familiar with experiencing strong emotional involvement with a movie or a novel. These emotional responses to art and fiction are referred to as “aesthetic” or “imagined” emotions (Boruah, 1988; Scruton, 1974). Frijda’s Law of apparent reality was therefore seriously criticized for disregarding aesthetic emotions (e.g., Walters, 1989). In a follow-up article, Frijda (1989) had to concede that aesthetic emotions are real emotions and that they are an ordinary phenomenon. According to Frijda (1989), viewers experience aesthetic emotions because they regard the events in films as true events in an imaginary world. Viewers do not perceive the occurrence of these events as unreal; they just discount any proof in the film that points to it being unreal.

Harris (2000) gives a useful extension to Frijda’s (1989) explanation. Harris believes that fictional entertainment can be consumed in two ways. First, in a default mode, whereby viewers do not employ their knowledge of the reality status of the movie to suppress their emotions. In this default mode, viewers are emotionally touched by movies, not because they constantly think that the movie is real, but because they do not include their knowledge of the reality status of the movie in their appraisal.

In the second way in which viewers consume fictional entertainment, they do use their knowledge of the reality status of the movie. This can occur spontaneously, for example when the protagonists act unconvincingly. However, viewers also do this resolutely, for example when they see a shocking scene such as a mutilation. In that case, they deliberately question
the reality status of the film to protect themselves against the emotions elicited. ‘It is only make-believe’ is one of such protective statements.

The two ways in which viewers consume fiction may find their roots in the two systems of information processing distinguished by Epstein (1994). When consuming entertainment in the non-default mode—when emotional involvement is minimized—viewers rely on their rational system of information processing: They use logic and reason to come to a reality appraisal of the fictional world. When viewers consume fiction in the default mode, that is, escorted by emotions, they rely on their experiential system of information processing. The experiential system involves rapid, automatic processing, is pleasure-oriented, emotionally driven, and characterized by a primacy of affective reactions.

The experiential mode of information processing may also underlie emotional involvement in fictional entertainment. According to Epstein (1994), the constructs of the world that are represented in the experiential system are called schemata. These schemata, which are all linked to other schemata, can represent thoughts (realistic or imaginary), emotions, and behavioral tendencies. If an external stimulus or event (e.g., watching a movie) activates one or more of these schemata, it can simultaneously trigger many other related schemata in an individual’s brain. Not all of these schemata are necessarily related to the external stimulus or event. The spreading activation principle (Collins & Loftus, 1975), implies that thoughts, fantasies, and emotions can all automatically and preconsciously be activated by each other, and, as a result, can all simultaneously occur while watching fictional entertainment.

**Fictional Entertainment and the Role of Imagination**

Epstein’s experiential mode of information processing offers a plausible explanation of why we experience joy and other emotions in response to imaginary events presented in fictional entertainment. In this section, we focus on how imagination can influence different
psychological processes while being exposed to fictional entertainment. As discussed, we assume that imagination is an important part of all emotional processes related to the fictional entertainment experience. We will illustrate this assumption by means of three entertainment processes: immersion, empathy, and parasocial interaction.

**Immersion.** Most people have had the sensation of being lost in a book or movie. This phenomenon of being immersed in an imaginary world has been covered in the literature by several concepts. In empirical literature research, it is known as *transportation* (Green & Brock, 2002), in film theory as the *Diegetic effect* (Burch, 1979), and in research on virtual realities as *presence* (Slater, Usoh, & Steed, 1994). Although there are some differences in the processes that these concepts describe, they share some important mechanisms. In all three concepts, the media consumer’s mental system becomes focused on the events occurring in an imaginary space, while the real-life world is temporarily suppressed. Second, in all three concepts, the media consumer witnesses the events occurring in the imaginary space, and these events drive his or her emotional system (Polichak & Gerrig, 2002; Tan, 1995). Finally, all three concepts derive their force from our capacity for imagination.

Polichak and Gerrig (2002) focused on types of participatory responses while watching drama. Because several types of their participatory responses fall under our definition of imagination, their taxonomy is relevant to our aim. They identified 5 types of participatory responses that may result from being involved in drama.

1. **Inferences:** These responses are used to fill in the gaps in the scenes that are not visible, but causally or temporally implied.

2. **‘As if’ responses.** These are the immediate responses that a viewer experiences when observing the scene as a participant. For example, when someone is killed in a detective movie, the viewer may generate a mental list of potential perpetrators, and evaluate the likeliness of each of them.
(3) **Problem solving responses.** Viewers often strategically gather evidence from the story that will enable them to more confidently predict the outcomes of the story, especially the outcomes they favor.

(4) **Replotting responses.** These are similar to problem-solving responses, but are retrospective. If, for example, a story develops differently than was expected, the viewer may feel discomfort and may start to replot the story to reduce this feeling of discomfort.

(5) **Evaluatory responses.** These responses reflect the viewers evaluation of the general or specific events or messages in the film story. For example, when viewers have seen an aggressive boxing movie, they may question whether boxing is an appropriate branch of sports.

Polichak and Gerrig’s study demonstrates that viewers bring a wealth of imaginary and participatory responses to the entertainment experience. The number and types of these responses depend on several variables, including the nature of the fictional story, viewers’ capacity for imagination, their beliefs, and earlier experiences, and the motives with which they selectively expose themselves to the particular type of entertainment.

**Empathy.** Imagination is a necessary condition for empathetic responses to fictional characters. According to Boruha (1988), empathy consists of two dimensions, an affective and an imaginative one. Geared to the entertainment experience, the affective dimension refers to the vicarious affective response to a protagonist’s situation. However, the emotions of viewer and protagonist do not necessarily have to be identical. In a scene in which an aggressive alien is lurking in the shadows, waiting to attack an innocent and unsuspecting child, the emotions of viewer and child do not agree, even though in such cases empathetic reactions are still common. This phenomenon whereby empathy is felt without actually seeing the emotions of the protagonist is called anticipatory empathy (Stotland, 1969).
The imaginative dimension of empathy consists of the viewer’s cognitive representation of the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist. By adopting the protagonist’s psychological point of view, the viewer imagines the protagonist’s thoughts, feelings, and mental states. In the example on anticipatory empathy, the viewer imagines the implications of the alien’s attack for the child. Such participatory or anticipatory responses are manifestations of one’s imagination. According to Boruha (1988), empathy involves a confluence of emotion and imagination in one mental state. Without imagination, it is impossible to empathize with protagonists, and without empathy with protagonists, it is impossible to be involved in entertainment.

*Parasocial interaction.* Imagination is probably most essential in parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the one-sided imaginative relationships that some media consumers develop with media characters or celebrities. Caughey (1984) discussed many cases in which people fantasized that they were involved with a celebrity. A well-known example in the book is the story of John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981. Hinckley had seen the movie *Taxi Driver* and had become infatuated with Iris, a teenage prostitute played by Jodie Foster. Hinckley wrote love letters to her and began to imagine that he was her lover. He eventually started to believe that he could get her by killing president Reagan. The Hinckley case reflects an extreme example of dysfunctional imagination. More common are parasocial relationships in which individuals imagine talking to or interacting with media characters. Such individuals are often lonely and isolated from people in their real life environment (Caughey, 1984; Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001).

*The Role of Fantasy and Imagination After Exposure to Entertainment*

This final section deals with the question of how media entertainment can influence people’s fantasy and imagination after exposure. The effects hypotheses in this section
identify media entertainment as the cause of changes in the viewer's fantasy and imagination. We discuss the stimulation hypothesis, and four types of reduction hypotheses: the visualization hypothesis, the rapid-pacing hypothesis, the passivity hypothesis, and the arousal hypothesis.

**Stimulation Hypothesis**

According to the stimulation hypothesis, media entertainment influences people’s fantasy and imagination through the content of the programs watched. As for fantasy, this hypothesis assumes that viewers who frequently consume certain types of media entertainment tend to fantasize more frequently about themes that correspond to that content. As for imagination, it argues that media entertainment provides viewers with a rich source of ideas from which they can draw when engaged in imaginative tasks, such as drawing and story telling, with the result that the quality or quantity of their imaginative products is enhanced.

Evidence for fantasy. Environmental stimuli can evoke fantasies, especially when these stimuli correspond to our current concerns (Klinger, 1990). Because media entertainment forms an important part of people's everyday environment, it is likely that fantasies are evoked not only by real-life events but also by exposure to media entertainment. It is no surprise, therefore, that the results of most studies on the entertainment-fantasy relationship are consistent with the stimulation hypothesis (see Valkenburg & van der Voort, 1994 for a review). However, as noted in the section on the thematic correspondence hypothesis, none of the correlational studies on the fantasy-entertainment relationships permit a conclusive causal interpretation. It is possible that both the stimulation hypothesis and the thematic correspondence are valid explanations of the positive relationships between television entertainment and fantasy themes.
Evidence for imagination. Television entertainment may enrich the viewer's repertoire of ideas. A series of media comparison experiments have demonstrated that children who have just seen a film story incorporate elements from the film in their story completions or drawings (e.g., Greenfield & Beagles-Roos, 1988). However, there is as yet little evidence that the quality or quantity of their imaginative products is improved through exposure to these film stories. Actually, none of the studies into the influence of media on imagination demonstrated positive relationships between media exposure and imagination. Therefore, there is little indication that the stimulation hypothesis holds true when it comes to imagination (Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1994).

Reduction hypotheses

All reduction hypotheses on fantasy and imagination focus on the possible negative effects of audiovisual entertainment. There is no researcher who believes that books or auditory stories hinder fantasy or imagination. The reduction hypotheses are all based on the idea that audiovisual entertainment has a number of structural characteristics (e.g., a rapid pace; ready-made images) that hinder the development of fantasy and imagination.

Most reduction hypotheses have been forwarded for both fantasy and imagination. However, as discussed above, in the case of fantasy there is no evidence of negative fantasy-entertainment relationships. In fact, so far only positive effects of media exposure on people’s fantasy have been reported. Because in the case of fantasy the validity of the reduction hypotheses is entirely lacking, our review of the reduction hypotheses will focus on imagination.

Visualization Hypothesis

In this reduction hypothesis, the visual nature of audiovisual entertainment is held responsible for a negative effect on imagination. Unlike verbal entertainment, audiovisual entertainment presents the viewer with ready-made visual images, and thus leaves media
consumer little room for forming his or her own visual images. It is assumed that when engaged in imagination, it is hard to dissociate oneself from the images supplied by audiovisual entertainment, with the result that one has difficulty generating novel ideas.

The visualization hypothesis has been investigated only with children. In these studies, referred to as media comparison studies, children were presented with a story or a problem. The text of the story or problem was usually kept the same, whereas the presentation modality (i.e., print and/or audio versus audiovisual) was varied.

It is obvious that consumers of audiovisual entertainment generally have to produce fewer visualizations than those of auditory or print media. After all, in print or audio modalities, readers and listeners are required to convert verbal information into their own visual images. However, this does not necessarily mean that readers or listeners produce more imaginative thoughts while being exposed to a print or audio story. Gerrig and Prentice (1996) observed that some forms of imaginative thinking, such as thoughts about characters or reflections on the broader implication of the story, are more often evoked by an audiovisual story rather than a printed story. An explanation for these differences is, according to the authors, that audiovisual entertainment is often more engaging than verbal entertainment.

The assumption that viewers have difficulty dissociating themselves from audiovisual images during thinking has never been investigated in the media comparison experiments. Therefore, it is still an open question whether the visual images are responsible for the presupposed reduction effect. A media comparison experiment by Kerns (1981) demonstrated that a silent film, which contained only visual information, elicited more imaginative responses than verbal media did. The author attributed her finding to the fact that silent films are more ambiguous than verbal media and leave more room for one's own interpretations. This finding contradicts the assumption of the visualization hypothesis that the ready-made
visual images are responsible for the presupposed difficulty to dissociate oneself from the stimulus materials.

The final assumption of the visualization hypothesis that audiovisual stories result in less imagination in comparison to verbal stories has received mixed support in the media comparison experiments. When an audiovisual story was compared to a written story, one study found a small negative effect for the audiovisual story (Kerns, 1981), whereas another study did not find significant differences (Meline, 1976). When compared to an auditory story, the audiovisual story led to slightly fewer imaginative (i.e., stimulus free) responses, but not for children younger than 7 (Valkenburg & Beentjes, 1997), and not when the stimulus stories were difficult to comprehend (Greenfield & Beagles-Roos, 1988) or unrelated to the imaginative assignment (Runco & Pezdek, 1984). Finally, when a visual imaginative task was used, the audiovisual story encouraged children to produce less conventional drawings than the audio story (Vibbert & Meringoff, 1981).

In summary, although the visualization hypothesis is still a popular hypothesis in both academic and popular literature, none of the assumptions of this hypothesis have received enough evidence to establish its validity.

Rapid Pacing Hypothesis

In this hypothesis, the reductive effect of entertainment is attributed to its rapid pace and continuous movement. The rapid pace of entertainment allows the viewer little time to process the information and reflect on the program content. As a result, audiovisual entertainment encourages cognitive overload, and a nonreflective style of thinking. Because reflective thinking is a prerequisite for imagination, imagination is hindered.

The validity of the rapid pacing hypothesis has never been directly investigated. Although it is unknown whether the mechanisms proposed by the rapid pacing hypothesis indeed underlie a reductive effect of television on imagination, we may examine whether the
available evidence suggests that these mechanisms operate at all. First, rapidly paced programs leave viewers less room for reflection on program content than slowly paced programs. Until now, however, there are no indications that a rapid program pace leads to cognitive overload, impulsive thinking, and shortened attention spans (Anderson, Levin, & Lorch, 1977). Zillmann (1982) even suggests that fast-paced educational programs result in superior attention and information acquisition. Because there is no evidence of ill effects of fast-paced programs on viewers’ cognitive style, it is not likely that a rapid program pace is a potential cause of reductive entertainment effects on imagination.

Passivity Hypothesis

This reduction hypotheses particularly focuses on television. Television is seen as an "easy" medium, requiring little mental effort (Salomon, 1984). With a minimum of mental effort, the viewer consumes fantasies produced by others. This leads to a passive "let you entertain me" attitude that undermines the willingness to use one’s own imagination.

The validity of the passivity hypothesis has also never been directly investigated. Some studies however have examined some of the assumptions on which the passivity hypothesis is based. The passivity hypothesis first assumes that the processing of television information requires little mental effort, and that this low level of mental effort elicited during television viewing leads to a tendency to invest little mental effort during other activities. It also assumes that viewers’ imagination is undermined, because they consume fantasies produced by others.
Although several studies have shown that viewers are cognitively far from passive while watching television or drama (Collins, 1982; Polichak & Gerrig, 2002), there is some evidence that television viewing requires less mental effort than reading does (Salomon, 1984). It has, however, never been investigated whether television viewing leads to a general tendency to invest little mental effort.

Of course, television viewers consume fantasies produced by others, as proposed in the passivity hypothesis, but there is little reason to assume that this reduces imagination. People who read a story, listen to a story, or watch a play also consume fantasies produced by others. Nevertheless, it has never been argued that verbal stories or theater hinder the development of imagination. Therefore, there is little reason to assume that television’s reductive effect on imaginative play and creativity is caused by a television-induced passive “let-you-entertain-me” attitude.

Arousal Hypothesis

Like the rapid pacing hypothesis, this hypothesis assumes that television promotes hyperactive and impulsive behavior. However, the hyperactivity is not seen as a result of the rapid pace of television programs, but is attributed to the arousing quality of action-oriented and violent programs. This arousing quality is assumed to foster a physically active and impulsive behavior orientation in viewers, which in turn disturbs the sequential thought and planning necessary for imagination.

Although television viewing appears to be generally associated with relaxation, violent programs can produce intense arousal (Zillmann, 1991). In addition, there is evidence that the frequency with which children watch violent and/or action oriented programs is positively related to restlessness in a waiting room (Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984a) and impulsivity at school (Anderson & McGuire, 1978).
Because research does indicate that violent programs can induce impulsive behavior, it is no surprise that some television-imagination effect studies have demonstrated that watching violent programs can adversely affect imagination in children (e.g., Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984b). However, although these studies established that violent programs can hinder imagination, they failed to investigate whether it was the arousal provoked by television violence that was responsible for the reductions in imagination.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In this chapter, we clarified that fantasy and/or imagination play an important role before, during, and/or after the entertainment experience. Fantasy and imagination before the entertainment experience may guide the media consumer’s selective exposure. Two out of three hypotheses forwarded in this section seem to be valid. The escapism hypothesis, which states that people’s fantasy lives predispose them to watch more television and media entertainment was supported by correlational studies that related certain fantasy styles to media exposure. The thematic correspondence hypothesis, which suggests that certain fantasy themes predispose media consumers to choose similar entertainment contents, also received support. However, the thematic compensation hypothesis, which assumes that people choose entertainment themes that are opposite to their fantasies, appeared to be invalid.

We argued that emotional processes during the entertainment experience are largely founded on imagination. Fantasy cannot play a role during the entertainment experience, because we defined fantasy as an activity that is mutually exclusive with any ongoing physical or mental task. Although empirical research on imagination during the entertainment experience is still lacking, we provided a first conceptualization of the role of imagination during exposure. Future research should formulate and test some assumptions on the specific role of imagination during exposure. These hypotheses can in part be inspired by those that pertain to the pre- and post-entertainment setting. It would be interesting to test whether the
assumptions that some reduction hypotheses make about information processing during exposure are valid. The rapid pacing hypothesis, for example, assumes that audiovisual entertainment precludes reflection while watching. It is worthwhile to compare the kind of reflections that people make while watching different types of entertainment in different modalities.

The role of fantasy and imagination after the entertainment experience is rather complex. In the case of fantasy, a stimulation effect seems most plausible whereas in the case of imagination, a slight reduction effect seems most plausible. However, the existing research is too scant to allow us to single out which of the four reduction hypotheses presented in this chapter is most plausible. Unfortunately, empirical research on the media-imagination/fantasy relationship has usually not been guided by explicit theoretical models. Most studies have examined the relationships between media exposure and fantasy or imagination as an input-output process, without specifying the underlying mechanisms of the presumed relationships. Future media research on the role of imagination and/or fantasy should derive from more sophisticated theoretical models and pay closer attention to the question of how and why imagination and fantasy may affect the entertainment experience and vice versa.
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