Individual Differences in Sympathy and Empathy Responses to Media and Drama Advertisements

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This research examines differences in individuals’ sympathy/empathy responses to media artifacts, such as books and movies, in relation to sympathy/empathy responses to drama commercials. We begin with clarification of the sympathy/empathy constructs and their application to media and advertising contexts. A convoluted history has led to a semantic muddle in which the terms “sympathy” and “empathy” have become so intertwined that no two researchers necessarily define them in the same way (Langfeld 1920 [1967]). Unstable usage is traceable to a varied research heritage from fields as disparate as psychology, aesthetics, theology, literary criticism, and moral philosophy or ethics (Morrison 1988). The consequence is a lack of threaded discourse not only among fields, but also within consumer behavior research.

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This research examines differences in individuals’ sympathy/empathy responses to media artifacts, such as books and movies, in relation to sympathy/empathy responses to drama commercials. We begin with clarification of the sympathy/empathy constructs and their application to media and advertising contexts. A convoluted history has led to a semantic muddle in which the terms “sympathy” and “empathy” have become so intertwined that no two researchers necessarily define them in the same way (Langfeld 1920 [1967]). Unstable usage is traceable to a varied research heritage from fields as disparate as psychology, aesthetics, theology, literary criticism, and moral philosophy or ethics (Morrison 1988). The consequence is a lack of threadless discourse not only among fields, but also within consumer behavior research.

As a prerequisite to clarification, we begin by differentiating between responses to real-life situations and aesthetic creations, specifying that our definitions relate only to media responses (Eisenberg et al. 1989). The need for such differentiation calls for a leap backwards to the late nineteenth century work of “psychological aestheticians” (Vivas and Krieger 1953, p. 277). The rationale is that responses to advertising stimuli occur in the domain of created media representations rather than that of real-life events. The transition from real-life to media representation can be seen as follows: whereas someone might react with terror to the experience of viewing a sinking ship, that same person might react with enjoyment to the cinematic spectacle of the Titanic going under.

To summarize the sympathy/empathy distinction in the philosophical, aesthetic, and psychological literatures (described in detail in our paper), we propose the salient characteristics of sympathy applicable to responses to media dramas to be: cognitively determined, emanating from an individual’s predilection to distinguish between another’s experience and his/her own, and demonstrated by an individual’s comprehension of another’s state or circumstances. That is, a sympathy response is volitional and in that it requires self-other differentiation; it is controllable in that an individual comprehends another’s feelings in a performance of emotions, but does not share them. In contrast, an empathy response is involuntary, unself-conscious, and affective in that the self merges with another person or object. As a response to a created work, empathy refers to a person’s capacity to feel within an object outside of the self (Langfeld 1920 [1967]). When experiencing an empathic response to aesthetic stimuli, individuals identify “with a particular character in a film, book, or play” (Mercer 1972, p. 15) such that the empathizer completely forgets his/her own “personal existence” in experiencing “the feelings of the characters” (Delacroix, 1927, p. 281). Thus, empathy stems from the perspective of a participant caught up in the dramatic world, experiencing a vicarious automatic emotional reaction (Eisenberg et al., 1989).

SCALE DEVELOPMENT

The introduction of individual differences in sympathy and empathy responses to media artifacts into consumer research requires measurement instruments for both constructs. To develop two new scales, we first reviewed the sympathy and empathy scales used in current psychological research (Davis 1980, Mehrabian and Epstein 1972) and consumer behavior research (Boller et al. 1989).

Based on a series of factor and LISREL analyses of a series of pretests, we selected four seven-point scale items, anchored by not at all descriptive/very descriptive, to measure individual differences in media empathy (IDME) and sympathy (IDMS):

**Individual Difference in Media Empathy Scale Items**

1. Sometimes feel as if I have become one of the characters in a movie I am watching;
2. When I watch a movie, I often feel as if I am “in” it;
3. After seeing a movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters;
4. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.

**Individual Difference in Media Sympathy Scale Items**

1. When I’m watching a movie, I try to understand what the characters are feeling;
2. I usually try to understand what is bothering the characters in a movie;
3. When I watch a movie, I try to understand what is motivating the characters’ actions;
4. I am usually able to recognize the problems that the characters in a movie are facing.

**EXPERIMENT**

A total of 154 undergraduate students at a southwestern university participated in our experiment; each group saw one of six, Clio award-winning classical drama commercials. Participants’ sympathy and empathy responses to the ads were measured using the scales developed by Escalas and Stern (2003). Detailed analysis of the eight individual differences items developed above shows that IDMS and IDME are unidimensional, reliable, and empirically distinct. Confirmatory factor analysis provides evidence of both construct validity and discriminant validity. The IDMS and IDME scales are significantly but moderately correlated (r=.26) and have solid internal consistency (IDMS α=.91, IDME α=.85). Next, we briefly summarize our hypotheses and the corresponding empirical results.

In consumer research, classical dramas ads are characterized by unified linear plots, causality, a dramatic turning point, character development and interaction (Stern 1994). Because classical dramas show characters engaged in actions to achieve their goals, these scenarios may be matched to an individual’s personal history, leading to sympathy and empathy responses. Our empirical results support the hypothesis that an increase in classical drama elements enhances sympathy and empathy ad responses. Further, we predict that interruptions to the drama unfolding in the advertisement, due to voice-overs by an announcer, text overlays, product shots, etc., will diminish the commercial’s capacity to evoke sympathy and empathy because interruptions will disrupt the viewer’s recognition of (sympathy) and the absorption in (empathy) the ad’s portrayal of emotions. Our experimental data reveal that interruptions lead to lower levels of ad response sympathy, providing only directional support for a reduction in ad response empathy.

We predict that individual differences in the propensity to respond with sympathy or empathy to media artifacts will influence...
advertising responses 1) directly, and 2) indirectly, by moderating the effect of properties of dramatic advertisements. In terms of a direct effect, our experimental results confirm that general media response tendencies affect corresponding ad sympathy/empathy responses: IDMS affects ad response sympathy, but not empathy, whereas IDME affects ad response empathy, but not sympathy. In terms of an indirect effect, we predict that the ability of classical drama elements to evoke sympathy/empathy will be stronger for viewers who are predisposed to feel sympathy/empathy towards media, as these viewers may be more sensitive to the classical aspects of media presentations that evoke these emotional responses. Supporting this notion, our experiment finds that individuals who are high in IDME respond with more empathy to ads with many classical elements, while consumers low in IDME do not appear to be affected by the number of classical elements.

In reference to dramatic interruptions, we predict that the extent to which a drama ad is interrupted will more adversely affect those who are not predisposed to respond to media presentations with either sympathy or empathy, because it is more difficult for an advertisement to evoke positive emotional responses in these consumers, and thus, these interruptions will have a greater negative effect. Our experiment finds an interactive effect of IDMS and interruptions, with consumers low in IDMS more likely to be distracted by interruptions than consumers high in IDMS, who are better able to recognize the emotions being portrayed by an ad.

In summary, this paper expands our understanding of sympathy and empathy responses to drama commercials by exploring individual differences in sympathy/empathy responses to media presentations, the role of classical drama elements and interruptions, and their interactive effects. We conclude with an acknowledgement of limitations and suggestions for future research.

REFERENCES


