Media Mood Manipulation: Examination of Mood Changes in a 24-Hour Activities Diary

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Previous research suggests that media use is often motivated by a desire to change one’s mood states (prolong positive moods and reduce negative moods). Based on 24-hour activities diaries generated by 27 participants, this study provided support for the notion that media use can serve a mood management function. We found that negative moods existing prior to media use were significantly reduced during the use of media. Positive moods, on the other hand, showed a significant increase. Interestingly, positive mood states returned to pre-use levels immediately after the media use, whereas negative mood states continued to show a general decrease after the media use. Theoretical implications of this study are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Research in psychology, communications, consumer behavior and other disciplines has suggested that some behaviors may be motivated by an attempt to alter or prolong specific mood states. People in negative moods engage in behaviors that can alter their emotional state in a more positive direction, while those in positive moods attempt to prolong these desirable feelings.

Within the consumer behavior realm, compulsive buying has been viewed as an extreme response to overcome negative emotions. Negative mood states often precede shopping for compulsive buyers, but the act of buying is typically characterized by intense positive feelings. Similarly, cheering one’s self up and reward for accomplishment are two common motivations for engaging in self-gifting behavior.

Another form of consumption that has been linked to altering mood states is media use. Television is reported to be used to alleviate boredom, enhance excitement or calm down. People in negative moods have been shown to select programs that can best alleviate these moods.

The use of media to alter mood states has generally been examined in experimental settings. Less is known about how people naturally use media to alter normally occurring moods and the degree to which media use achieves such mood changes. The current study is an effort to examine this phenomenon using activity diaries to record normal behaviors.

It was hypothesized that negative mood states would show a reduction from the period immediately preceding media use to the period during which media was being used. Additionally, positive mood states were expected to increase from the period immediately preceding media use to the period media is being used.

While prior research has found that there are immediate changes in mood when using the media, there is little evidence regarding sustained mood change. This is important since immediate changes in mood can be due to a short-term reaction to the environmental stimulus (media content). Thus, this study also sought to examine changes in moods from the period preceding media use to the period following media use.

A second set of hypotheses examined the use of program selection to alter arousal level rather than valence. People in highly arousing negative mood states, compared to those not in such mood states, were predicted to consume more slow paced media content. In contrast, people in non-arousing negative mood states were predicted to consume more fast-paced media content than those experiencing other moods.

Respondents were asked to complete an activity diary consisting of 48 half-hour episodes. The Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), recently proposed by Kahneman et al. (2004), was used for this task. The DRM asks participants to recall and record activities when convenient during the day. For each half-hour episode participants listed their primary activity. We then asked participants to rate the extent to which they experienced each of ten different feelings during this time block. The positive feelings examined were “warm/friendly,” “enjoying self,” “excited,” “capable,” and “energised.”

The negative feelings included “overwhelmed,” “depressed,” “anxious,” “tired,” and “annoyed.” Participants were 11 male and 16 female undergraduate students. On average, each participant had 3.5 media related episodes on the day when the diary was filled out. These 97 episodes served as the units of analysis.

As predicted, negative mood states were significantly reduced from the period before media use to the period when media use was occurring (p<.01). Participants reported feeling significantly less depressed (p<.05), less anxious (p=.05), less tired (p=.05), and less annoyed (p<.001) while using media.

Positive feelings significantly increased while people were consuming media. Specifically, the results showed a significant increase in feeling enjoyment (p<.001), excitement (p<.01), more energised (p<.05), and feeling warm/friendly (p=.01) from the time immediately before using media to the time they were engaged in media use. The improvement in negative mood was found to continue on after media use has ended. Three of the five negative emotions were significantly reduced from the period before media use to the period after media use ended (overwhelmed: p<.001; tired: p<.01; annoyed: p<.05). A fourth mood state, “depressed” approached, but did not reach significance (depressed: p<.10). Interestingly, however, the increase in positive emotions lasted only as long as the media was being used. After use, all of the positive emotions returned to pre-use levels. Results regarding arousal were less supportive. Respondents in negative arousing moods had a greater tendency to consume slow paced media content than when they were not in such mood states. However, the findings approached, but did not achieve significance (p<.08). Additionally, people were equally likely to consume fast paced media content when in non-arousing negative moods as when they were not in such mood states.

The present study supports the notion that media consumption serves a mood management function, and shows that this occurs in a natural setting. Negative moods that preceded an instance of media use were reduced during the period of media consumption and these changes persisted after consumption. Positive mood states were also enhanced during media use. However, unlike the change to negative mood states, the improvement in positive moods was temporary and limited to the period of actual media use.

While the data support the fact that people use media to change hedonic tone, the evidence for changing arousal was less supportive. However, two important limitations should be kept in mind. First, the sample size was small. This may partly explain why the greater tendency to consume slow paced programs in negative arousing moods approached, but did not reach, significance. Secondly, pace had to be inferred from program genre information. However, within any program genre, pacing can differ greatly. Given these limitations, the data may be a rather conservative test of the mood management hypotheses. Overall, the data are supportive of the notion that media consumption does serve to modify moods in the course of everyday lives.
REFERENCES


