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Introducing positive media psychology to the field of children, adolescents, and media

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ABSTRACT

The field of children, adolescents, and media has predominantly focused on harmful media effects, for instance, concerning the potential harm of media violence. Although we recognize the relevance of that research, we propose that the balance in the field should be restored with research that also considers the beneficial effects of media exposure. In this essay we introduce positive media psychology to the arena of children, adolescents, and media. By incorporating insights from the field of positive psychology and pioneering work on meaningful media entertainment among adults, we provide a theoretical backdrop for future research to examine how media can help children and adolescents to thrive and flourish.

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Introduction

> Although television is frequently implicated as a cause of many problems in children, our research indicates that it may also be part of the solution.
>
> Christakis et al. (2013)

Ever since the Payne Fund studies were conducted in the early years of the twentieth century to examine the effects of movies on children, our field has predominantly focused on harmful media effects. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the positive effects of media use on child and adolescent well-being. To illustrate, meta-analyses on the effects of media violence could gather hundreds of studies (e.g. Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Paik & Comstock, 1994), while meta-analyses focusing on positive social and educational effects included only a few dozen (e.g. Mares & Woodard, 2005; Moses, 2008). This bias in research attention can be explained by several factors, including the public and political concerns about possibly harmful media content that have fueled research and the—often related—possibilities for research funding (cf. Lopez & Snyder, 2009).

In this essay we argue that a more balanced perspective is needed to fully understand the effects of media on children and adolescents, one that also considers the benefits of media use. After all, children's media not only contain harmful content, but are also larded with educational components, positive role models, and positive moral reference frames

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(Mares & Woodard, 2005; Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Fraser, & Stockdale, 2013; Smith et al., 2006). Research in the cultural and popular studies domains has acknowledged this, generally having taken a relatively positive and constructionist perspective on media. For example, popular culture researcher Ward (1996) argued that Disney movies tell us stories about specific moral principles, such as taking responsibility in life and respecting one's parents in *The Lion King*. Nevertheless, in the media psychological domain, wherein most media effects research is conducted, the question whether exposure to such movies will actually lead to increased morality and prosocial behaviors has been receiving much less research attention than the question whether violent media content leads to increased aggressive behaviors. Importantly, the research that has investigated positive media effects has yielded similar effect sizes as those addressing adverse media effects (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Mares & Woodard, 2005; Moses, 2008; Paik & Comstock, 1994). In our view, our research field owes it to science and society to present a more balanced view of media effects and, therefore, to extend research on positive media effects.

It is the aim of this essay to inspire future positive effects research among children and adolescents. We do so by drawing on insights from the field of positive psychology, which is a branch of psychology aiming to understand how individuals, families, and communities thrive and flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In addition, we draw from the groundbreaking work by the research group from Oliver and Raney (e.g. 2011, 2012, 2015) on the impact of meaningful entertainment among adults, being labeled by them as "positive media psychology." Accordingly, in this essay we propose to introduce positive media psychology to the field of children, adolescents, and media to scientifically understand how media enable children and adolescents to thrive and flourish.

Positive media psychology

Positive psychology uses scientific understanding and effective intervention to aid in the achievement of a satisfactory life. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) pioneered this new field to bring a stronger emphasis to the scientific study of what makes life worth living, instead of focusing on illness, deficits, and problems. From the dawn of positive psychology, particularly research on happiness or subjective well-being received a tremendous boost. Happiness has been defined in various ways in the literature, we follow the general definition as provided by Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book *The how of happiness* (2008): "the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one's life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile." (p. 31) Positive psychology research has shown that being happy has important desired consequences later in life, such as having good health, academic success, and more fulfilling social relationships (Holder, 2012; Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). In combination with evidence indicating that happiness can be contagious (Fowler & Christakis, 2008), this makes examining how to contribute to happiness in children and adolescents relevant not only at an individual level, but also for society at large (Lyumbomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Of particular importance to research on positive media effects are behaviors that have been found to enhance happiness. Positive psychology research has shown that, even though happiness is subject to strong genetic effects and—to a smaller extent—circumstances, it can be enhanced by intentional activities (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). For example, an activity that has been found to increase happiness in young adolescents is

engaging in prosocial behaviors (Holder, 2012; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012), which involve voluntary behaviors intended to benefit others, such as practicing acts of kindness (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2007; Padilla-Walker et al., 2013). Similarly, expressing gratitude, or counting one's blessings, has also been found to be an effective happiness-enhancing strategy in young adolescents (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Therefore, an important question for positive media psychology is how media can encourage these happiness-enhancing behaviors. This link will be addressed in the next section of this essay, in which we discuss directions for future research.

In addition to behaviors related to happiness, we discuss ideas related to emotional precursors of happiness. Thereby, we focus not only on positive emotions, but also on emotions that are related to meaningfulness specifically. Recently, Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013) demonstrated that being happy and finding life meaningful overlap substantially, but indicated important differences. For instance, being a "giver" rather than a "taker" was related to meaningfulness and not to happiness. Moreover, concerns with one's personal identity and expressing the self contributed to meaningfulness and not happiness. In his book *Authentic happiness*, Seligman (2002) also described the importance of meaningfulness, arguing that when people use their unique strengths and virtues for a goal greater than themselves they can find a deep sense of fulfillment. It is only recently that scholars have started to examine whether entertainment media can be meaningful, and how emotions relate to this (e.g. Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). Such studies among children and adolescents have not yet been conducted. In our view, it is important that upcoming research in the area of positive media psychology including children and adolescents also focuses on the pursuit of meaningfulness, and not just the pursuit of happiness.

Positive media psychology for children and adolescents: directions for research

Before introducing specific ideas for further research, it is important to acknowledge earlier work among children and adolescents that can be classified as positive media psychology research. After all, the idea of positive media psychology is not new—we only call for more research in this field to restore the balance between positive and negative media effects research. Extant work includes effects of watching television on prosocial behaviors (e.g. Mares & Woodard, 2005), social network use on social relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), and playing video games on overall subjective well-being (e.g. Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014; Mares & Woodard, 2005). To illustrate, Granic et al. (2014) reviewed research on the benefits of gaming and concluded that video games hold immense potential for acquiring new thoughts and behaviors that can promote well-being—especially given how enthralled most children and adolescents are with gaming.

In the remainder of this essay we put forward research ideas for further positive media psychology research among children and adolescents, guided by positive psychology. First, we focus on how media can encourage behaviors related to well-being, building further upon existing communication research. Then, we present ideas that focus on how media can induce emotions that can eventually contribute to well-being. As yet, this potentially important underlying mechanism between media exposure and well-being has not yet received any research attention among children and adolescents.

Positive media psychology to examine behavioral predictors of well-being

Positive psychology research has shown that encouraging children to perform three acts of kindness every week over the course of four weeks significantly improved their well-being (Layous et al., 2012). Media may provide excellent ways to encourage such prosocial behaviors. There is already convincing evidence that prosocial behaviors in children and adolescents can be stimulated by exposing them to television programing depicting such behaviors (Christakis et al., 2013; Mares & Woodard, 2005). The most frequently applied theories explaining these positive effects have been social cognitive theory and entertainment-education theory (Bandura, 2004; Mares & Woodard, 2005; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Although evidence is accumulating that prosocial television encourages prosocial behavior in children and adolescents, many questions are still waiting to be answered, especially regarding other types of media. For instance, the extremely popular Disney movies are larded with prosocial behaviors (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013), but it has not yet been examined how watching these movies affects young viewers. Similarly, the effects of superhero movies, which are especially popular among adolescents, have not yet been investigated. It is conceivable that being exposed to the helping and triumphing superheroes inspires adolescents to help others—for example, through processes of wishful identification (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

A particularly promising avenue for further research can be found in social media, which form an increasingly important part of children's and adolescents' daily lives. By means of social media personal experiences and activities are shared (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), including prosocial ones. The question remains how children and adolescents are encouraged to perform such behaviors after having seen them online. There are anecdotal examples of prosocial behaviors that "went viral" on social media, such as the social media-based *Ice-Bucket Challenge*, which raised awareness for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. However, as yet there is no research on the effects of such prosocial communication diffusion among children and adolescents. Another fascinating question is how good news, often including stories of real-life heroes, inspires children and adolescents. With the rapidly growing popularity of positive journalism, such as the "Metro Good Vibes" and "HuffPost Good News," this question is becoming increasingly relevant.

As indicated above, expressing gratitude, or counting one's blessings, has also been found to be an effective happiness-enhancing strategy in young adolescents (Froh et al., 2008). Sharing positive experiences can also enhance well-being, sometimes even having a stronger impact than the positive event itself (e.g. Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Because sharing emotions and experiences are important activities on social network sites, this might also bring forward social media as a promising avenue for research. Future research could examine how sharing positive emotions and experiences online, for instance, concerning gratefulness, affect children, how their friends react to these expressions, and whether they are encouraged to engage in such behaviors as well.

Finally, from a social cognitive theory perspective it would be intriguing to examine if children and adolescents can be inspired to live a (more) happy and meaningful life based on virtuous actions by movie characters—because these characters can be important role models (Bandura, 2004; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Peterson and Seligman (2004) presented a measure of 24 human ideals of virtue, labeled "character strengths," which were then grouped into six classes: wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Movies often portray characters that develop and sustain exactly those character strengths

and use them to overcome life's challenges (Niemic & Wedding, 2014). It would be fascinating for future research to investigate how modeling these characters increases children's and adolescents' own character strengths, and in this way contributes to their happiness and sense of fulfillment.

Positive media psychology to examine emotional predictors of well-being

In addition to examining how media can enhance well-being in children and adolescents through behavioral mechanisms, future studies could also focus on how media "move" children and adolescents, in other words, affect them emotionally. In the field of positive psychology, various theories have been developed in relation to well-being in adults that can inspire such research. Prominently, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory on positive emotions states that positive emotions broaden individuals' thought–action repertoires, which then build skills and resources that subsequently increase well-being (e.g. Cohn & Fredrickson, 2006; Fredrickson, 2003). Interestingly, studies testing this theory used movies to evoke positive emotions. In a series of laboratory experiments participants watched movies that either induced positive, negative, or no emotions. Participants who experienced positive emotions were more likely to be creative, inventive, focus on the "big picture" and, in doing so, built resources that supported coping and thriving in life (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2006; Fredrickson, 2003). As yet, this research has not been conducted with children or adolescents. It would be fascinating to examine whether movies and other forms of media, such as television programs, books, music, and short movies from social media or apps can induce positive emotions and, subsequently, broaden and build thought–action repertoires and, eventually, well-being in children and adolescents.

Next to positive emotions future research might also investigate the impact of media exposure on more complex emotions, such as the co-occurrence of happy and sad feelings, for example, when watching movies such as *La Vita è Bella* (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001; Oliver et al., 2012). From research among adults, it is known that people can use entertainment not only as a way of experiencing enjoyment, but also as a means of grappling with questions such as life's purpose and meaningfulness—which is not necessarily elicited by positive emotions exclusively (Oliver & Raney, 2011). The question is whether these so-called "eudaimonic motivations," reflecting the use of media entertainment as a source of meaningfulness seeking, also occur among children and adolescents and, if so, at what stage of childhood or adolescence these motivations emerge.

Finally, a particularly important emotion to consider is moral elevation, which has been defined as a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when witnessing unexpected acts of human compassion or virtue (Haidt, 2000). After feeling moral elevation, individuals become more motivated to affiliate with and help others. It is conceivable that media characters displaying prosocial behaviors can also evoke this mechanism. Witnessing good deeds in media might change the thought—action repertoire, triggering moral elevation and, in turn, making prosocial behaviors of the viewers more likely (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2006; Fredrickson, 2003; Haidt, 2000). Research among adults has shown promising results regarding movie exposure and moral elevation (Niemic & Wedding, 2014; Oliver et al., 2012), but the topic has not yet been studied among children or adolescents. The concept of moral elevation raises several research questions, for example, at what age children or adolescents start to experience moral elevation and how various types of media sources can elicit such

complex emotions. A recent study among young adults revealed that feelings of elevation could be elicited by an online video lasting less than 5 minutes. Interestingly, the raised feelings of elevation created feelings of greater affinity and less prejudice toward diverse racial end ethnic groups (Oliver et al., 2015). A promising step forward would be to examine whether online videos also can lead to experiences of moral elevation in children and adolescents and how this, subsequently, is related to their actual acts of kindness and well-being.

Conclusion

> "You know, the ancient Egyptians had a beautiful belief about death.
> When their souls got to the entrance to heaven, the guards asked two questions.
> Their answers determined whether they were able to enter or not.
> 'Have you found joy in your life?'
> 'Has your life brought joy to others?'"
> Carter Chambers (in the movie "The Bucket List", 2007)

In this essay we introduced positive media psychology to the field of children, adolescents, and media. We hope that in the coming years more research will be conducted that focuses on the positive effects of media on children and adolescents. We have argued that our research field owes it to science and society to extend this field of positive media effects research. It is important to emphasize that we well recognize that the idea behind positive media psychology is not novel, and we make no claim of originality. Moreover, the importance of research on adverse media effects should not be ignored. However, the balance in media effects research among children and adolescents needs to be restored. We hope that positive media psychology will spark studies on how media move children and adolescents. Move them emotionally, but also literally by inspiring them to be kind and grateful and to use their own specific character strengths every day in order to thrive and flourish (Baumeister et al., 2013; Seligman, 2002). The large amount of positive media content, combined with a huge reach and popularity among children and adolescents, gives media immense potential in enriching the lives of children and adolescents.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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