TV WATCHING, SOAP OPERA AND HAPPINESS

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One hundred and fourteen subjects reported the amount of time they spent watching television in general, and soap opera in particular. They also completed scales measuring happiness and other personality variables, such as extraversion and cooperativeness. In the multiple regression analysis, having controlled for the demographic variables, watching TV was related to unhappiness, whereas watching soap opera was related to happiness. Discriminant analysis showed that females, higher happiness and extraversion distinguished regular soap watchers (who nevertheless watched little TV in general) from irregular soap watchers (who nevertheless watched a lot of TV in general).

Key words: soap opera, TV watching, happiness


Watching TV now occupies more leisure time than any other leisure activity, on average about 4.75 hours a day for women, and 3.75 for men in Britain. One of the most popular forms of TV is “soap opera”. It seems likely that watching TV is very satisfying, or people would not do it so much, though some studies have found that it is not rated very highly as a source of satisfaction. The present study investigates the satisfaction obtained from TV watching in general and from watching soap operas in particular.

Is watching TV a source of happiness, satisfaction or joy? Robinson(1) found that only 17% of a large American sample reported “great satisfaction” from viewing TV, compared with 32% for reading, 26% for sports and games and 25% for housework. What about the immediate effects of TV on mood? Csikszentmihalyi and Kubey(2) found that when watching TV people felt more drowsy, passive and weaker than when reading or participating in other leisure activities. Since most TV programmes are presented in a cheerful and enter-
taining way, such a positive state would be expected. Moreover, people watch TV a great deal, and there has been a lot of evidence for various “uses and gratifications”(3—5). Therefore, it seems likely that TV watching will be associated with a somewhat raised level of satisfaction and happiness.

“Soap opera” has become very popular in recent years in several parts of the world. Perhaps it offers especially powerful gratification. In a recent study, Livingstone(6) asked regular watchers the reasons that they thought soap opera is so popular.
(1) Entertainment and escapism “You can have a little romance, glamour, passion, love and hate in your life” 92%
(2) Realism. “It [EastEnders] is very much a soap of the 80s’ dealing with the problems that occur in everyday life such as unemployment, racism, adultery, rape, alcoholism, and drugs” 89%.
(3) Characters as extension of real-world social networks. “I know that after a while the characters do become real people and we are concerned for their well-being just as we are our friends and colleagues” 62%.
(4) As an educational medium. “We can relate to the situation and sometimes sort your own problems out through listening and doing what the character portrayed has done” 42%.
(5) As part of daily life. “After a while you watch it so much it becomes a regular thing to do. On Wednesdays you come home, have dinner, do your jobs, watch Coronation Street.

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wash up and then it's time for Dallas” 40%.

(6) Emotional experience. “When you’re watching soap operas you can experience a full range of emotions from anger and despair to sheer joy, excitement and relief” 37%.

(7) Keeping a critical distance. “Many people like to watch them to laugh because we all know life is not really like that. However, even so, we like to get involved in their plots” 52%.

Hypothesis 1. Watching TV in general and soap opera in particular will have positive effects on happiness.

Which kinds of people watch TV most? There is a substantial social class difference, working class people (classes D and E) watch 4.87 hours a day; classes A and B 2.78 hours(7). As we saw above, women watch more TV than men. Other groups who watch more TV are those who are ill, housebound, or unemployed, members of ethnic minority groups, the young and the old(8,9). Little is known about personality differences, but lonely people watch a lot, 21% of them over 5 hours a day(10). One theory of TV watching is that it is used to control mood. Experiments have been done where different moods are induced, and subjects then asked to choose a TV programme to watch. Subjects who had been given a stressful puzzle task chose a relaxing rather than exciting film, while subjects who had been given a boring task mostly chose an exciting film(11). However it is not clear from this which kinds of personality would be expected to watch more TV in general.

Watching soap opera, and to a lesser extent “sit coms”, may have a clearer relationship with personality. It has been suggested that watching these programmes is a kind of “parasocial” activity, i.e. social behaviour at second-hand. It could follow that introverts, and people with poor social skills would watch more; or it could follow that extraverts would watch more soap opera, in order to enjoy even more social activity. In an unpublished experiment in which subjects were asked to talk about recent happy events, we found that introverts talked about soap opera and other parasocial experiences more often than extraverts, who described real social encounters more often. In one study it was found that ethnic minority group members watched more soap opera in order to learn how to behave in common social situations(8). In another study(14), we have found that cooperativeness as a personality trait strongly correlated with both extraversion and social skills. It follows, then, that cooperative people should, like extraverts, watch more soap operas for the enjoyment of cooperative social intercourse.

Hypothesis 2. This is exploratory rather than predictive. It is expected that there will be personality differences in watching TV in general, and soap opera in particular.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Subjects

114 subjects from the Oxford Subject Panel took part in this study. Subjects were residents from the Oxford area who volunteered to participate in psychological studies. The standing panel is representative of the general population in the UK on all demographic variables except race. This current sample was all white and composed of 42 males and 72 females, ages ranging from 18 to 65, with a mean of 44.1. There was no age difference between the two sexes.

Materials

Television watching. Two indicators were used: (a) how many hours a day do you watch TV? (b) how many programmes do you watch?

Soap opera watching. Two indicators were used: (a) do you watch soap operas regularly? (b) how many times per week?

Happiness was measured by the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI)(12). This is a 29-item questionnaire, originally based on reversing the items of Beck Depression Inventory, and adding further items. The Cronbach alpha of the scale exceeds .90. It is also quite consistent over time, and correlated .43 with judgements by friends. The validity of the scale has been confirmed by its strong correlations with other indices of the three components it is supposed to measure, i.e. positive affect, negative affect and cognitive life satisfaction. For more details, please refer to the original paper cited above.

Extraversion was measured by the EPQ(13), which has been widely used internationally with good reliability and validity. The E scale in the EPQ is also regarded as one of the best measures of the extraversion construct(17).

Cooperativeness was measured by a newly devised scale(14), consisting of 36 pro- or anti-cooperation statements covering all major life do-
mains: Leisure, Leadership, Friends, Family, Education, Clubs, Work, and Committees. This is a measure assessing self-reported ability, desire for, and approval of cooperation in all these areas. The reliability of the scale has been found acceptable (Cronbach alpha .81, and 6-month test-retest .69). The validity of the scale has been confirmed using multivariate-multimethod matrix. For more details on the psychometrics of the Cooperation Scale, please refer to the above mentioned article. Cooperativeness as measured by the scale was also found to be predictive of happiness in the earlier study.

Demographic Information was also recorded. Subjects reported their sex and age. Job status were classified as "no paid job", "part-time job", "full-time job", and "overtime or second job".

RESULTS

On average, subjects watched 2 hours TV (SD=1.36), and 3 programmes (SD=2.10) a day. Nearly half of our subjects (49.1%) watched soap operas regularly, and 41 of them (35.9%) watched 3 times or more per week. In all the further analyses, following the convention in communication and leisure surveys, hours spent watching television was used as the TV watching indicator, while self proclaimed soap operas watching was treated as a dummy variable to indicate regular soap watching.

Using Pearson correlation, watching soap operas was correlated with sex (female, sex was also treated as a dummy variable), extraversion (r=.27, p<.01), and cooperativeness (r=.15, p<.05), while TV watching was correlated with age (older) and job status (unemployed or part-time).

A partial correlation coefficient of .22 (p<.01) confirmed that the finding that regular soap watchers were extravedted still holds up when controlling for sex of viewers. However, the partial correlation between soap watching and cooperativeness was not significant when controlling for sex. Since women have been reported to watch both TV and soaps a lot, we performed another partial correlation between soap watching and sex, controlling for general TV watching. The correlation coefficient was highly significant (r=.37, p<.001). Thus, it seems that women did choose to spend their free time watching soap, rather than watching a lot of TV in general. Soap watchers were also more extraverted regardless of their gender (i.e. when gender was partialled out). On the other hand, people who watched a lot of TV in general were older, unemployed or part-time workers (i.e. when soap operas watching was partialled out). In addition, soap watching was also positively correlated with happiness.

However, in order to examine whether soap or TV watching had any effects on happiness, we needed statistical controls for all the demographic variables. Hence, a multiple regression was performed using the hierarchical method. At Step 1, age sex and job status were entered into the equation; At Step 2, TV and soap watching were entered; At Step 3, psychological variables, i.e. extraversion and cooperativeness were also entered. Results are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R square</th>
<th>R square change</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>F</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.07*</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
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<td>Job</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap opera</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.17****</td>
<td>-.08****</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperativeness</td>
<td>.30</td>
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<td>-.08****</td>
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Note: * = p < .05, **** = p < .0001.
+ indicates a new step in the hierarchical regression.
F value is for the overall model.
Among demographic variables, age was related to happiness - younger people were happier (Beta=.19, p<.05). Sex and job status made no contribution. After demographic variables had been statistically controlled, TV watching was related to unhappiness (Beta=-.221, p<.05), whereas soap watching was related to happiness (Beta=.23, p<.00). Finally, extraversion also contributed to happiness (Beta=.41, p<.001).

So far, it seems that soap and TV viewing each had different correlates, and had different impacts on happiness. It is interesting to compare TV watching in general against soap watching in particular. Do personal factors, such as sex, age, job status, extraversion and cooperativeness, or personal mental state, such as happiness, differentiate TV watchers from soap watchers? A discriminant analysis was carried out to examine the effects of the above mentioned predictors in more detail. The subjects were classified into four groups, according to their scores on TV watching (sample mean as cut-off point) and soap watching. Group 1 were people who watched both TV and soap a lot; Group 2 were people who watched a lot TV but little soap; Group 3 were people who watched little TV but a lot soap; Group 4 were people who watched little TV and soap.

Three canonical discriminant functions were derived. The first accounted for 70.91% of the total discriminating power of the three functions, and the other two accounted for the remaining 29.08%.

The first discriminant function was highly significant, Chi square (21, N=114)=41.57, p<.005. The canonical correlation, which is a measure of the association between the discriminant function and the dummy variables representing the 4 groups, was .49. The square of this value represents the proportion of variance in the discriminant function that is explained by group membership - in this case, 24.01%. For this function, major determinants of the scores were sex, happiness, age and extraversion. The standardized discriminant coefficients for the major predictor variables were .70 (sex), .38 (happiness), .37 (age), and .35 (extraversion). When evaluated at group means, the function value was highest for Group 1 (.63) and lowest for Group 2 (-.69); Group 3 (.46) was intermediate but closer to Group 1 than Group 2; Group 4 (-.51) was intermediate too but closer to Group 2 than Group 1. The group means for the discriminant variables are presented in Fig. 1.

Groups 1 and 3 (regular soap watchers) were distinguished from Groups 2 and 4 (Irregular soap watchers) by female, higher happiness, older age, and extraversion. In order to contrast general TV watching with soap watching, comparison should be made between Groups 2 and 3. Here, Group 3 (regular soap but low TV watchers) was distinguished from

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**Fig. 1.** Group means for the discriminant variables
Group 2 (irregular soap but high TV watchers) by female, higher happiness and extraversion. However, there was no age difference between the two groups. The second and third discriminant functions failed to reach statistical significance, with Chi-square (12, N=114)=12.86, and Chi-square (5, N=114)=1.05, respectively.

Overall, therefore, the results showed that female, higher happiness, older age and extraversion distinguished regular soap watchers (Groups 1 and 3) from irregular watchers (Groups 2 and 4). In addition, there is also evidence that female, higher happiness and extraversion distinguished regular soap watchers (who nevertheless watched little TV in general) from irregular soap watchers (who nevertheless watched a lot of TV in general).

**DISCUSSION**

The most interesting finding is that while people who watch a lot of TV in general are less happy, those who watch a lot of soap operas are more happy than other people. This finding was not only supported by correlations, but also emerged from multiple regression analysis. After controlling for effects of demographic variables such as age, sex and job status, TV watching in general contributed negatively to happiness, whereas watching soap operas contributed positively. The negative relationship with TV watching in general could perhaps best be explained in terms of some of the kinds of people who are known to be heavy watchers. Research has found that women, the old and the young, those who are ill, housebound, unemployed and lonely, members of lower social class and minority groups, watch TV more than average\(^{(8)}\). Results from this study also supported the relationship between being old, unemployed or doing part-time work and watching a lot of TV in general, but not necessarily soap operas. Within this group, however, it may still be the case that TV has some positive effect.

The positive relation between soap opera watching and happiness may be because these programmes offer pseudo-membership of a close-knit social group, which people almost feel themselves to be members of, of the so-called “parasocial” theory\(^{(15)}\). Another part of the explanation may lie in the “open test” aspect of soap opera: a variety of perspectives are presented, with no clear solution, to everyday problems; viewers can provide their own interpretations, or discuss the programme later in the pub\(^{(16)}\).

The second main finding is that there are clear individual differences between those who watch TV in general or soap opera. Heavy TV watchers in this study correlated only with age, and having a part-time job, with a non-significant link with introversion. Heavy soap-opera watching had stronger correlates - with being female, extraverted, cooperative, and with being happy - though we regard the latter more as a consequence. In order to fine-tune this individual differences, discriminant analysis was adopted, where distinction between heavy TV watchers and regular soap operas watcher deserves the most attention. There was clear evidence that sex (female) and extraversion were important discriminant variables. Previous studies have shown that women watch soap opera a lot more than men, and various explanations have been offered. Soap opera is said to be aimed at female viewers, shown at times convenient to them, and it becomes part of women's everyday life. They deal with the minutiae of relationships, with romantic and other relationships, family life, rather than with work or politics for example, and are in the tradition of women's fiction. In addition they usually give prominent roles to “strong, active women”\(^{(16)}\).

Why do extraverts watch more soap opera? The explanation may be simply that extraverts enjoy social interaction and relationships, both in real-life, and at second-hand. However extraverts watch less TV in general (a non-significant trend). The soap world evidently has a special appeal for extraverts. Cooperativeness similarly could be accounted for by the basically cooperative nature of the groups portrayed, which are therefore the kind of scene which cooperative individuals can empathize with and enjoy seeing.

Leisure is a new field for psychology, and as working week becomes shorter, people retire earlier, and unemployment remains high because of automation and computers, the amount of leisure we have is increasing, and will continue to do so. It is not for social scientists to say how people should spend their spare time, but at least we can show the effects of different leisure on well-being. It is also essential that we should understand leisure -- why people need it,
and what kinds of people engage in what kinds of activities, and why. Yet, psychologists have been slow in getting to grips with the subject. This study is an attempt in the direction, but much more is needed in the future. The apparent dichotomy of TV watching and soap watching in terms of their effects on happiness is very interesting. Maybe we should stop treating television as a single leisure activity, and should start to look further into its different components and their specific effects. In addition, the high brow approach of condemning soap operas as “cheap melodramas” needs hard rethinking, as the results have clearly showed that they have quite positive effects on well-being, at least for some groups.

Individual differences research applied to leisure study also has the potential of breaking new grounds. Proposals, mainly in the USA, have been made for the development of “leisure counselling”, of which Pleasant Activities Therapy is a special case (18). However, some people are not aware of what they enjoy doing most. Individual differences research can thus help to match persons (for example, in terms of their personality traits) to leisure activities. These research can also provide important information for community planners and the leisure industry, in order to offer better and more effective services to the public.

SUMMARY

This field survey of TV watching and in particular soap watching habits probed into the relationship between these generally passive forms of leisure and mental health, as measured by the happiness scale. Two major findings have emerged from the analyses. First, while people who watch a lot of TV in general are less happy, those who watch a lot of soap opera are more happy than other people. Second, there are clear individual differences between those who watch TV in general or soap operas. As to explaining these differences, further rigorous studies are required. Results are also discussed in terms of their implication to leisure psychology and leisure service in general.

REFERENCES

看電視，看電視連續劇及幸福感之關係

陸洛 Michael Argyle*

本研究調查了英國牛津地區114名社區民衆，被試報告了他們總體看電視的時間，特別是看連續劇的時間，被試還完成了幸福感和外向人格，合作性傾向的人格測量。在多變數回歸分析中，當控制了性別，年齡，有無職業等因素後，看電視與不幸福有顯著關係，而看連續劇則與幸福有顯著關係。鑑別分析則顯示女性，高幸福感和外向人格最能將固定連續劇觀賞者（但很少看其它電視）和非固定連續劇觀賞者（但看許多其它電視）區分開來。

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