

# Coping and Film Reception

## A Study on the Impact of Film Dramas and the Mediating Effects of Emotional Modes of Film Reception and Coping Strategies

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**Abstract.** This study investigated the impact of film dramas on the emotional and cognitive state of recipients, as well as mediating effects of different modes of film reception. Furthermore, associations between the modes of reception and individual favored coping strategies were examined. One hundred fifty nondepressive and nonsuicidal adults living in Austria watched one of three films featuring the death of the main character. Data on the viewers' mood, inner tensions, self-esteem, life satisfaction, depression, suicidal tendencies, attitudes toward suicide, predominantly used modes of reception, and preferred coping strategies were collected with questionnaires that were handed out before and after seeing the movie. Results indicated that drama viewing was linked to both negative and positive effects: on the one hand, to a deterioration of mood as well as an increase of inner tensions and depression scores, and on the other hand, to a rise in self-esteem and life satisfaction as well as a drop in suicidal tendencies. The more a subject was involved in the film, the more pronounced were the negative impacts and the smaller were the positive reactions. The viewers' preferred coping strategies were partly associated with the modes of reception: the more an individual preferred to seek social support when facing a problem, the more he or she identified with the drama's protagonist and tried to find behavior patterns in the movie to improve his or her own life.

**Keywords:** drama, film effects, involvement, coping, modes of reception

### Introduction

One topic within the research on emotion in media processes and effects that certainly deserves more attention is the impact film dramas can have on their viewers. There are several different theories and perspectives on the viewers' responses to the portrayal of tragedies in the media. According to affective disposition theory (Zillmann, 1996), viewers enjoy a film the most when the protagonist benefits from the story's outcome. If the heroes fail, we feel bad for them, which might lead to a deterioration of our mood and well-being. Evidence from several studies suggests that individuals exposed to sad film endings experience significant higher degrees of emotional stress and a deterioration of mood (e.g., Hesse, Spies, Hänze, & Gerrards-Hesse, 1992; Tannenbaum & Gaer, 1965; Till, 2010). Some dramas conclude with the portrayal of the main character's suicide. Several researchers reported that the broadcasting of such dramas can lead to imitational suicides among the viewing population (e.g., Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Ostroff & Boyd,

1987; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). Accordingly, many psychologists consider portrayals of suicide in the media as an "advertisement" for suicidal behavior, which might increase the recipients' suicidality or their approval of suicide as a mean to solve personal problems (e.g., Phillips & Lesyna, 1995).

On the other hand, terror management theory suggests that reminding people of their vulnerability and mortality increases their need for an anxiety buffer (Greenberg et al., 1992). This reduction of anxiety is accomplished by raising one's self-esteem based on the belief that one is meeting the standards of value prescribed by the respective cultural worldview (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). In fact, the confrontation with mortality can have positive, liberating effects, facilitating confidence, purposefulness, and self-assertiveness, and creating an appreciation for life and increased life satisfaction (Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Martin, Campbell, & Henry, 2004). Moreover, Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory proposes that humans tend to evaluate their values, abilities, and living

conditions by comparing them with those of other people. A comparison with the undesirable situations typically displayed in dramas is thought to improve an individual's emotional well-being. Tan (2008) points out that emotional responses to entertainment can be experienced as training of one's own adaptive capacities. Accordingly, the results of various media studies suggest that people use sad films to cope with negative experiences in their lives, which results in an increased enjoyment of the film and an improved mood (e.g., Mares & Cantor, 1992; Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006). Some researchers (e.g., Oliver, 1993; Oliver, Weaver, & Sargent, 2000) argue that individual differences in personality in terms of empathy and femininity account for the ability to positively evaluate negative feelings, thus leading to enjoyment of media contents with negative valences. However, maybe it is not necessarily a combination of certain traits of our personality that influence media effects, but rather a situational approach to the media product and its content.

## Involvement and Modes of Reception

Human emotions are based on the appraisal of a given situation (Lazarus, 1993; Scherer, 1984). The appraisal of a media-induced situation, however, is much more complex (see Mangold, Unz, & Winterhoff-Spurk, 2001). There are many situational aspects a recipient can focus on: The content of the media portrayal, the situation of the reception, the nature of the product, evoked memories and daydreams, and the interactions between content and situation (Wirth & Schramm, 2007). Accordingly, the individual approach toward a media stimulus must be considered a key factor regarding its impact (see Mangold et al., 2001).

Krugman (1965) suggested that recipients use different levels of involvement (high versus low involvement) to deal with a media input. He defined involvement as the number of bridging experiences or personal references a person makes between the content of a stimulus and his or her life. The fact that *involvement* underwent a multitude of different definitions and operationalizations over time led to an increasing diffusion of this concept, resulting in a variety of perspectives and characterizations of involvement (see Half, 1998; Wirth, 2006). While some authors conceptualize involvement as an attribute of information processing (e.g., Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984; Rubin & Perse, 1988), this paper focuses on involvement as a distinctive form of media usage.

Especially in literature studies, a one-dimensional categorization of media reception was applied. It was assumed that works of high artistic content are consumed via an analytical form of reception and kitsch without emotional distance (Vorderer, 1992). Liebes and Katz (1986) differentiated between involved and distanced reception based on rhetorical patterns observed in group discussions after the screening of a soap opera. Oatley (1994) and Tan (1996) labeled emotions experienced during involvement as *within-emotions* or *fiction emotions* and feelings toward the media message as *without-emotions* or *artifact emotions*.

Today, however, one-dimensional conceptions of involvement are deemed to be inadequate (Suckfüll, 2007).

Accordingly, several multidimensional approaches toward involvement were developed during the last few decades (see Suckfüll & Scharkow, 2009; Wirth, 2006). Charlton and Borcsa (1997) proposed that recipients differ in their approach toward films along three bipolar dimensions: illusion versus in-lusion, identification versus projection, and situation oriented versus person oriented. MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) differentiated between six distinctive levels of involvement: feature analysis, basic categorization, meaning analysis, information integration, role-taking, and constructive processes. However, while Charlton and Borcsa (1997) fail to consider combinations of different forms of involvement (Suckfüll, 2007), the approach suggested by MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) neither separates involvement from attention and perception nor differentiates adequately between the various levels of involvement (Wirth, 2006). Appel, Koch, Schreier, and Groeben (2002) developed a scale for reading experience consisting of 14 subdimensions. This approach, however, left the theoretical and empirical relations between these dimensions indeterminate (Suckfüll & Scharkow, 2009).

A concept that accounts for these points of criticism was recently publicized by Suckfüll (2007; Suckfüll & Scharkow, 2009). This model presumes that each recipient acquires specific approaches during his or her process of media learning and socialization which are known as *modes of reception*. These modes can be described as distinct and steadily changing forms of involvement with media contents to maintain a certain level of activation or a specific mood. In this respect, Suckfüll (2007) defines the modes of reception as individually learned and practiced strategies which recipients use during the consumption of a media product and which reflect the respective approach to the processing of the media stimulus during reception.

According to Suckfüll (2007), the modes of reception vary with an individual's personality and situation. Recipients exhibit a mode or a combination of modes which they use predominantly and which they change during reception. Suckfüll and Scharkow (2009) proposed six modes of film reception:

- (1) Socio-involvement – this mode refers to a process in which the recipient compares himself or herself to the protagonists in the film. It is based on a form of media participation as proposed by Vorderer (1998), in which the viewers are concerned with the person on screen. It can be envisioned as an activity similar to identification – as outlined by Cohen (2001) – empathy (Omdahl, 1995), or wishful identification (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).
- (2) Ego-involvement – this modality is the recipient's experience when trying to find suggestions in a film to improve his or her own life or to solve a problem. This mode is based on Vorderer's (1998) concept of "ego-emotional" media participation, which occurs when media contents are meaningful or of personal relevance to the recipient.

- (3) Diegetic Involvement – this factor describes an activity in which a person is engaged in the film plot, the viewer imagines himself or herself being part of the story. This mode can be considered to be equivalent to the concept of transportation (Gerrig, 1993). Presence (Lee, 2004) and escapism (Vorderer, 1996) are also related concepts.
- (4) Emotional Involvement – this form of involvement can be described as a way to act out one's feelings, or the recipient's willingness to get in touch with his or her emotions. According to Suckfüll (2007), this mode correlates significantly with the concept of *need for affect*, the motivation to approach emotion-inducing situations (Maio & Esses, 2001).
- (5) Imagination – this is a very creative mode of reception that involves a person's own imaginary modification of the film plot: for example, an alternative ending.
- (6) Production – this modality refers to the recipient's reflecting on the way a film or a certain scene was produced. This mode is considered to be a defense mechanism against unpleasant sensations and is similar to what Charlton and Borcsa (1997) define as *in-lusion* and Liebes and Katz (1986) as well as Vorderer (1992) describe as distance or analyzing reception.

Suckfüll and Scharrow (2009) consider these modes as distinguishable from each other, although the intercorrelations between them are substantial. As a matter of fact, the modes *socio-involvement* and *ego-involvement* can be combined to a second-order factor, entitled *identity work*, which describes a comparison process used by a person during the reception of a film to cope with his or her own issues. *Diegetic involvement* and *emotional involvement* can be merged, producing the second-order factor of *confidence*, referring to the recipient's willingness to abandon a part of his or her control over the situation while remaining confident to be able to regain it without suffering any negative consequences. With this approach, Suckfüll & Scharrow (2009) presented a multidimensional model of involvement in fictional films which couples the original conceptualization of involvement as qualitative information processing (Krugman, 1965) with the idea of a distanced mode of reception (Liebes & Katz, 1986; Vorderer, 1992) and other concepts featuring different types of involvement (e.g., Charlton & Borcsa, 1997; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989).

The importance of involvement for film effects was empirically demonstrated by Koriat, Melkman, Averill, and Lazarus (1972). The viewers of a "stress-film" were instructed to imagine that the portrayed events would happen to themselves, resulting in a change of their emotional state. An Austrian study (Till, 2010) revealed that the more viewers of a drama were involved with the content, the more their emotional well-being deteriorated. Those studies, however, solely examined how involvement in general affects reception.

Empathy occurs when an individual shares another person's emotional state due to taking his or her perspective and

appraising the given situation in a similar way (Omdahl, 1995). In this regard, empathy can be considered a correlate of Suckfüll's (2007) concept of *socio-involvement*. Based on evidence showing empathy to amplify media-induced emotions (e.g., Darnell & Cook, 2009; Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987; Feshbach, 1989), it is plausible to assume that *socio-involvement* is a significant determinant of emotional reactions to a movie. Identification, another correlate of *socio-involvement*, and transportation, a correlate of *diegetic involvement* (Suckfüll, 2007), are also known to increase the impact of mass media on recipients' emotions, attitudes, and behavior (see Basil, 1996; Brown & Basil, 1995; Green & Brock, 2000; Perry & Perry, 1976; Till, 2010). These associations indicate that audience responses to a film are influenced by the modes of reception. However, we still do not know how specific modes might differentially influence media effects and which mechanisms underlie these modalities.

## Emotional Coping

Coping is conceptualized as "a response to environmental and psychological demands in particular stressful situations" (Endler & Parker, 1990, p. 845). Tamborini, Stiff, and Heide (1990) proposed that cognitive and behavioral activities during film reception – like looking away or thinking of something else – can be considered an application of coping behaviors to prevent the onset of negative effects. Similarly, some viewers of horror films concentrate on the factitiousness of the depicted events to reduce the evoked fear (Cantor, 2002).

The literature on coping is heterogeneous; there is basically no agreement on how many coping styles actually exist (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Dunahoo, Hobfoll, Monnier, Hulsizer, & Johnson, 1998). A very useful model to describe the various approaches to deal with stressful situations (see Dunahoo et al., 1998) was created by Monnier, Hobfoll, Dunahoo, Hulsizer, and Johnson (1998), differentiating between nine individual strategies: assertive action, social joining, seeking social support, cautious action, instinctive action, avoidance, indirect action, antisocial action, and aggressive action. The individual coping styles influence a person's media reception. Children with inadequate coping strategies, for example, exhibit a greater desire to watch violent TV programs and thereby increase their already high anxiety (Vitouch & Mikosz, 1987). A link between coping and film effects has also been suggested by Lazarus (1966, 1993) and Tamborini et al. (1990).

The advent of research on media-induced stress resulted in the development of the concept of emotion regulation defined as an individual's attempt to influence the occurrence and expression of emotions (Gross, 1998). Wirth and Schramm (2007) differentiate between five strategies: turning away from the media content cognitively (e.g., focusing on the situation of the reception) or noncognitively (e.g., closing one's eyes), turning toward the content cognitively (e.g., focusing on the production of the film) or

noncognitively (e.g., reducing the volume of the soundtrack), and suppression. The recipient selects these strategies based on his or her socio-biography (Cantor, 2002).

A limitation of emotion regulation as outlined by Wirth and Schramm (2007) is the nonconsideration of the option to intensify an emotional experience. This possibility is discussed by Gross and Thompson (2007; Thompson, 1994), however their conception primarily focuses on monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish specific goals and is not centered on modulating media involvement to optimize the emotional experience. Moreover, emotion regulation (Wirth & Schramm, 2007) does not take into account that people might use involvement in a film to cope with problems in “real” life. Therefore, it is useful to link an individual’s favored coping style with his or her predominantly used forms of film involvement to analyze the impact of a motion picture. It is apt to assume that our coping strategies influence our approach toward the film, which in turn affects our reactions to the movie.

## Hypotheses

Based on Zillmann’s (1996) affective disposition theory and on the empirical evidence found in the studies of Hesse et al. (1992), Tannenbaum and Gaer (1965), and Till (2010) we predicted a deterioration of the viewers’ emotional parameters as a result of the screening of a drama with a negative outcome:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* The viewing of a film drama has a negative influence on the mood, the inner tension, and the depression of the recipients.

Due to the associations between the suicide of a film protagonist and the suicidal behavior of the viewers found in various medical-psychological investigations (see Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Ostroff & Boyd, 1987; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988) we hypothesized:

*H2:* The viewing of a film drama increases the viewers’ suicidal tendencies and their approval of suicide as a solution to personal problems.

Social comparison and terror management theory suggest that an individual’s contentment with his or her personal circumstances increases when faced with other peoples’ fatal or hopeless situations in the media. However, if we hypothesize a deterioration of mood, a rise of inner tension, depression, and suicidality, as well as an increase of suicide approval as a result of the screening of a drama with a negative outcome, we also have to assume a negative impact of such films on the viewers’ evaluation of their self and their own lives. Thus we hypothesized:

*H3:* The viewing of a film drama deteriorates the recipients’ self-esteem and life satisfaction.

On account of the empirical evidence demonstrating a connection between the impact of media on the recipients and their level of involvement with its content, we hypothesized the modes of reception (*identity work*, *confidence*, *imagination*, and *production*) to modulate the effects of film dramas. Since each modality is supposed to represent a specific form of involvement (see Suckfüll, 2007; Suckfüll & Scharkow, 2009), all of them should amplify the film effects.

*H4:* The more a person uses the reception modes (a) *identity work*, (b) *confidence*, (c) *imagination*, or (d) *production* during the screening of a film drama, the greater is the deterioration of the viewer’s emotional and cognitive state.

The modes of film reception, especially when watching a drama or a movie that focuses on tragic issues and problems of a protagonist, could be considered as a way to cope with the observed content of the motion picture. Therefore we hypothesized that reception modalities used by an individual to approach the viewing of a drama are determined by his or her favored coping strategies. The strategy of *avoidance* could be deemed, for example, as a similar mental process to the reception mode *imagination*, since both conceptions use “an escape from reality” to handle the situation. We analyzed the following hypothesis:

*H5:* The higher an individual’s basic parameter value of avoidance when coping with a problem, the higher will be his or her scoring on the reception mode *imagination* when viewing a film drama.

A further coping strategy is seeking social support (Monnier et al., 1998). It is apt to assume that people with a preference for this form of problem solving also like to use the reception modality *identity work*, since both processes contain certain aspects of orienting one’s behavior on other peoples’ actions to improve the own situation.

*H6:* The higher an individual’s basic parameter value of seeking social support when coping with a problem, the higher will be his or her scoring on the reception mode *identity work* when viewing a film drama.

Some people use indirect actions to cope with their problems; they manipulate their environment in order to make it believe someone else is in control of the situation, although the manipulating person himself or herself gets the solution of the problem going (Monnier et al., 1998). We assumed that individuals favoring this style of coping would have high loadings on *imagination* and *production*, since all of those processes use the supervision of feelings and emotion as a protective mechanism.

*H7 and H8:* The higher an individual’s basic parameter value of indirect actions when coping with a problem, the higher will be his or her scoring on the

reception mode (a) *imagination* and (b) *production* when viewing a film drama.

## Method

### Design and Material

A reception study was conducted consisting of three groups of participants watching a film drama that ended with the main character's death: *Phenomenon* (USA, 1996), *It's My Party* (USA, 1996), or *The Fire Within* (France/Italy, 1963). All three films feature male protagonists who are suffering from a very serious disease and are dying in consequence of their distress; in *It's My Party* and *The Fire Within*, the main character commits suicide, in *Phenomenon*, he dies due to his ailment. These movies are representing different facets of the same genre: dramas with a negative outcome.

### Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 154 individuals living in Austria. Four of them were eliminated due to high depression and/or suicidality scores. The included study sample ( $N = 150$ ) consisted of 55 men (36.7%), with a mean age of 35.18 years, and 95 women (63.3%), with a mean age of 36.56 years.

### Measures

#### Mood

Mood was measured by a scale designed by Becker (1988) using eight items (adjectives such as "merry" or "sad") on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all" to 4 = "highly" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

#### Inner Tensions

Inner tensions were measured by a scale designed by Imhof (1998) using 10 items (adjectives such as "tense" or "jittery") on a 4-point scale ranging from "definitely do not feel" to "definitely feel." However, one item was excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ).

#### Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Scale developed by Collani and Herzberg (2003) using 10 items (statements such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities") on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 = "strongly disagree" to 3 = "strongly agree" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ).

### Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured by the Life Satisfaction Questionnaire developed by Schumacher (2003) using five items (statements such as "I am satisfied with my life") on a 7-point-scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." However, one item was excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ).

### Depression

Depression was measured by a questionnaire designed by Lehl and Gallwitz (1983) using eight items (statements such as "I want to cry") plus one warm-up item on a 5-point scale ranging from "completely wrong" to "exactly right." However, one item was excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ).

### Suicidality

Suicidality was measured by a questionnaire designed by Stork (1972) using 52 dichotomized items (statements such as "I can empathize with people who die to join a beloved person in death") ranging from "wrong" to "right." However, six items were excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Attitudes Toward Suicide

Attitudes toward suicide were measured by a questionnaire developed by Biblarz, Brown, Biblarz, Pilgrim, and Baldree (1991) using 19 items (statements such as "Everyone has the right to commit suicide") on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 = "disagree" to 5 = "agree." However, two items were excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ). This questionnaire was translated into German by the investigators of this study.

### Coping Strategies

Coping strategies were measured by the German Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (GSACS) designed by Starke (2000) using 52 items (e.g., statements such as "Avoid dealing with the problem, things like this often go away on their own" for avoidance; "Check with friends about what they would do" for seeking social support; and "Let others think they are in control, but keep your own hands firmly on the wheel" for indirect action) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = "not at all what I would do" to 5 = "very much what I would do" (avoidance: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ; seeking social support: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ; indirect action: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Modes of Reception

Modes of reception were measured by a questionnaire designed by Suckfüll (2007) using 18 items (statements such

as “In films I seek for suggestions for myself” for *identity work*, “I let myself totally go” for *confidence*, “It is fun for me to change the plot in my mind” for *imagination*, and “I often imagine, how the film was produced” for *production* on a 5-point scale ranging from  $-2 =$  “strongly disagree” to  $+2 =$  “strongly agree” (*identity work*: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ; *confidence*: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ; *imagination*: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ ; *production*: Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ ).

In computing the parameters, scores on the negative items were reversed, so that high scores indicated a high level of the respective variable. The scores were then added together in accordance with the instructions given in the respective manual. Despite the fact that the reliability of the scales measuring depression and the attitudes toward suicide were relatively low – this, of course, constitutes a limitation of our study – all items were retained since the reliability did not improve when bad fitting items were removed.

## Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. All participants agreed to take part by completing an informed consent form. Prior to the screening, we explained to the subjects that they were about to take part in a study on the influence of films. There was no mention of the topic of the films or how the impact would be measured. The subjects’ allocation to the film groups was randomized (*Phenomenon*:  $n = 30$ ; *It’s My Party*:  $n = 60$ ; *The Fire Within*:  $n = 60$ ). It was ensured that the subjects had not already seen the respective film in the past. For ethical reasons solely nondepressive or nonsuicidal participants were included as study subjects. The study took place in Vienna, Austria, and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical University of Vienna and the Vienna General

Hospital/AKH. Before the film questionnaires on mood, inner tensions, self-esteem, life satisfaction, depression, suicidality, attitudes toward suicide, and favored coping strategies were completed by the participants. After the movie the same parameters except for coping were measured again as well as the modes of reception.

## Data Analysis

An overview of each parameter’s mean and standard deviation before and after the movie screening for each film is shown in Table 1. Because no relevant or only minimal differences were revealed between the respective films regarding their impact on the viewers’ emotional and cognitive state (see Till, Niederkrotenthaler, Herberth, Vitouch, & Sonneck, 2010), the data across the three groups were collapsed and analyzed together. Therefore, we were able to examine the effects of a whole genre instead of three individual films.

## Results

### Effects of Film Dramas

To analyze the impact film dramas have on the emotional and cognitive state of the subjects,  $t$  tests were performed (H1–H3). An overview of the results including mean and standard deviation for each parameter is shown in Table 2. There was a significant drop in suicidality ( $t = 3.16$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p < .01$ ), an increase in self-esteem ( $t = -4.64$ ,  $df = 144$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and life satisfaction ( $t = -3.80$ ,  $df = 144$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but also in depression ( $t = -4.88$ ,  $df = 144$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and inner tension scores ( $t = -3.66$ ,  $df = 146$ ,

Table 1. Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for all parameters of recipients’ emotional and mental states for each film before and after screening

		<i>It’s My Party</i>		<i>Fire Within</i>		<i>Phenomenon</i>	
		Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Mood	<i>M</i>	27.03	20.03	26.09	21.51	26.86	22.54
	<i>SD</i>	2.74	4.58	4.08	4.49	3.57	4.32
Inner tension	<i>M</i>	16.19	18.07	18.90	19.03	18.07	18.73
	<i>SD</i>	3.47	4.29	4.67	4.25	3.68	4.64
Self-esteem	<i>M</i>	23.64	24.76	22.90	23.85	24.83	25.72
	<i>SD</i>	5.33	4.40	4.87	4.78	3.91	3.96
Life satisfaction	<i>M</i>	26.25	27.12	24.93	25.68	26.00	26.62
	<i>SD</i>	4.29	4.11	4.71	4.91	4.82	5.65
Depression	<i>M</i>	3.25	5.71	5.11	6.05	3.61	4.86
	<i>SD</i>	2.92	3.20	3.54	4.00	2.29	3.03
Suicidality	<i>M</i>	14.71	13.33	19.03	18.47	13.59	12.24
	<i>SD</i>	8.16	8.00	8.52	9.10	8.24	7.42
Attitudes toward suicide	<i>M</i>	30.34	32.21	34.18	33.72	33.60	34.20
	<i>SD</i>	10.17	10.05	9.65	10.85	9.28	8.87

Note. Values are means and standard deviations of the parameters representing the subjects’ emotional and mental states based on the descriptive statistics analyzed via SPSS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Table 2. Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for all parameters of recipients' emotional and cognitive states before and after screening of a drama (groups 1–3 combined)

	Before		After		<i>t</i> Value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Mood	26.62	3.49	21.11	4.57	14.85***
Inner tensions	15.59	4.02	16.89	4.00	-3.66***
Self-esteem	23.58	4.91	24.58	4.50	-4.64***
Life satisfaction	20.93	3.70	21.54	3.84	-3.80***
Depression	3.01	3.04	4.17	3.25	-4.88***
Suicidality	12.80	8.12	11.99	8.09	3.16**
Attitudes toward suicide	29.39	9.81	30.16	9.85	-1.24

Notes. The last column reports *t* values from paired-samples *t* tests representing the change of the respective parameter. \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed).

*p* < .001), as well as a deterioration of mood ( $t = 14.85$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Only the attitudes towards suicide were not affected by the movie screening ( $t = -1.24$ ,  $df = 141$ ,  $p = .21$ ). Thus H1 was confirmed. The viewing of dramas does indeed have a negative influence on mood, on inner tensions, and on the depression of recipients. H2, on the other hand, was rejected. The screening of the movies does not increase the viewers' suicidality; as a matter of fact, while the subjects' attitudes toward suicide did not change, their suicidal tendencies subsided significantly. Simultaneously, the viewers' self-esteem and satisfaction with their lives improved. This led to a rejection and reversion of H3.

## Modes of Reception and Film Effects

To examine to what extent reception modes have a mediating effect on the impact of film dramas on the viewers' emotional and cognitive state, we performed a series of Pearson correlations for each mode (H4). For an overview of the correlations see Table 3. *Identity work* was significantly linked to the change of inner tensions (Pearson's  $r = .26$ ,  $r^2 = .06$ ,  $n = 147$ ,  $p < .01$ ), depression (Pearson's  $r = .30$ ,  $r^2 = .09$ ,  $n = 145$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and suicidality (Pearson's  $r = .20$ ,  $r^2 = .04$ ,  $n = 143$ ,  $p < .05$ ): The higher an individual's score on this mode, (1) the more of an increase there was in inner tensions and depression and (2) the less suicidal tendencies

diminished. The reception mode *confidence* turned out to correlate significantly with the change of the parameters of mood (Pearson's  $r = -.29$ ,  $r^2 = .08$ ,  $n = 143$ ,  $p < .001$ ), inner tensions (Pearson's  $r = .38$ ,  $r^2 = .14$ ,  $n = 147$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and depression (Pearson's  $r = .39$ ,  $r^2 = .15$ ,  $n = 145$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The more an individual used this mode during the film, the more (1) mood deteriorated and (2) the more inner tensions as well as depression scores increased. The correlations regarding *imagination* demonstrated a significant connection with the change of mood (Pearson's  $r = -.23$ ,  $r^2 = .05$ ,  $n = 143$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and inner tensions (Pearson's  $r = .24$ ,  $r^2 = .05$ ,  $n = 147$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The more the participants were thinking about the plot and trying to modify it in their imagination, the more (1) their mood deteriorated and (2) their inner tensions increased. The reception mode *production* was not significantly associated with a film's effects. Overall, the impact film dramas have on the emotional and cognitive state of viewers is indeed related to the modes of reception. The more the modes *identity work*, *confidence*, or *imagination* are used by a viewer during the reception, the stronger are the negative film effects. Thus H4a–c was confirmed, while H4d was rejected. Of note, in our sample there were high intercorrelations between some of the modes of reception similar to the ones reported by Suckfüll (2007) as well as Suckfüll and Scharkow (2009) in their original description of this new concept (for details, see Table 4).

Table 3. Associations between modes of reception and change of the different parameters of emotional and cognitive state due to screening of film dramas

	Identity work	Confidence	Imagination	Production
Change of:				
Mood	-.13	-.29***	-.23**	.00
Inner tensions	.26**	.38***	.24**	.12
Self-esteem	-.10	.11	-.01	-.12
Life satisfaction	.05	-.13	.13	.03
Depression	.30***	.39***	.15	-.01
Suicidality	.20*	.02	.05	.10
Attitudes toward suicide	.03	.04	-.02	.01

Notes. Values are coefficients of Pearson correlations representing the associations between film effects and modes of reception. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001 (two-tailed).

Table 4. Intercorrelations between the modes of reception

	Identity work	Confidence	Imagination	Production
Identity work	—	.43***	.32***	.22**
Confidence	.43***	—	.10	-.06
Imagination	.32***	.10	—	.30***
Production	.22**	-.06	.30***	—

Notes. Values are coefficients of Pearson correlations representing the associations among the modes of reception.

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

## Modes of Reception and Coping Strategies

Pearson correlations were performed to analyze the connection between the modes of reception and the coping style (H5–H8). There were no significant correlations between the coping strategy of avoidance and the mode *imagination* (Pearson's  $r = .12$ ,  $r^2 = .01$ ,  $n = 146$ ,  $p = .13$ ). Thus H5 was rejected. However, there was a significant correlation between the coping strategy *seeking social support* and the reception mode *identity work* (Pearson's  $r = .26$ ,  $r^2 = .06$ ,  $n = 146$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that the more an individual is geared to family and friends when facing a problem, the more he or she compares himself or herself to the protagonist in the film to cope with personal issues. Thus H6 was confirmed. H7 and H8 addressed the associations between indirect coping strategies and the modes of reception. There were no significant correlations, neither regarding *imagination* (Pearson's  $r = .12$ ,  $r^2 = .01$ ,  $n = 148$ ,  $p = .12$ ) nor in terms of *production* (Pearson's  $r = .05$ ,  $r^2 = .00$ ,  $n = 148$ ,  $p = .52$ ). Therefore, both of these hypotheses were rejected.

## Discussion

The results of the present study show that film dramas have a strong impact on the emotional and cognitive state of the viewers. The recipients reacted to the dramas with a deterioration of mood and an increase in depression and inner tension scores – after the movie screenings, the subjects were much sadder, unhappier, more irritable, and even more depressed than they were before. The viewing of the dramas led to a significant deterioration of the recipients' emotional well-being. These effects were probably due to the focus of these movies on the problems and downfall of the hero, resulting ultimately in his death. This is concordant with Zillmann's (1996) affective disposition theory proposing that an outcome victimizing the protagonist is deplored by viewers. However, the dramas also produced some positive effects, namely an increase in self-esteem and life satisfaction as well as a reduction of suicidal tendencies. The participants obviously felt better about themselves after the film screening. This is probably a result of comparing their own lives and problems to those of the main character of the respective drama. According to the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954), humans have a drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions and abilities with

those of other people. The confrontation with the hopeless situation displayed in the motion pictures might have produced some kind of “contrast effect” that led to a more positive evaluation of their own living conditions and circumstances. This conclusion fits well with the results of studies by Mares and Cantor (1992) as well as Nabi et al. (2006) proposing that people use sad films to cope with negative life experiences. Another explanation for the positive film effects could be that humans lend their lives more meaning when confronted with their vulnerability and mortality, as suggested by terror management theory (see Greenberg et al., 1992). Thus the parallel occurrence of positive and negative film effects is plausible.

It is also important to note that not all recipients were equally affected by the movies; the predominantly applied mode of reception appeared to be an important factor regarding a drama's impact. The higher an individual's loadings were in *identity work*, *confidence*, or *imagination*, the greater was the deterioration of his or her emotional and cognitive state. Subjects, who (1) tended to compare themselves with the protagonist and predominantly tried to find suggestions in the film to improve their own lives, (2) preferred to be engaged in the plot and to act out their feelings, or (3) constantly imagined alternative endings, experienced a more negative change in their well-being – a deterioration of mood and an increase in inner tensions and depression – and fewer positive effects – such as a reduction of suicidality – than those using none of these modes or another strategy of reception. The modality *production* was not significantly associated with the effects of the dramas.

But what factors account for the use of certain modes of reception? There was an association between the coping strategy of seeking social support and the modality *identity work*. It seems to be plausible to assume that our habitual approach to solving everyday life's problems affects the way we deal with drama on television, and not vice versa, even though such an inverted causality cannot be ruled out. This means that individuals who are geared to their social environment when coping with a problem also like to identify with the protagonists in film dramas and try to find behavior patterns they can use to cope with their own issues. It is these recipients who are more negatively affected by those movies due to their involvement, reacting with a higher increase in inner tensions and depression. It seems plausible that this social form of problem solving is effective when dealing with everyday life's stressful situations, but it obviously causes some negative consequences in terms of corruptive film effects as well.



Despite the insight this research offers into the emotional and cognitive reactions to film dramas and the influence of the viewer's individual approach toward the movie, some limitations of the present study have to be acknowledged. First, the modes of reception are a relatively new concept of media psychology we know very little about so far. The substantial intercorrelations among the individual modes indicate that there might be an underlying concept beneath those modes yet to be determined. Suckfüll's (2007) modes of reception can also be criticized for the fact that they all already existed under different names: *diegetic involvement* as *transportation* or *socio-involvement* as *empathy*. However, integrating these different concepts of viewer-film relations in one comprehensive model was innovative and is useful for further and more in-depth research into involvement with fictional media content. Secondly, the present study focuses on the relationship between modes of reception and the effects of film dramas. Therefore, the conclusion that the same associations will be found with movies of other genres cannot be drawn based on our analyses. Moreover, all three dramas concluded with the main character's death, so our results do not refer necessarily to all forms of drama. Future research on emotional involvement with films would profit from exploring this issue with regard to other types of dramas and other movie genres. Limitations of the present study also include its correlational character, which did not allow us to demonstrate causality between the modes of reception and the observed film effects. Finally, most hypothesized correlations between coping and reception mode were found not to be significant, indicating that seeking social support is the only coping strategy to be related to film involvement. Moreover, given the relatively small percentage of the variance that is explained by this correlation, the preferred coping style of a person obviously represents only one of several factors that account for involvement in film dramas and their impact. Further research to reveal other variables defining an individual's strategy of film reception and therefore his or her emotional as well as cognitive – and probably even behavioral – reactions is necessary and recommended.

Considering the effects of dramas presented in many studies in the last few decades which report an increase in rates of suicide and attempted suicide due to the broadcasting of films featuring the self-inflicted death of the protagonist (e.g., Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Ostroff & Boyd, 1987; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988), this area of research is a very important topic in the field of public health that definitely calls for more attention on the part of medical psychologists and media scientists (see Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009). To prevent such consequences we have to learn more about the complex processes underlying the reception of media and its impact on individuals and society. The present research is a first step in this direction. Most importantly, this study provides evidence that it is necessary to differentiate the recipients by their individual approach toward the media product when investigating its influences.

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