

**The Psychological Benefits of Watching Popular Films : a Qualitative Analysis**

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**LETTER OF CONSENT**

I the co-author, K.F.H. Botha hereby declare that the input and effort of Mr. J. van Wyk is of sufficient scope to be a reflection of his own efforts. I hereby provide consent that Mr. J. Van Wyk may submit this manuscript in article format for examination purposes in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Clinical Psychology.

.....  
Dr. K.F.H. Botha  
Supervisor

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**INTENDED JOURNAL AND GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS**

Intended Journal: Psychological Reports.

The manuscript as well as the reference list has been styled according to the above mentioned Journal's specifications. (Manuscript submission guidelines to follow)

## PSYCHOLOGICAL REPORTS

*Psychological Reports* is published bimonthly, two volumes a year, the first with issues in February, April, and June, and the second with issues in August, October, and December, from Box 9229, Montana 59807-9229. Subscriptions are accepted only for full calendar years. A minimum of 2600 pages is planned for 2004. The subscription rate is \$370.00 per year plus postage and handling (\$25.00, outside USA \$30.00). Single issues are \$45.00 plus postage (\$5.00, outside USA \$25.00).

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## OPSOMMING

Die doel van die navorsing was om die subjektiewe psigologiese voordele wat dit inhou om na populêre films te kyk, te ondersoek. 'n Sekondêre doelwit was om die rol wat ouderdom, geslag, die frekwensie van filmkyk en die verskillende film genres speel, in die psigologiese voordele wat ervaar word, te ondersoek. Die navorsing was 'n verkennende, kwalitatiewe studie. 'n Beskikbaarheidsteekproef van 50 deelnemers in 'n plattelandse universiteitsdorp in Suid-Afrika is gebruik. Daar is gebruik gemaak van 'n self-opgestelde vraelys. Tematiese inhouds-analise, aan die hand van Berg (1998) se riglyne, is as navorsingsmetode toegepas.

Die psigologiese waarde of voordele wat deur die deelnemers identifiseer is, kan in vier onderskeie temas ingedeel word naamlik; Leer-ervarings, Persoonlike groei, Affektiewe voordele en Kreatiwiteit. Leer-ervaring, as psigologiese waarde, is die meeste gemeld deur die deelnemers en kan beskryf word as die stimulerende effek van populêre films op hulle idees, perspektiewe en kennis. Persoonlike groei impliseer die insig en verandering wat gestimuleer word deur die identifisering met karakters in populêre films. Affektiewe voordele sluit ontspanning en genotvolle ervarings asook meer intense emosionele ervarings in. Kreatiwiteit sluit die stimulering van die deelnemers se kreatiewe idees, fantasie sowel as estetiese waardering van kuns in films in. Hierdie psigologiese voordele is soortgelyk aan 'n aantal psigologiese welstandkonstrukte soos geïdentifiseer deur Seligman en Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Peterson en Seligman (2004), Seligman (2004) en Shorey, Snyder, Rand, Hockemeyer and Feldman (2002).

Dit blyk dat geslag spesifiek 'n rol speel in die kwaliteit van Affektiewe en kreatiewe voordele. Ouderdom speel 'n rol in die voordele, spesifiek met betrekking tot verskille in ontwikkelingsbehoefte. Frekwensie van filmkyk speel 'n rol tot die mate dat 'n groter verskeidenheid voordele ervaar is deur deelnemers wat meer gereeld populêre films kyk. Film genre is ook belangrik aangesien deelnemers meer voordele ervaar deur na Drama-, Komedie- en Kunsfilms te kyk. Die finale gevolgtrekking is dat om na populêre films te kyk 'n bydrae tot die subjektiewe ervaring van psigologiese welstand lewer. Die toepassing hiervan in psigoterapie en in die bevordering van psigologiese welstand in die breet sal in verdere navorsing ondersoek moet word.

## SUMMARY

The aim of this research was to explore the subjective psychological benefits of watching popular films. A secondary aim was to explore whether age, gender, frequency of watching popular films and different film genres play a role in the experience of psychological benefits. The research was an exploratory, qualitative survey. An availability sample consisting of 50 participants from a small university town in rural South Africa, took part. A self-compiled questionnaire was used. Thematic content analysis, according to the guidelines provided by Berg (1998), was applied as research method.

The psychological benefits identified by the participants can be divided into four distinct themes namely: Learning experience, Personal growth, Affective benefits and Creativity. Learning experience was the most frequent psychological benefit participants noted and can be described as the stimulating effect popular films have on the participants' ideas, perspectives and knowledge. Personal growth implies the insight and change stimulated by the identification with characters in popular films. Affective benefits include relaxing, entertaining, and more intense emotional experiences. Creativity includes the stimulation of the participants' creative ideas and fantasy as well as the aesthetical appreciation of the beauty and art in films. These benefits concur to a large extent with what was found by another researcher. Furthermore, these benefits were related to a number of psychological well-being constructs.

It seems that gender plays a role specifically in the quality of Affective- and Creative benefits. Age plays a role in benefits experienced, especially due to the difference in developmental needs. Frequency of watching popular films plays a role to the extent that a greater variety of psychological benefits were experienced by participants who watch films more often. Film genre also seems important, as participants experienced more benefits from watching Drama, Comedy and Art films. The final conclusion is that watching popular films may contribute to the subjective experience of psychological well-being. The applicability of this in psychotherapy and in promoting psychological well-being on a broader scale will have to be investigated in further research.

**COVER PAGE**

**The Psychological Benefits of Watching Popular Films: A Qualitative Analysis**

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MANUSCRIPT

**RUNNING HEAD: PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS**

**The Psychological Benefits of Watching Popular Films: A Qualitative Analysis**

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**Abstract**

Popular films are more than just a form of entertainment. They are instruments that shape and reflect people's construction of the world they live in. This study explored the subjective psychological benefits that 25 employed adults and 25 students from a university town in South Africa, experience by watching popular films. The participants completed an open-ended questionnaire which was analysed by means of content analysis. Four themes, namely Learning Experiences, Personal Growth, Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness were identified. Age, gender, film genre and frequency of watching popular films were also found to play a role within the psychological benefits gained. The findings suggest that watching popular films may contribute to the subjective experience of psychological well-being.

In the emerging positive psychology paradigm, the focus is on the identification and nurture of different virtues or strengths, making life more fulfilling and productive (Rashid, 2002). Positive psychology aims to improve the quality of life and to prevent psychopathology by making life joyful and meaningful. According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (in Snyder & Lopez, 2002) the field of positive psychology consists of valued subjective experiences of well-being, contentment and satisfaction, hope and optimism, flow and happiness.

From a constructivistic perspective, well-being is not an external 'fact' or fixed 'reality', but rather a subjective construction or experience by the individual, in relation to the world and social relationships (Gergen, 1999). The mass media has long been recognized as playing a major role in the creation and reproduction of meaning (Lyons, 2000). According to Burman and Parker (in Lyons, 2000), meanings developed in the media often become so embedded in society, that it is difficult for individuals to resist them. Popular films, as a billion dollar industry (If you film it, 2002), is also more than a form of entertainment. It is a means of communication, a vehicle for instruction, a historical record, and a looking glass that shapes and reflects the trend of the times (Haas & Widener, 1995). Popular films are designed to capture the attention of viewers, promote personal awareness, engage the spatial as well as the rational parts of the brain. Therefore it might have a potentially longer lasting impact than straightforward didactic presentations (Alexander, 2000). Like other forms of art, films are the artists' projection of their experience of life. The individual, as onlooker onto the artists' projection, can subjectively identify a character's traits or the situational benefits. Identification with a character might take place, possibly leading to identification of benefits in the individual's own circumstances. This might lead to positive reappraisal, better coping and well-being. It might also be that a certain popular film reminds the individual of circumstances in the past and of the positive outcomes or benefits from those circumstances.

Popular films and the characters that are portrayed could therefore function as role models of well-being to the public. Starstruck British boys, under the spell of the film "Billy Elliot", have made history at the Royal Ballet by outnumbering girls for the first time in its 76-year history (Hunter, 2003). Hunter also states that the film industry is aware of its influence, or at least tends to promote this idea. Two scenes in

“Boiler Room” (2000), for example indicate that the film has taught a generation of young businessmen how to do business. Analyzing the film “Cast Away”, Ingram (2001) focuses on two critical psychological advantages that the character Noland shows after he is shipwrecked on an island and his attempts at getting help is futile: first, he achieves ego stability and secondly, he reconstitutes time. Berg-Cross (in Wedding & Niemiec, 2003) reports that popular films provide clients in psychotherapy with deeper insights into their life dilemmas and personalities, and create meaningful therapeutic metaphors capturing the essence of the presenting problem. In constructing a syllabus for teaching Positive Psychology to undergraduate students, Rashid (2002) identifies different films to use in teaching the different virtues or strengths, for example, subjective well-being in “Fanny and Alexander” (1983), optimism in “Ordinary People” (1980) and flow in “Legend of Bagger Vance” (2002).

Popular films therefore, might open whole new highways of possibilities in terms of promoting subjective well-being. The literature referred to, was taken from different studies on popular films, but none of these studies specifically explored the possible contribution of popular films to subjective well-being. Therefore the aim of this research was to explore the subjective psychological benefits of watching popular films. A secondary aim was to explore the role age, gender, frequency of watching popular films and different film genres play within these psychological benefits.

#### Method

The research was an exploratory, qualitative survey. An availability sample consisting of 50 participants of university students ( $n = 25$ ) aged 19 to 24 and employed adults ( $n = 25$ ) aged 25 to 50, from a small university town in rural South Africa took part. Of these, 19 were male and 31 were female. All participants have access to film theatres and speak either Afrikaans or English fluently. The study was approved by the university’s ethical committee. Informed consent was obtained before the study commenced and anonymity was insured after which the questionnaires were administered. In this research, “popular film” was defined as any contemporary film shown at a cinema or on television. It therefore excludes television soap operas and television or film documentaries. A self-compiled questionnaire consisting of the following questions were used: “How often do you watch popular films? What type of popular films do you prefer? What personal gain do you derive

from watching popular films? In other words, what emotional or psychological benefits do you find in watching popular films? Give concrete examples if possible - for example; specific characters and scenes from films or changes in your thoughts, feelings or actions.”

Participants’ responses to the questionnaire constituted the research data. Content analysis, which is the identification of themes, topics and symbols through coding, was applied (Berg, 1998). The researcher read the data to get an overview of the benefits identified by the participants. Coding was then applied, identifying broad themes, which were then refined, ensuring the data was correctly reflected. The role different variables play within each theme was then explored. Although percentages are indicated, no statistical methods were used. Percentage of responses and the content of the responses were only used as guidelines for the discussion, with a 5% or more than expected difference, taken as qualitatively meaningful.

## Results

### *Psychological Benefits*

The psychological benefits identified by the participants can be divided into four distinct themes namely; Learning Experience, Personal Growth, Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness.

*(Insert Table 1 about here)*

Learning Experience was the most frequent psychological benefit participants noted and can be described as the stimulating effect popular films have on their ideas, perspectives and knowledge. Examples include; “It broadens my knowledge”, “It reinforces my idea of reality about things like drug abuse” and “I learn new perspectives on things”. Responses like “new perspectives” and “learn critical thinking” are similar to the strength open-mindedness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which means to think things through and examine them from all sides. In addition, a response like “it gives me ideas of handling different situations in future” hints at benefiting from popular films in terms of hope, which includes future-mindedness, a construct defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as believing that a good future is something that can be brought about. Learning Experiences therefore seem to include cognitive mastery, an essential ingredient of self-actualisation (Maslow, in Louw & Edwards, 1998). Researchers like Chigier (1995), who proposed the use of popular

films in sexual health education at a youth centre and Boyatzis (1994), who used it to teach social development to undergraduate students, already noted the educational value of popular films.

Personal Growth implies the insight and change stimulated by the confrontation and challenging of own beliefs and behaviour through the identification with characters in popular films. Typical responses were: "I identify with a character" and "I become aware of the effect of my behaviour on others", which are notably similar to the interpersonal strength social intelligence, defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as the awareness of motives and feelings of others and oneself. Responses like "films reinforce my belief in the good" and "it inspires me, giving me hope and courage to face life" possibly reflect the strengths persistence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) defined as completing what one starts, optimism (Seligman, 2004) and hope (Shorey, Snyder, Rand, Hockemeyer & Feldman, 2002 and Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which means to expect the best in the future and working to achieve it. Paquette (2003) in support of this says that popular films can reflect humanity's search for meaning in life and can be used for personal development.

Affective Benefits include relaxing, entertaining and intense, emotional experiences. Participants found the joyful, satisfactory experience and the stimulation of underlying emotions by films particularly beneficial. They described it as follows: "Get pleasure from the movie", "it makes me calm and relaxed", "I can escape" and "It is entertaining". Deneen (2002) states that it is odd, surprising, encouraging and almost inconceivable that movies, the ultimate escape, might teach us about escape, about reality, things true and imagined, just by attending closely to the images on the wall. In addition, responses like "Movies help with the expression of emotions", and "I can show empathy easily and therefore benefit psychologically from it" reflect compassion and care, characteristic of the interpersonal strength kindness, (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to O'Malley (1999) popular films can help evolve one's empathic powers which in turn can help develop the virtue of forgiveness.

Aesthetic Awareness includes the stimulation of the participants' creative ideas and fantasy as well as the aesthetical appreciation of the beauty and art in films. The participants described it as "I fantasize, it takes me away to beautiful places"; "It enriches your fantasy"; and "appreciate the beautiful images". The above mentioned responses might indicate that strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning, like appreciation of beauty (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which

implies one's awe and wonder for beauty and excellence in all domains of life, are being reinforced. According to Armstrong (2003) the appreciation of beautiful objects is related to our inherent need for meaningful connections with others.

Psychological benefits as identified in this study concur to a large extent with what Stonehill (in Goodale, 1988) found, namely that people watch popular films for the learning experience, the emotional experience and finally for something beautiful to look at. Furthermore, the benefits identified in this study were related to certain psychological well-being constructs like open-mindedness, future-mindedness, social intelligence, persistence, optimism, hope, kindness and appreciation of beauty.

### *Gender*

*(Insert Table 2 about here)*

Female participants experienced more Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness benefits from watching popular films than expected in relation to the male participants. A clear difference in the quality between the Affective Benefits of the male and female participants was also noted. Female participants experienced more stimulation of empathic abilities for example: "I can show empathy easily and therefore benefit psychologically from it", whereas a similar response was noted only once among male participants. The difference in the quality of Affective Benefits might be explained by the tendency that women express affect easier than men (Roothman, Kirsten & Wissing, 2003), and rely more on emotional coping styles and less on rational and detachment coping styles (Matud, 2004). There was also a difference in the quality of the responses on Aesthetic Awareness. Both gender groups experienced "stimulation of creative ideas", but female participants expressed "aesthetic appreciation" more often.

### *Age*

*(Insert Table 3 about here)*

Adults reported more Learning Experiences than expected in relation to students, with a clear difference in the quality. Adults experienced this benefit more

in terms of “the complexity of relationships” and “moral issues”, whereas students seem to experienced learning more in terms of how to handle new situations. Students experienced more Personal Growth benefits than expected. There is also a difference in the quality of the responses. Adults experienced growth more in terms of self evaluation, for example: “I evaluate my behaviour” and “It confronts my behaviour”, whereas students experienced growth more in terms of identification, for example: “I identify with characters” and “identify good traits”. It might be that the students, given their developmental phase, are more open or have a greater need for, as they put it, “identification”, “inspiration” and “motivation”. Adults experienced more Affective Benefits, but with no clear difference in the quality of the responses in relation to students. The most meaningful difference was in terms of Aesthetic Awareness. Adults experienced more creative benefits than expected in relation to the students. The reason might be that adults, given their more structured family and working environments, have a greater need for creativity. Adults also experienced more “aesthetic appreciation” than expected in relation to students.

The difference in psychological benefits between students and adults might be explained by the difference in developmental stage. Young adults are working on stabilising their identity and defining their values (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1999), which might explain why students experience more Personal Growth. In comparison, in middle adulthood the clarifying of values and life philosophy is one of the major developmental tasks. This might explain the difference in the Learning Experiences, where responses like “learning about the complexity of relationships and moral issues” were more prominent among the employed adults.

#### *Frequency of watching popular films*

In this study, a high frequency of watching popular films was defined as more than one popular film per week; a medium frequency one or less per week but not less than two per month; and a low frequency less than two popular films per month.

*(Insert Table 4 about here)*

Participants who fall within the high and medium frequency categories, experienced a greater variety of psychological benefits than the participants who fall within the low frequency category. Participants who fall within the high frequency

category experienced less Learning, Affective and Personal Growth benefits than expected. Participants who fall within the medium frequency category experienced more Learning and Personal Growth benefits than were expected, and less from Aesthetic Awareness. Participants who fall within the low frequency category experienced more Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness, and less Personal Growth benefits than expected.

Participants who fall within the medium frequency category experienced Personal Growth benefits in terms of “identification”, and Affective Benefits in terms of “empathy” more often than the other participants. Participants who fall within the low frequency category experienced Aesthetic Awareness more in terms of “aesthetic appreciation” than the other participants, who experienced “stimulation of fantasy” more often. It might be concluded that participants who watch very few popular films, do so not to be “inspired” or “motivated”, or do not internalise the inspiration experienced from watching popular films, thus not using it as a means for Personal Growth.

#### *Film genre*

The different film genres participants identified as contributing to the experience of psychological benefits were Drama, Comedy, Art, Thriller, Fantasy, Romance, and Other (for example, “Reality” or Documentary movies).

*(Insert Table 5 about here)*

Participants who prefer Drama, reported more Learning Experiences and Personal Growth than expected in relation to other participants. As Drama films tend to depict situations and complexities of life and relationships more often, it might explain the high frequency of responses like “learn about different personalities” and “learn about relationships and the differences between genders”. Participants who prefer Comedy experienced more Affective Benefits than expected. Responses like “makes me feel better” and “makes me feel happy and joyful”, might indicate that the most psychological benefits gained from watching Comedies are uplifting and positive emotions. Participants who prefer Art films experienced more Learning and Aesthetic Awareness benefits than expected in relation to other participants. From responses like “learn about the complexity of moral issues” and “stimulates a more

creative outlook on life" it seems as if Art films tend to depict the complexities of life in a more creative way than ordinary Drama films.

### Conclusion

The aims of this research were to explore the subjective psychological benefits of watching popular films and the role age, gender, frequency of watching popular films and different film genres play within these psychological benefits. Four distinct themes were identified, namely Learning Experience, Personal Growth, Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness. These benefits concur to a large extent with what was found by another researcher. Furthermore, these benefits were related to a number of psychological well-being constructs. It seems that gender plays a role specifically in the quality of Affective Benefits and Aesthetic Awareness. Age plays a role in benefits experienced, especially due to the difference in developmental needs. Frequency of watching popular films plays a role to the extent that a greater variety of psychological benefits were experienced by participants who watch films more often. Film genre also seems important, as participants experienced more benefits from watching Drama, Comedy and Art films. It might therefore be concluded that watching popular films may contribute to the subjective experience of psychological well-being. The applicability of this in psychotherapy and in promoting psychological well-being on a broader scale will have to be investigated in further research.

Given the fact that this study was an exploratory study, some limitations and possibilities for future research were identified. Due to the small sample of this study, findings cannot be generalised to a wider population. Including adolescents will furthermore give a broader view of the influence developmental phase might have. It is finally recommended that for similar studies, focus group interviews be used in conjunction with questionnaires.

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**TABLE 1***Psychological benefits gained from watching popular films*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>% of total responses</b>
Learning Experience	60	36 %
Personal Growth	44	26 %
Affective Benefits	39	24%
Aesthetic Awareness	10	6%
*Irrelevant data	12	8%
Total	165	100%

*\* Note: Irrelevant data include inappropriate responses that could not be used*

**TABLE 2***Frequency and percentage of psychological benefits by gender*

	Male		Female		Total	
	n= 19	(38%)	n= 31	(62%)	n= 50	(100%)
<b>Theme</b>	n	%	n	%	n	%
Learning Experience	23	38%	37	62%	60	100%
Personal Growth	18	40%	26	60%	44	100%
Affective Benefits	11	28% -	28	72% +	39	100%
Aesthetic Awareness	3	30% -	7	70% +	10	100%

*Note : - denotes 5% lower than expected ; + denotes 5% higher than expected*

**TABLE 3***Frequency and percentage of psychological benefits by age group*

	Students		Adults		Total	
	n= 25	(50%)	n= 25	(50%)	n= 50	(100%)
<b>Theme</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Learning Experience	26	43% -	34	57% +	60	100%
Personal Growth	25	57% +	19	43% -	44	100%
Affective Benefits	17	44% -	22	56% +	39	100%
Aesthetic Awareness	4	40% -	6	60% +	10	100%

*Note : - denotes 5% lower than expected ; + denotes 5% higher than expected*

**TABLE 4**

*Frequency and percentage of psychological benefits by frequency of watching popular films*

	High n=25 (50%)		Medium n= 15 (30%)		Low n=10 (20%)		Total n=50 (100%)	
<b>Theme</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Learning	19	32% -	28	47% +	13	21%	60	100%
Experience								
Personal Growth	20	45% -	19	43% +	5	12% -	44	100%
Affective Benefits	16	41% -	12	31%	11	28% +	39	100%
Aesthetic	5	50%	2	20% -	3	30% +	10	100%
Awareness								

*Note : - denotes 5% lower than expected ; + denotes 5% higher than expected*

**TABLE 5***Frequency and percentage of psychological benefits by film genre*

Themes	Drama n=21(42%)		Comedy n=11(22%)		Art n=7 (14%)		Other n=6 (12%)		Thriller n=3 (6%)		Fantasy n=1 (2%)		Romance n=1 (2%)		Total n=153 (100%)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Learning Experience	35	58%+	2	3%-	13	22%+	4	7%-	6	10%	0	0%	0	0%	60	100%
Affective Benefits	14	36%-	12	30%+	6	15%	4	10%	1	3%	1	3%	1	3%	39	100%
Personal Growth	24	55%+	9	20%	7	16%	3	7%-	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	44	100%
Aesthetic Awareness	4	40%	2	20%	2	20%+	1	10%	0	0%-	0	0%	1	10%+	10	100%

*Note : - denotes 5% lower than expected ; + denotes 5% higher than expected*