

People watch negative TV to combat life's stress, study suggests

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When the day is filled with news of mass shootings, police malfeasance and "me too" courtroom escapades, people turn to entertainment media, where they watch—as it turns out—more negativity, a new University of

California, Davis, study suggests.

Researchers have long known that people use media to manage their emotions. But why do some people watch a Disney animated flick and others a biopic about the holocaust, asked Richard Huskey, assistant professor of communication and corresponding author of the study.

During a three-year period from 2020 to 2023—which included both pandemic closures and non-pandemic months—researchers observed that most of the hundreds of people in their study had a persistent preference for negative media. This result was observed for all adults under 50 years old. It appears that adults 50 years and older tend to seek more escapist media entertainment with less negativity.

The study, composed of three separate computational decision-making experiments, was published in the *Journal of Communication* June 12.

The way researchers used to think about how people use media to manage their emotions goes like this, explained Huskey, who is also principal investigator of the Cognitive Communication Science Lab and an affiliated researcher with the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain, "The 'reason' someone decided to watch a sitcom rather than a crime drama last night might be because they had a bad day at work and wanted something to help improve their mood."

This explanation, however, has received mixed support since the 1980s, when it was first being researched. "If the explanation I described is true, why would anyone want to watch movies like *Schindler's List*?" So, researchers from UC Davis and Michigan State tried to get to the bottom of the reasons for that behavior.

They observed in studies with [college students](#) and a nationally representative adult population by age, gender and race—more than 500

people in all—that most viewers prefer negative and highly arousing media. Beyond that, putting people into a negative mood seems to amplify their preference for even more negative content.

"Sometimes, people are in a bad mood, and use media to amplify that mood," Huskey said. He said that finding was surprising.

"It shows that people use media for emotional regulation, but in a way that is really different than we'd expect," he said.

This finding might surprise entertainment apps too. Not only did the researchers study people's media preferences, but also how they decided what to watch. "That is what makes computational models so powerful," said Xuanjun (Jason) Gong, a doctoral candidate and lead author on the study. "They provide new insights into the psychological processes that govern our decisions."

The researchers used a [computational model](#) to investigate when people make more cautious or careless choices and found that people are much more cautious when two very similar choices are offered.

Netflix, for example, places really similar choices side-by-side, such as a series of spy movies, or oodles of period costume dramas, or comedies, which can lead to indecision by the viewer, the researchers observed. But when viewers channel surf, or look at other apps that offer movies or entertaining programs, the viewer can make choices among different types of media. That can make a viewer less cautious about their choice. Under that circumstance, people are more likely to choose the negative media option, the study showed.

More information: Xuanjun Gong et al, Computationally modeling mood management theory: a drift-diffusion model of people's preferential choice for valence and arousal in media, *Journal of*

Communication (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/joc/jqad020](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad020)

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