

Fact or fiction: Which do moviegoers prefer?

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Do you feel sadder watching a documentary about war or a drama about a young person dying of cancer? According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers mistakenly believe they will have stronger emotional reactions when stories are based on true events rather than fiction.

"Consumers may choose to read a tragic fictional story because they assume that knowing it was fictional would make them less sad than reading a less dramatic, but true story," write authors Jane E. J. Ebert (Brandeis University) and Tom Meyvis (New York University). "However, the fictional nature does not alter the impact of the tragic story, leaving them more emotionally distraught than if they had read the true story instead."

In the midst of emotional experiences, consumers are so absorbed by the actual experience that they might be unable to take into account the fictional nature of the story. The authors tested this in one study by informing viewers that a film they were about to see was fictional. These viewers did feel less sad after watching this fictional movie, but only when breaks were provided, allowing the viewers to mull over the fact that the story was not true.

In another study, participants read a tragic story and were asked how they would have felt if they had known that the event in the story really happened or was completely fictional. Not surprisingly, participants indicated they would have felt substantially sadder had they known the story was real. Another group of participants was asked to read the same story and told that the event was either real or fictional. These participants felt sad after reading the story regardless of whether the event actually happened.

Publishers and movie studios should note that underestimating the emotional impact of fictional stories may lead consumers to choose less enjoyable books and movies just because they are

based on a true story. "Emphasizing realism may indeed make consumers more likely to choose these options, as [consumers](#) tend to believe that true stories will have a greater emotional impact than fictional stories. However, our results suggest that while emphasizing realism may increase sales, it does not necessarily increase satisfaction," the authors conclude.

More information: Jane E. J. Ebert and Tom Meyvis. "Reading Fictional Stories and Winning Delayed Prizes: The Surprising Emotional Impact of Distant Events." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2014.

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