

The Role of Fictionality on Gender Differences in Responses to Emotional Melodramatic Entertainment

Jennifer J. Argo, University of Alberta, Canada
Rui (Juliet) Zhu, University of British Columbia, Canada
Darren W. Dahl, University of British Columbia, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Characterized by its heart-tugging, emotional plot, melodrama is a subtype of dramatic entertainment that appeals to the heightened emotions of audiences and readers of all ages. Often labelled “chick-flicks,” “tearjerkers,” or “human interest stories,” emotional melodramas appear in a wide range of entertainment formats (e.g., movies, short stories). In general, the target audience for emotionally melodramatic entertainment has primarily been female consumers. For example, The Oprah Winfrey Show which regularly features stories of tragedy, personal weakness and devastation, attracts approximately 50 million US viewers, among whom women outnumber men in the audience by a ratio of 19 to 1 (http://www2.oprah.com/presents/2005/20anniv/tows/tows_trivia.jhtml). Given this prevalent belief, the purpose of the present research is to understand and test for gender differences in evaluations of melodramatic entertainment. We use as our context of investigation emotionally melodramatic short stories. Further, we extend this literature by identifying the role of one characteristic inherent in melodramatic entertainment—its level of fictionality—on the activation of these gender differences. Finally, the present research seeks to explore underlying processes and tests the impact of the credibility of the fictionality communication source in influencing gender and the level of fictionality on consumers’ evaluations of melodramas.

Gender research has consistently found that females are more emotional and emotionally expressive than males (e.g., Allen and Haccoun 1976). The existence of these gender differences has been attributed to gender-specific norms regarding the “rules of emotions” that are developed through socialization (Birnbaum 1983). For little boys, the norm that they should be emotionally strong and refrain from emotional experiences is socialized by discouraging them from displaying soft emotions (e.g., “big boys don’t cry”; Birnbaum and Croll 1984; Timmers, Fischer and Manstead 2003). In contrast, such restrictive norms do not apply to females and in fact, society encourages women to seek and express their emotions (Timmers et al. 2003). Given the existence of these norms for emotional expression, we expect that females in general will respond more favorably to emotional melodramatic entertainment than males.

However, we expect that this predicted effect will be moderated by an important factor inherent in such melodramas, its level of fictionality. Defined here as the extent to which the story line for a melodrama reflects a real-life event (i.e., low in fictionality) versus a fictitious account (i.e., high in fictionality), the level of fictionality in melodramatic entertainment is expected to either attenuate or magnify gender differences in evaluations of such entertainment. Melodramatic entertainment that is high in fictionality is safe because it is not real or binding, permanently beneficial or harmful (Izod 2000). This is in stark contrast to reality where social rules and norms must be adhered to if one is to avoid the penalties imposed by society for deviating behaviors. Given that fiction presents a context where rules and norms are relaxed and there may be minimal social ramifications for eliciting emotions, we expect that males will feel safe to become involved in a melodramatic story, experience and express their emotions, and consequently evaluate the story more favorably. In contrast, when a melodra-

matic story is factual, the rules of society (i.e., gender norms about emotional responses) cannot be freely discarded without potential negative consequences. Thus, in this situation, we expect males to react consistently with gender norms, such that they will be less involved in an emotionally melodramatic story and thus evaluate the story less favorably. The opposite pattern is expected for females as developmental psychology suggests that they have a preference for reality which begins to become apparent at a young age. In particular, while little boys are prone to play fantasy themes and devise make-believe toys (e.g., Marshall 1961), little girls generally replicate reality by playing a domestic or teacher role (McLoyd 1983; Nicolopoulou 1997). Furthermore, these developmental findings for the preferences towards reality are reflected in adulthood (e.g., Elkin and Handel 1972). Thus, we expect that females will respond more favorably to melodramatic entertainment that is low in fictionality (i.e., based on reality). This should be the case because melodramatic stories that are high in realism are more salient and vivid, thus increasing involvement with the story and consequently eliciting more favorable evaluations. Finally, the predicted pattern of effects for both genders is only expected to arise when information about the level of fictionality is provided by a high (vs. low) credible source.

Three studies examined the impact of level of fictionality on gender differences in consumers’ evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment. The first two studies found that males formed more favorable evaluations of a melodramatic story when they were explicitly told that the story was make-believe (i.e., high in fictionality) versus real (i.e., low in fictionality). In the make-believe condition, males temporarily relaxed their gender emotion stereotypes, which led to increased emotion expression, and consequently more favorable evaluations. Females, on the other hand, evaluated the melodramatic story more favorably when they were told it was based on a real occurrence (i.e., low in fictionality). Mediation analysis demonstrates that as implied in the theorizing for both genders, higher involvement was shown to lead to more favorable evaluations of a melodramatic story. The third study extends on the first two studies by examining the role of source credibility on individuals’ evaluations of a melodramatic story. The interaction effects between gender and level of fictionality only held when the source of the fictionality communication was high in credibility. When source credibility was low, the differences in responses to fictionality were attenuated for both genders.

This research makes three important contributions. First, it advances our understanding of gender differences in evaluations of melodramatic entertainment by identifying an important factor (i.e., level of fictionality) which moderates these differences. Second, it explores underlying processes (e.g., involvement) for the observed effects. Finally, it investigates a boundary condition (i.e., source credibility) for the impact of fictionality and gender on evaluations of melodramas.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Jon G. and Dorothy Markiewicz Haccoun (1976), “Sex Differences in Emotionality: A Multidimensional Approach,” *Human Relations*, 29 (August), 711-22.

- Bimbaum, Dana (1983), "Preschoolers' Stereotypes About Sex Differences in Emotionality: A Reaffirmation," *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 143 (September), 139-40.
- Bimbaum, Dana and William L. Croll (1984), "The Etiology of Children's Stereotypes about Sex Differences in Emotionality," *Sex Roles*, 10(9-10), 677-91.
- Elkin, Frederick and Gerald Handel (1972), *The Child and Society: The Process of Socialization*, New York, NY, US: Random House.
- Izod, John (2000), "Active Imagination and the Analysis of Film," *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 45 (April), 267-85.
- Marshall, Helen R. (1961), "Relations Between Home Experiences and Children's Use of Language in Play Interactions with Peers," *Psychological Monographs*, 75(5, Whole No. 509), 76.
- McLoyd, Vonnie C. (1983), "The Effects of the Structure of Play Objects On the Pretend Play of Low-Income Preschool Children," *Child Development*, 54 (June), 626-35.
- Nicolopoulou, Ageliki (1997), "Children and Narratives: Toward an Interpretive and Sociocultural Approach," in *Narrative Development: Six Approaches*, ed. Michael Bamberg, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 179-215.
- Timmers, Monique, Agneta H. Fischer, and Antony S. R. Manstead (2003), "Ability Versus Vulnerability: Beliefs about Men's and Women's Emotional Behavior," *Cognition and Emotion*, 17 (January), 41-63.

Copyright of *Advances in Consumer Research - North American Conference Proceedings* is the property of Association for Consumer Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.