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Author	李, 光鎬(Lee, Kwangho)
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Book Review

Introduction to Positive Media Psychology

Arthur A. Raney et al.

Taylor & Francis Group, 2021, 225 Pages

LEE Kwangho*

Does the media make us happy? Does it contribute to our human maturity and prosperity? Does it make our society a warmer and more comfortable place to live? As a researcher in media psychology myself, I have rarely thought about such questions. The basic perspective of media education I have received is to always focus on the negative impact on the audience (especially children and adolescents) and how to control such media content and protect the audience.

Violent and sexual expressions in movies and video games, gender and minority stereotyping in dramas and advertisements, bias in news reporting, ideal body images in social media, and addiction to smartphones are just some of how the media is perceived as a toxic and harmful entity that needs to be viewed with suspicion and kept at a distance.

However, looking back on our daily media use, we utilize the benefits of the media in almost every aspect of our lives, including information acquisition, learning, entertainment, social interaction, and rest. Of course, this is not to say that media psychology has not paid attention to these various media benefits in the past. Typically, the uses and gratifications approach has explored the relationship between such utility and media use. However, it tends to be limited to the utility of gratifying our ‘basic needs’, and less likely to consider our reflexive goals of enhancing human maturity or altruistic purposes of more directing toward others or the community.

The “Introduction to Positive Media Psychology” co-authored by Raney, Janicke-Bowles, Oliver, and Dale, focuses on media’s “benign” effects, which has been a blind spot in media effect research provides a systematic and accessible overview of the relevant research.

First of all, Chapter 1 of this book explains what positive media psychology is. For people like me who are accustomed to conventional media effect research, this chapter is an introduction that quickly broadens the horizons to new types of media effect research. This chapter states that positive psychology, which explores the

* Professor at Department of Humanities and Social Science, Faculty of Letters, Keio University

psychological conditions under which humans feel happiness and seeks interventions to be happy, is the theoretical foundation of this book.

Chapters 2 and 3 are theoretical parts. Assumptions about media and audience in media psychology, theories that explain the cognitive, affective, and behavioral influences of media, and the psychological and social psychological theories that support them are briefly introduced in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 discusses the main concepts and theories of positive psychology. After clarifying the differences between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, major theories are introduced that provide insight into how eudaimonic well-being, in particular, can be realized. Theories about the relationship between types of well-being and corresponding cognitive processes, as well as the determinants of well-being, are described, providing a framework for understanding empirical research in the following chapters.

Chapters 4 through 11 present a wealth of empirical findings of how positive media influences have been explored and what has been revealed for each specific type of media content. Dolf Zillmann's research on entertainment and his famous disposition theory, mood management theory, excitation transfer theory are discussed at the beginning of Chapter 4. The content factors, identification with characters, and parasocial interaction that affect the enjoyment derived from entertainment are also explained in this chapter.

This is followed by research on meaningful and transcendent entertainment, which has not received much attention in entertainment research to date. The characteristics of the emotional and cognitive aspects of eudaimonic entertainment experiences are identified, and the positive effects of meaningful entertainment are discussed in Chapter 5, based on empirical findings and psychological explanations such as meta emotions and terror management theory.

The study of transcendent entertainment, which invites us to go beyond our personal benefits to a greater understanding of interconnectedness with others and nature, is perhaps the most unexplored subject for many media students and researchers. Emotions such as elevation, inspiration, gratitude, awe, and Kama Muta are often felt in everyday media use, but little academic attention has been paid to the media content that brings them about. Ample evidences of what kind of content triggers these self-transcendent emotions and whether such emotions lead to altruistic outcomes are introduced.

In Chapter 7, the positive effects of social media are examined. Not only personal effects such as reducing loneliness and managing stress, but also social effects such as connecting with others and making advocacy are discussed.

In Chapter 8, it is first pointed out that the new technologies of digital games and virtual reality may have different impacts from traditional media due to their characteristics such as interactivity, immersion, and presence. The positive influence of digital games as hedonic, meaningful, and transcendent entertainment then are

examined in detail. The effects of games for learning, health, and social change, and the potential of virtual reality to augment those effects, are also discussed.

The positive influence of non-fiction and fiction are covered in the following two chapters. In chapter 9, the effects of positive news are addressed. After explaining the basic theories of news influence such as agenda-setting, media framing, and exemplification, the content analysis results on the weight given to “good news” in American news media and audience surveys on the degree of exposure gained are discussed. Studies of positive ways of reporting news, such as restorative narratives and constructive journalism, other than news about positive events, are particularly notable. This is followed by a lot of empirical research that explores the various effects of positive news, such as elevation, connectedness, prejudice reduction, and altruism.

Chapter 10 examines the influence of fiction. In particular, the persuasive effect of narratives is the central topic of this chapter. Including the transportation imagery model and the extended elaboration likelihood model, major theories about the mechanisms by which narrative influence emerges are explained, and studies demonstrating the power of narrative on aspects such as health behavior, attitudes toward others, hope, and resilience are introduced.

In Chapter 11, the learning effects of children’s media are examined in detail by developmental stages, based on empirical studies of actual programs such as Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues. The effects on children’s prosocial behavior are also explained for media such as television programs and digital games.

The effects of the media are not the same for all individuals, and a variety of individual and cultural differences mediate and moderate the effects. Chapter 12 discusses individual variables such as gender, age, personality traits, and cultural differences that influence the manifestation of media influence.

The final chapter, Chapter 13, presents a “mindful media use model” that provides practical guidance on how to stop problematic media use behaviors and successfully elicit the positive media influences described in the previous chapters.

The first author, Prof. Arthur A. Raney’s central research interest is how morality relates to the consumption and enjoyment of entertainment. His interest may have come from the Disposition Theory of Dolf Zillmann, a professor at the University of Alabama where he spent his undergraduate years. Zillmann argued that entertainment consumers are ‘untiring moral monitors’ who evaluate media characters in terms of morality and that the dispositions of like and dislike formed based on these evaluations are the basic mechanism of entertainment enjoyment. While Zillmann focused on mainly hedonic entertainment, Raney and his colleagues took morality as a key concept to expand their field of research to include eudaimonic entertainment and its various positive effects. This is an important and meaningful expansion of the horizon and a significant paradigm change in media psychology. Fortunately, I am working on publishing a Japanese translation of this

book now, and I hope it will lead to the development of entertainment studies in Japan.