Fact or Fiction: An Investigation of Empathy Differences in Response to Emotional Melodramatic Entertainment

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Three studies investigate the influence of empathy and the level of fictionality of short stories on consumers' evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment. We find that high empathizers' evaluations are more favorable when the story is low in fictionality (i.e., real) versus high. In contrast, low empathizers' evaluations do not differ, regardless of the level of fictionality, except when these individuals (i.e., males) are provided with an excuse to become involved in the story; in this case a story that is high (i.e., make-believe) as opposed to low in fictionality is evaluated more favorably. Finally, transportation (i.e., absorption into a narrative) with the story is found to both moderate and mediate the effects.

It is well established that various forms of entertainment such as sports, concerts, movies, dramas, and narratives provide real consumption experiences (e.g., Andrade and Cohen 2007; Deighton 1992; Escalas and Stern 2003; Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). In fact, these consumption experiences have a fairly significant impact in the marketplace. To illustrate, Americans spent approximately 8.5% of their total income on the consumption of entertainment, which resulted in an industry generating over $145 billion in sales in 2003 (http://www.census.gov/compendia/statatab). In addition to consumer spending, entertainment also has implications in managerial decisions. For example, millions of dollars are at stake for producers and publishers of entertainment material when they identify which projects are worth pursuing and which to reject. Also, marketers buying advertisement time must decide well in advance during which programs to advertise their products. Given the fact that entertainment appears to be an important consumable product, in the present research we seek to understand when consumers' evaluations of it will be favorable. To achieve this we focus on one genre of entertainment that has received minimal academic attention—emotional melodramas.

Characterized by its heart-tugging, poignant plot, emotional melodrama is a subtype of dramatic entertainment that appeals to the heightened emotions of audiences and readers of all ages (http://www.britannica.com). Often labeled “chick flicks,” “tearjerkers,” or “human interest stories,” emotional melodramas appear in a wide range of entertainment formats (e.g., movies, short stories, television, and plays). Through the conveyance of the struggles or sufferings of protagonists who work through their challenges or overcome their problems through sacrifice and bravery (http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/melodrama/ melodrama.htm), melodramas often foster deep emotional reactions on the part of the consumer. The importance of this form of entertainment is underscored in the popularity and success of Hollywood movies (e.g., Titanic, $1.8 billion worldwide gross, A Beautiful Mind, $316 million worldwide gross, and The Notebook, $102 million worldwide gross), daytime television programming (e.g., the Oprah Winfrey Show, the number one TV talk show in the United States), and novels (e.g., Angela's Ashes, winner of the Pulitzer Prize) that follow this genre.

Despite the apparent popularity of emotional melodramatic entertainment, it is unclear when consumers will enjoy
this genre of entertainment. In the present research we suggest that differences in empathy may influence consumers’ responses to emotional melodramatic entertainment. Indeed, according to previous research, consumers need to process the content of a melodramatic appeal empathetically, as empathizing with the characters or plot increases the likelihood that they will accept the melodrama’s “verisimilitude and respond to it emotionally” (Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989, 341). We expect that individual differences in empathy (i.e., high vs. low empathizers) will interact with a certain stimulus characteristic (i.e., the melodrama’s level of fictionality—the degree to which it is based on reality) to influence the degree of empathy realized, which will in turn determine overall enjoyment of a melodrama. Using gender as a proxy for empathy in studies 1 and 2 and measuring the empathy construct directly via an individual difference scale in study 3, we predict that high empathizers will feel empathy when they are exposed to an emotional melodrama and that their responses to the entertainment will be augmented when it is real (i.e., low in fictionality). Finally, we determine whether the degree to which a consumer is transported (i.e., absorbed; Green and Brock 2000; Wang and Calder 2006) into the narrative is an underlying factor for this predicted effect. We use as our context of investigation emotional melodramatic short stories.

This research contributes to our understanding of melodramatic entertainment in a number of ways. First, it extends previous work in marketing that has primarily focused on the role of empathy in the context of social marketing and advertising (e.g., Aaker and Williams 1998; Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Deighton et al. 1989). It achieves this by exploring the impact of empathy on evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment and identifying an important moderating factor (i.e., level of fictionality). We find that high empathizers evaluate melodramatic entertainment more favorably when they believe it is low as compared to high in fictionality, whereas, in two of the three studies, low empathizers’ evaluations do not differ regardless of the level of fictionality. Second, it explores underlying processes for the observed effects. Results demonstrate that transportation and evoked emotions independently motivate the findings. Third, it tests boundary conditions for the interactive impact of empathy and fictionality on evaluations of short stories. We find that the patterns cease to exist when consumers do not become transported into the story or when they are exposed to a nonmelodramatic story. In the next section we present our theoretical background and conceptual development. We then report three experiments that offer systematic testing of our theorization. We conclude with a general discussion of the findings and highlight implications and future research directions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, we will first review the extant research on empathy and fictionality. Then, based on this review, we develop our theorization by suggesting that empathy interacts with a melodrama’s level of fictionality to affect consumers’ enjoyment of the emotional melodramatic entertainment.

Empathy

Empathy has been defined broadly as a construct that encompasses cognitive empathy, identification, and emotional contagion and generally involves understanding the internal states of others (Preston and de Waal 2002). More specifically it is one’s ability to experience and understand another person’s affective or psychological state (i.e., imagine the self in someone else’s shoes; Burke 1971; Krebs 1970; Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990). The concept of empathy has received increasing attention in recent years, mainly due to its power to explain and predict important social behavior. For example, Batson et al. (1995) demonstrate that feeling empathy for another person can be powerful enough to motivate individuals to forsake justice (i.e., fairness) in the interest of benefiting the person with whom one empathizes. As another illustration, empathy has been widely regarded as a core component of effective mental health counseling in the health care industry (McLeod 1999; Pope and Kline 1999), prompting the requirement in top medical schools that students spend valuable time trailing a patient rather than a doctor (Thornburgh 2006).

Not only has empathy been investigated in the psychology domain, but it has also been examined in marketing. In general, research on empathy has shown that it has a positive effect on attitudes in an advertising context (e.g., Edell and Burke 1987; Holbrook and Batra 1987; Stayman and Aaker 1988; Wells 1989). For example, Bagozzi and Moore (1994) find that negative emotions arising from exposure to public service advertisements create empathetic reactions and in turn influence consumers’ willingness to help. In another investigation, Aaker and Williams (1998) explore conditions under which other-focused emotional appeals that are empathetic in nature influence evaluations for members in different cultures.

Other consumer behavior researchers have explored the role of empathy in advertising drama. Wells (1989) suggested that drama can draw viewers into an advertisement and thus elicit positive reactions. Following on Wells’s work, Deighton and colleagues (1989, 335) point out that in a successful and persuasive advertising drama “the audience becomes 'lost' in the story and experiences the concerns and feelings of the characters.” Finally, Escalas, Moore, and Edell Britton (2004) find that a heightened level of empathy is elicited with consumers becoming absorbed into commercials and creating higher levels of positive evaluations when the story lines of the advertisements are well (as compared to poorly) developed. In sum, this line of research suggests that successful dramas are likely to induce heightened levels of empathy and consequently lead to more favorable evaluations. Extending prior research, we argue that even for the same drama (e.g., emotional melodrama in our case), consumers with varying degrees of empathy will respond differently. Specifically, we expect that high (vs. low) empathizers will evaluate an emotional melo-
drama, which conveys the struggles and sufferings of a protagonist more favorably. This will arise because high empathizers will become transported and absorbed into the plot to a greater extent. Furthermore, we build on this line of research by investigating how the impact of empathy on evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment might be moderated by the melodrama's fictionality.

The Importance of Fictionality

Story lines for various forms of entertainment can be categorized as fiction or nonfiction, and what differs between these two categories is the extent to which the information underlying the stories is based on true accounts. We note that this categorization is not absolute, but rather a story can fall along a continuum of fictionality from entirely make-believe to completely real. In the present research we investigate the level of fictionality, defined as the extent to which a story reflects one end of the continuum (i.e., a real-life event) versus the other (i.e., a fictitious account).

In general, people tend to be more responsive to real (i.e., low in fictionality) as compared to fictional (i.e., high in fictionality) information. For example, Cappella et al. (2005) find that when people believe a news story is real they are more likely to make inferences. Similarly, Johnson (2004) shows that the more realistic the situation people find themselves in, the more intense emotional responses they will elicit. In yet another context, research has shown that intense responses to real information are related to favorable evaluations; consumers have a preference that product placements appearing in video games be for real rather than make-believe brands (e.g., DeLorme and Reid 1999; Nelson, Keum, and Yaros 2004).

Considering fictionality and empathy together, we predict that high empathizers will be transported into the story to a greater extent and will therefore evaluate melodramatic entertainment more favorably, especially when they believe it is low (i.e., real) as compared to high (i.e., make-believe) in fictionality. In contrast, evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment are not expected to differ for low empathizers, regardless of their perceptions of the story's level of fictionality, because they are less likely to become absorbed in the story and understand the plights of others (the typical story line present in melodramas) in the first place.

H1a: High empathizers will evaluate emotional melodramatic entertainment more favorably when it is low (vs. high) in fictionality.

H1b: Differences in consumers' evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment based on level of fictionality will be attenuated for low empathizers.

As implied in our theorization, we anticipate that the degree to which a consumer is transported (i.e., absorbed) into the story will mediate the predictions. According to Green and Brock (2000, 701) transportation is where "all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative" and where, in essence, people become "lost in a story." Thus, the more empathetic a person is, the more s/he will be involved and immersed into the story and transported into the world of the narrative. Further, research suggests that people become more involved when the information they are presented with is believable (e.g., Aldoory 2001). More formally,

H2: Transportation will mediate the influence of empathy and fictionality on consumers' evaluations of an emotional melodramatic story.

In the remainder of the article we report three experiments that aim to test our hypotheses. In the first two studies, we use gender as a proxy for the central construct of empathy. Such an operationalization is reasonable as it is well established that on average females are more empathetic than males (e.g., Eisenberg and Lennon 1983; Gault and Sabini 2000; Lennon and Eisenberg 1987; Toussaint and Webb 2005). Indeed, in a review of the literature on gender differences in empathy, Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) find the prevalence of a sex difference favoring females across a large number of studies using a variety of methods for data collection (e.g., self-report scales, reflective crying, and other self-report measures). Both sociological and psychological theorists have attributed such a gender difference to variations in the traditional roles of the two sexes. Whereas men usually assume an instrumental role within a family and ensure that tasks needed for the family to function in the outside world are accomplished, women are socialized to assume an expressive role where they focus on facilitating interpersonal harmony within the family. Thus, compared to men, women are socialized to be more empathetic (e.g., Eisenberg and Lennon 1983; Parsons and Bales 1955). Whereas gender is a reasonable measure for empathy, these are not identical constructs. Although females are generally more empathetic than males, there are males who rate high on this dimension and females who rate low. Thus, in the third study, we measure the empathy construct directly by using an individual difference scale (Mehrabian and Epstein 1972).

STUDY 1

The primary objective of the study was to test our hypotheses by measuring consumers' empathy and perceived fictionality of melodramatic stories. To enhance the generalizability of our findings, we selected three stories that reflected different themes common in emotional melodramas, including sacrifice, love, and pride. Differences across the three stories relative to the primary independent variables were not expected.

Method

This study used a 2 (empathy: low vs. high) × 3 (theme: sacrifice vs. love vs. pride) × (perceived fictionality) be-
tween-subjects experimental design. Both empathy (operationalized as gender) and perceived fictionality were measured. The theme of the story was manipulated by having participants read one of three short stories. Two hundred sixty-five undergraduate students from the University of Alberta completed the study. Participants in all three studies received $10 honoraria.

Upon arrival, participants were provided with an experimental package. Instructions indicated that during the study they would be asked to read the transcript of a pilot idea for a TV program. The “transcript,” which began on the next page, was actually an acclaimed emotional melodramatic short story from English literature. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three short stories: “The Last Leaf,” by O. Henry (sacrifice), “An Angel in Disguise,” by T. S. Arthur (love), or “The Diamond Necklace,” by Guy de Maupassant (pride). All three stories used in the experiment were approximately the same length and reading difficulty. A pretest demonstrated that the three stories indeed evoked heightened emotions as compared to a neutral, non-emotional story (i.e., “A Piece of Red Calico,” by Frank Stockton) of approximately the same length and reading difficulty.

After reading the “transcript,” participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of both the independent and dependent variables. They were first asked to evaluate the story using three items on 11-point scales (bad/good, terrible/outstanding, and poor/excellent) and to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they believed that the facts recounted in the story were based on a true account (did not believe it at all/definitely believed it). Finally, they indicated their gender, age, and student status and completed a suspicion probe. Responses to the age and student status items did not predict significant variance in any of the dependent measures, nor did the suspicion probe question indicate that anyone correctly identified the experimental hypotheses in this study or in the subsequent studies; these variables are not discussed further.

Results

Using linear regression analysis we analyzed the impact of empathy, theme, the continuous measure of perceived fictionality, and their interaction terms on overall evaluations. The results produced a main effect for empathy ($\beta = .90$, $t = 2.18$, $p < .05$) and fictionality ($\beta = .24$, $t = 3.48$, $p = .001$). More important, these effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction between empathy and fictionality ($\beta = -.31$, $t = 3.15$, $p < .01$). To facilitate an examination of the interaction, a median split was performed on the perceived fictionality variable, creating two levels for this factor (high vs. low in fictionality). Note that a 3 (theme) x 2 (empathy) x 2 (perceived fictionality) between-subjects ANOVA for the overall evaluations index also produced the significant two-way interaction for the latter two factors ($F(1, 253) = 23.75$, $p < .001$). Given that theme did not interact with any of the other variables, the results of the three stories were collapsed. Consistent with hypothesis 1a, high empathizers evaluated the melodramas more favorably when they rated the story low in perceived fictionality (vs. high; $t(261) = 6.91$, $p < .001$; see table 1 for means). A second planned contrast provided support for hypothesis 1b as low empathizers did not differ in their overall evaluations regardless of their perceived fictionality of the story ($p > .20$). Finally, high empathizers evaluated the stories more favorably than low empathizers when perceived fictionality was low ($t(261) = \ldots$)

### Table 1

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<th>Low empathizers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low fictionality</td>
<td>High fictionality</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.38 (.91)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.01 (1.03)</td>
<td>-.03 (.31)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.56 (1.44)</td>
<td>4.44 (.71)</td>
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<td>Cell size</td>
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<td>Story 2 (“An Angel In Disguise”; love theme):</td>
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<td>Overall evaluations</td>
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<td>-.13 (1.01)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
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<td>4.81 (1.49)</td>
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<td>Cell size</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story 3 (“The Diamond Necklace”; pride theme):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall evaluations</td>
<td>.76 (.76)</td>
<td>-.18 (.57)</td>
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To
Regression results revealed that the interaction of empathy mediation analysis was conducted (Baron and Kenny 1986). To examine whether transportation underlies the effects, mediation analysis was conducted (Baron and Kenny 1986). Regression results revealed that the interaction of empathy and perceived fictionality significantly affected overall evaluations ($\beta = -0.31, t = 3.15, p < .01$) and participants' transportation with the story ($\beta = -1.15, t = -3.69, p < .001$). The inclusion of transportation as a covariate in the original analysis for overall evaluations produced a main effect for transportation ($\beta = .36, t = 10.20, p < .001$), and, more important, the interaction fell in significance ($\beta = -0.59, t = -3.21, p < .01$; Sobel's test $Z = -3.47, p < .001$). Therefore, transportation mediates the impact of the relationship between empathy and perceived fictionality on participants' overall evaluations of melodramatic stories.

Discussion

Across three stories using different emotional melodramatic themes, study 1 demonstrated that the impact of empathy on evaluations of the melodramatic entertainment was moderated by perceived fictionality. We found that high empathizers reported higher overall evaluations when they believed that the story had really happened (i.e., low in fictionality) versus when they believed it was fictional (i.e., high in fictionality). In contrast, low empathizers formed equally low evaluations regardless of the perceived fictionality of the stories. Finally, transportation appeared to be driving the effects identified.

STUDY 2

Study 2 intends to build on study 1 to provide stronger support to our theorization. First, instead of measuring fictionality we directly manipulated the fictional nature of the story (i.e., real vs. make-believe). Second, we test whether evoked emotional responses serve as an additional mediator to the observed effects. Given that the type of melodrama we are interested in is emotional in nature, we anticipate that evoked emotions will influence the evaluations of the entertainment (Edell and Burke 1987; Holbrook and Batra 1987). Specifically, we expect that high empathizers will elicit more emotional responses and consequently will form more favorable evaluations when they are informed that the story is real versus make-believe, while low empathizers will elicit equally low numbers of emotional responses and subsequently form equally low evaluations regardless of the fictionality of the story. As in study 1, we again use gender as an operationalization of the empathy construct in this study.

Method

This study used a 2 (empathy: low vs. high) × 2 (fictionality: real vs. make-believe) between-subjects experimental design. Because similar mean patterns were observed for all three stories in study 1, in this study we used one short story, "The Last Leaf." Eighty undergraduate students from the University of Alberta completed the study.

The same procedure was used as described in study 1, with two exceptions. First, to manipulate the fictionality of the story, participants read that the transcript described a "real life story (i.e., it is nonfiction—a true story that actually happened)" in the real condition and a "make-believe story (i.e., it is fiction—a fake story that has never happened before)" in the make-believe condition. Second, thought listings were collected to assess whether high and low empathizers differed in their evoked emotional responses based on the fictionality of the melodramatic story. Participants were asked to write down any thoughts or feelings they had while reading the story. Two trained coders who were blind to the experimental conditions independently classified the total number of emotional words participants reported (e.g., "touched," "moved," and "happy"). Emotions that were related to an evaluation of the story itself, such as "the story was not sad," were not included. Initial level of agreement between the two coders was 90%, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion with one of the authors. As in study 1, overall evaluations ($\alpha = .95$) and transportation were assessed ($r = .73$).

Results

A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA conducted on the overall evaluations index produced a significant interaction between the independent variables ($F(1,76) = 14.37, p < .001$; see table 2 for means). Consistent with hypothesis 1a, high empathizers evaluated the emotional melodramatic story more favorably when it was real (i.e., low in fictionality) as compared to when it was make-believe ($t(76) = 2.28, p < .05$). However, support was not found for hypothesis 1b as low empathizers eval-

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<th>TREATMENT MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR STUDY 2</th>
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$5.19, p < .001$, but no differences arose when perceived fictionality was high ($p > .10$).

To examine whether transportation underlies the effects, mediation analysis was conducted (Baron and Kenny 1986). Regression results revealed that the interaction of empathy and perceived fictionality significantly affected overall evaluations ($\beta = -0.31, t = 3.15, p < .01$) and participants' transportation with the story ($\beta = -1.15, t = -3.69, p < .001$). The inclusion of transportation as a covariate in the original analysis for overall evaluations produced a main effect for transportation ($\beta = .36, t = 10.20, p < .001$), and, more important, the interaction fell in significance ($\beta = -0.59, t = -3.21, p < .01$; Sobel's test $Z = -3.47, p < .001$). Therefore, transportation mediates the impact of the relationship between empathy and perceived fictionality on participants' overall evaluations of melodramatic stories.

Discussion

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Mediation analysis was conducted to ascertain whether transportation and evoked emotional words independently mediated the impact of empathy and level of fictionality. Results supported our theorization. Specifically, regression analyses revealed that the interaction of empathy and fictionality significantly affected overall evaluations ($\beta = 1.46$, $t = 3.79, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .159$), participants’ transportation with the story ($\beta = 1.64$, $t = 2.65, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .085$), and emotional words elicited ($\beta = 2.32$, $t = 2.72, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .089$). Further, including both transportation and evoked emotional words simultaneously into the original analysis for overall evaluations demonstrated that they both served as distinct mediators. In particular, both transportation ($\beta = .27$, $t = 4.29, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .199$) and evoked emotional words ($\beta = .13$, $t = 2.83, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .098$) significantly predicted evaluations, and the interaction term fell in significance ($\beta = .73$, $t = 2.15, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .059$; Sobel for emotional words: $Z = 1.97, p < .05$; Sobel for transportation: $Z = 2.25, p < .05$).

**Discussion**

Study 2 provides a stronger test for hypothesis 1 and further explores the underlying processes for the predicted hypotheses. Consistent with hypothesis 1a and replicating study 1, results supported our theorization that high empathizers would evaluate emotional melodramatic entertainment more favorably when the story was said to be real (vs. make-believe). However, the pattern of effects for low empathizers did not replicate study 1 and did not support hypothesis 1b. Rather than finding no differences in evaluations due to the story’s fictionality, study 2 demonstrated that low empathizers evaluated the story more favorably when it was make-believe as opposed to real. Results demonstrated that transportation and elicited emotions served as independent mediators of our effects.

One possible explanation for the unexpected pattern arising for low empathizers may be related to the nature of a melodrama that is high in fictionality. In particular, melodramatic entertainment that is high in fictionality is arguably safe because it is not real or binding, permanently beneficial or harmful (Izod 2000). Rather, it can be experienced from a comfortable distance with the knowledge that when one leaves the theater, turns off the television, or puts down the novel, the emotions it elicited can be escaped and are meaningless when one returns to the “real world” (Gabbard and Gabbard 1987). Further, enjoying fictional entertainment provides an opportunity to break rules associated with social norms (Jung 1961). This is in stark contrast to reality, where social rules must be observed and adhered to if one is to avoid society’s penalties for deviating beliefs and behaviors.

Recall in this study that low empathy was operationalized as male participants. For this particular group there exists a norm that they should be emotionally strong and refrain from displaying soft emotions such as sadness (e.g., “big boys don’t cry”; Timmers, Fischer, and Manstead 2003). Failure to comply with this norm could increase the possibility that the deviant male would be evaluated negatively (Forsyth 1995). Given this, explicitly informing consumers that the story is make-believe may create a safe situation for low empathizers to evaluate the story more favorably. In contrast, when the melodramatic story is factual, the rules of society (i.e., norms about emotional responses) cannot be freely discarded without potential negative consequences. Thus, in this latter situation, low empathizers (operationalized as males) would be expected to react consistently with social expectations or norms, such that they would evaluate the story less favorably. Follow-up analysis suggests that low empathizers (i.e., males) were less likely to endorse gender stereotype beliefs (e.g., “men who express their emotions are weak,” and “men should not cry”) when the story was fictitious versus true. It appears that males who are low empathizers temporarily discarded social norms in the make-believe versus real condition and in turn evaluated the melodramatic story more favorably.

**STUDY 3**

The final study has three objectives. First, instead of using gender as a proxy for empathy, we directly measure individuals’ empathy. This will provide insight into whether it is the presence of an excuse that enabled low empathizers (i.e., males) to enjoy the melodramatic entertainment in study 2. Should study 2’s pattern for low empathizers arise again (i.e., they enjoy the story more in the make-believe vs. real condition), this would suggest that the presence of an excuse may not in fact be influencing the results, as low empathizers (not just males) do not necessarily need an excuse to enjoy melodramatic stories. In contrast, if the pattern replicates that observed in study 1 (i.e., no differences in evaluations regardless of the fictionality of the story) this would provide support for the notion that an excuse produced the unexpected results for low empathizers in study 2. A second objective of study 3 is to further investigate the role of transportation. While in the first two studies we used a mediation approach to test the process involving transportation, in study 3 we will use a moderation approach, following the notion that unless one is drawn into the melodramatic story in the first place, one cannot empathize. We expect the interaction effect of empathy and fictionality to occur only among those who are absorbed (i.e., transported) into the melodramatic story. Finally, we assess whether the relationship between empathy and level of fictionality is unique to emotional melodramas or if it also applies to more neutral entertainment.
ID as a random effect, we analyzed the impact of fictionality, and empathy was measured. Treatments were blocked on participant, with each participant receiving two treatments. Neithe...y to transport nor the type of story was repeated within participant. One hundred and forty-seven undergraduate students from the University of Alberta completed the study.

The same procedure was used as described in study 2, with a few notable differences. Participants were first told that during the study they would be completing a series of different experiments. They first completed the emotional empathy scale (Mehrabian and Epstein 1972). Responses to the scale were mean centered for analysis. Participants were then provided with the opportunity to transport manipulation. Following Shiv and Huber (2000), participants in the high opportunity to transport condition were asked to memorize a two digit number (i.e., making it easy to become absorbed in the story), whereas those in the low condition memorized an eight digit number (i.e., making it more difficult to become absorbed in the story). After being provided with a number to memorize, they received the experimental package. As in study 2, level of fictionality was manipulated on the cover page of both stories by indicating that the story was true or make-believe. Participants then read one of two stories. As in the earlier studies, “The Last Leaf” was used as the emotional melodramatic story while “A Piece of Red Calico,” by Frank Stockton, was employed as the neutral story. After reading the story, participants completed the survey. The process was repeated for the second story with the opposite opportunity to transport manipulation. The order in which the stories were presented and the opportunity to transport manipulation were counterbalanced. Overall evaluations of the story (α = .90) were again assessed.

Results

Using a linear mixed-effects model including participant ID as a random effect, we analyzed the impact of fictionality, opportunity to transport, type of story, the continuous mean-centered measure of emotional empathy, an order dummy variable, and their interaction terms on overall evaluations. Results of the analysis revealed that the four-way interaction among fictionality, opportunity to transport, type of story, and empathy (β = −1.82, t(111) = 2.19, p < .05) and the main effect of empathy (β = .97, t(111) = 2.44, p < .05) were statistically significant. For ease of presentation, a median split was calculated on the empathy index to create a group of low and a group of high empathizers. Note that the interaction among dichotomized empathy, fictionality, opportunity to transport, and story was also significant when using an ANOVA approach to the data (F(1,256) = 5.24, p < .05). Focusing first on “The Last Leaf” story, we found a significant three-way interaction among fictionality, opportunity to transport, and empathy (F(1,138) = 4.20, p < .05; see table 3 for means). To further analyze this interaction, another simple interaction for participants who were high in opportunity to transport was conducted. The two-way interaction of fictionality by empathy was significant (F(1,76) = 6.77, p < .05). Simple effects tests demonstrated that high empathizers evaluated the melodramatic story most favorably when it was real as compared to the other conditions (vs. make-believe, t(76) = 3.10, p < .01; vs. low empathizers and real, t(76) = 2.59, p < .05; vs. low empathizers and make-believe, t(76) = 1.90, p = .06) and that there were no differences among the other three conditions (p’s > .20). A simple interaction test was also conducted for participants who read “The Last Leaf” and were low in opportunity to transport. As anticipated, the 2 (fictionality) × 2 (empathy) ANOVA did not produce any significant effects (p’s > .20). A simple interaction test was conducted for participants who read the neutral story (“A Piece of Red Calico”), but the 2 (fictionality) × 2 (empathy) × 2 (transport) ANOVA did not produce any significant main effects or interactions (p’s > .10; see table 3 for means).

Discussion

This study demonstrated that when the opportunity to be transported into an emotional melodramatic story was high, the results replicated those found in study 1. Specifically,
high empathizers evaluated the story more favorably when it was low (vs. high) in fictionality, while low empathizers’ evaluations did not differ regardless of the level of fictionality. This suggests that study 2’s unexpected results for low empathizers may have indeed been related to the proposed explanation that an excuse was provided, which enabled them to become absorbed in the story and enjoy it more. Analyses for those with low opportunity to transport themselves into the narrative did not produce any significant findings, regardless of whether they read the emotional melodramatic story or the neutral story. These results suggest that transportation acted as a significant moderator in this context. Finally, the observed effects that empathy and fictionality interact to influence story enjoyment appear to be unique to emotional melodramatic entertainment and do not arise for a more neutral form of entertainment.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Each year millions of dollars are spent by consumers in the enjoyment of emotional melodramatic entertainment. However, our understanding of when and why consumers might enjoy this type of entertainment remains limited. This research sheds light on this question by examining the effects of two important factors, namely, empathy and perceived fictionality, on consumers’ evaluations and enjoyment of melodramatic entertainment. In line with the previous literature, we find that high empathizers generally enjoy emotional melodrama more than low empathizers. More important, the fictionality of an emotional melodrama appears to moderate this main-effect relationship. Specifically, while high empathizers evaluate a melodramatic story more favorably when it is low versus high in fictionality, low empathizers form equally low evaluations of the story regardless of its fictionality level (as in studies 1 and 3). Interestingly, in study 2 low empathizers evaluated an emotional melodramatic story more favorably when they were told that the story is make-believe as opposed to real. This finding may have been due to the use of gender as an operationalization of empathy and the manipulation (rather than measurement) of fictionality. Providing explicit information that the story is make-believe may have enabled low empathizers (males in this case) to relax emotion norms and become more involved in the story, in turn resulting in more favorable evaluations of the entertainment.

To better understand the results, the current research also explores underlying process mechanisms and boundary conditions for these effects. Specifically, mediation analysis reveals that two psychological mechanisms, transportation and evoked emotional responses, serve as potential underlying drivers for the observed findings. Furthermore, manipulating transportation provides further support that only when consumers are involved in the story do their responses demonstrate the anticipated interactive effects between empathy and fictionality. Finally, we find that the observed effects in this research are unique to emotional melodramas, as no treatment effects are observed for a neutral story in study 3.

Our research makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, it extends previous research in marketing that has in general focused on the use of empathetic appeals in consumers’ evaluations of advertisements (e.g., Aaker and Williams 1998) and their likelihood of behaving altruistically (e.g., Bagozzi and Moore 1994). It also builds on Deighton et al.’s (1989) work that suggests that consumers’ empathy should affect the evaluations of entertainment by identifying a factor inherent in entertainment (i.e., its level of fictionality) that moderates empathy’s influence in the context of emotional melodramatic short stories. The present research explores why consumers’ evaluations of emotional melodramatic entertainment are influenced by their empathy level and the story’s fictionality. To achieve this, we empirically test for the independent motivating roles of consumer transportation in the story and evoked emotions from the story. Finally, we identify two conditions under which empathy and fictionality would not interact to influence consumers’ evaluations of entertainment: when consumers’ transportation with the story is low and when the story is not an emotional melodrama.

At a practical level our research findings speak to an increasingly popular trend in the entertainment industry wherein publishers and producers indicate at the outset of the story or program its level of fictionality (i.e., whether it is based on actual facts). A strong example of the importance of this issue is apparent in the controversy related to the novel A Million Little Pieces, by James Frey. After dominating the number one spot in the New York Times best-seller list for over 15 weeks, selling over 1.77 million copies, and moving Oprah Winfrey to say that she “couldn’t put down ... a gut-wrenching memoir that is raw and it’s so real,” the story touted as a nonfictional memoir shocked readers when the news broke that Frey had embellished significant portions of the memoir to the extent that it had relapsed into a piece of fictional work (http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.html). In response to learning that the story once believed to be true was in fact make-believe, class action lawsuits were filed around the country against Frey and Random House Inc. Clearly, the communication of the level of fictionality can be an important issue. Our results would suggest that such a technique would be more effective when the entertainment is targeting high versus low empathizers. Indeed, signaling the nature of the fictionality of a story or program may be one possible way of targeting specific segments in audiences. Thus, placement of the signal (e.g., at the start or end of a story or program) is an important consideration that may enable specific targeting strategies.

While we focus on the impact of fictionality on high and low empathizers’ enjoyment of emotional melodramatic entertainment, we acknowledge that a number of other factors might affect consumers’ responses to such entertainment. For instance, DeWall and Baumeister (2006) find that if individuals are socially excluded, their emotional system will cease to function normally, and they will experience an increase in emotional insensitivity. In turn, a decrease in emotional sensitivity results in a subsequent decrease in the
likelihood that individuals will empathize with other people. Thus, if consumers are exposed to melodramatic entertainment alone, the role of empathy on evaluations may be attenuated. Support for the notion that consumers may respond to entertainment differently depending on the social context is found in Fisher and Dubé (2005), who demonstrate that exposure to emotional advertising in a public versus private setting influenced genders (individuals who differ in empathy levels) differently.

This research also has certain limitations that offer avenues for future investigations. For example, in study 2, we observed an unexpected finding for low empathizers (operationalized as males), such that they enjoyed emotional melodramatic entertainment more when they were explicitly informed that the entertainment was make-believe as compared to real. Although we offered a post hoc proposition to explain the results, we have limited data to thoroughly test our explanation. Future research could seek to explore our unexpected finding in more detail by asking a variety of questions. Do males consciously or unconsciously convince themselves that it is alright to deviate from societal norms and enjoy fictional melodramatic entertainment? Is fictionality a motivator for males to actively seek out emotional melodramas? Are there other rationales that might explain males’ heightened enjoyment of fictional versus nonfictional entertainment? Could it be that fictional and factual (e.g., documentary) writings differ in ways that affect males’ responses? At a broader level, future research should seek to explore the possibility that gender may activate different patterns of responses in other entertainment contexts. Finally, future research could investigate the impact of fictionality in melodramas that contain masculine norm-congruent emotion as well as other entertainment genres such as comedy, action, and horror. These genres have typically been associated with a variety of emotions, including power, happiness, anger, and fear. Does fictionality play a role in consumer reactions toward these other types of stories? Do empathy differences exist with respect to these different genres? These and many other questions await future inquiry.

REFERENCES


