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“I Can’t Wait for the Next Episode!” Investigating the Motivational Pull of Television Dramas Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

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Motivation for sustained engagement with TV dramas was investigated in 3 studies from the lens of Self-Determination Theory. Study 1 was a lab-based design in which participants were randomly assigned to watch 1 of 2 preselected drama shows. The results showed that our descriptive process model predicted sustained engagement with the 2 shows. We replicated this model in Study 2, and found that the results held even after controlling for the attention requirements of the shows. In Study 3, we tested the ecological validity of our model with a variety of drama shows that a sample of self-selected TV viewers reported watching on their own time. The results of the model were consistent with Studies 1 and 2, even after controlling for the different shows that were watched. Overall, the model may have the potential to address a broad range of questions regarding people’s motivation to watch TV shows, and may serve as an initial foundation for continued investigations of the motivational pull of TV shows from the lens of SDT.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, motivation, TV dramas, sustained engagement

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Americans spend a tremendous amount of time watching TV, averaging over 30 hours a week (Nielsen, 2017). TV dramas are particularly popular, accounting for the lion’s share of primetime TV viewership (41%), followed by sports (23%) and reality shows (16%; Nielsen, 2012). The drama *Game of Thrones* recently became HBO’s most popular series of all time, with an average of 18.4 million viewers per new episode (2014). These conspicuous statistics clearly convey the massive appeal of TV dra-

mas; yet, few formal theories of motivation have been applied to investigate predictors of sustained TV engagement. Importantly, we address this question by applying a prominent theory of human motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2017), to examine the motivational pull of TV dramas.

Theoretical Background: Self-Determination Theory

The current research builds from a body of work examining motivation for watching TV and predictors of media enjoyment (e.g., Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). For example, from the uses and gratifications perspective (Katz, 1959), Rubin (1981) identified several gratifications people report for watching TV, such as to pass time, unwind, or gain information, and researchers have applied this approach to identify reasons for watching specific TV genres. Ebersole and Woods (2007) found associations between viewers’ motivations for watching reality TV shows and their affinity for these shows. Further, researchers have exam-

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ined both gratifications sought and obtained from media when studying engagement (e.g., Rubin, 2009).

Extending this work, we examine the motivational pull of TV dramas through the lens of SDT, a widely researched theory of human motivation. One of the main tenets of SDT is that experiences of the psychological needs of autonomy (personal agency), relatedness (social connectedness), and competence (sense of efficacy), enhance motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2000). SDT has been applied to active media contexts, such as video games (e.g., Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010; Reinecke et al., 2012). For example, Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski (2006) conducted four studies examining the links between the in-game need satisfactions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and preferences for future play and well-being. Results showed that these in-game need experiences had robust effects on enhancing player motivation and well-being. Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, and Organ (2010) also demonstrated links between in-game need satisfaction and enjoyment, and replicated these findings when controlling for hedonic-based predictors (Tamborini et al., 2011). Vorderer (2011) proposed a two-dimensional model of media enjoyment that distinguishes between basic pleasure-seeking experiences and deeper nonhedonic experiences that are linked with intrinsic needs (Vorderer & Reinecke, 2015).

Although empirical work examining need satisfaction in video game contexts sets the stage for the current media research, the present investigation differs in several fundamental ways. Specifically, SDT has been primarily applied to *active* contexts in which need experiences occur when people are engaged in action (e.g., video game play). In contrast, we investigate whether the theory helps to explain engagement in the *passive* context of TV viewing. Unlike sports or video games in which players make choices, develop mastery, and connect with others during game-play, TV viewers passively receive shows and do not have opportunities to engage in similarly active need satisfying behaviors. Hence, the onus is on the show to provide viewers with themes and features that fulfill psychological needs such as feeling a sense of connection to the characters, and that facilitate viewers' interest and autonomous

choice to continue to watch the show. In the current research, we developed a descriptive process model to examine need-related experiences, themes, and features as they predict sustained engagement with TV dramas. Importantly, we note that traditional SDT models of need satisfaction from action cannot be applied in the same way to the passive context of TV viewing, and thus the current SDT-based model differs from those in other domains. We review each of these need-related experiences, themes, and features, and describe their relation to sustained engagement in passive media.

Need-Related Experiences, Themes, and Features of Shows

Sustained engagement outcomes: Intrinsic viewing motivation and recommending the show to others. Because TV viewing is a passive behavior, viewers do not have opportunities to make choices and actively seek out interesting options *within* the show, which are defining elements of autonomy in interactive settings (Ryan et al., 2006). TV viewers can, however, take interest in a show and volitionally choose to view the next episode, and they can also recommend a show to others. We thus focus on predictors of these two variables—viewers' *intrinsic motivation for watching* (consisting of interest in the show and willingness to continue to new episodes), and their *willingness to recommend* the show to others. Next, we discuss the need-related experiences, themes, and features of shows that we hypothesize will predict these sustained engagement outcomes.

Relatedness with characters. According to SDT, people have a psychological need for relatedness or to feel close and connected to others (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the context of TV dramas, we focus on a concept that involves a sense of relatedness, namely the degree to which viewers feel a sense of connection to characters in the show. Importantly, researchers have shown that the perception of psychological bonds with media characters (i.e., parasocial relationships; Horton & Wohl, 1956), such as being familiar with and liking a fictional superhero (e.g., Young, Gabriel, & Hollar, 2013), can be similar to social bonds with real people (e.g., Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009; Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). Hence, we hypothe-

size that feelings of relatedness with TV characters (i.e., feelings of connection and attachment) will predict higher levels of intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show (H1).

Viewing competence. According to SDT, people have a psychological need to feel competent (i.e., capable and effective) when engaged in an activity (White, 1963; Deci, 1975). Although TV shows do not afford opportunities to overcome challenges as in active contexts, TV viewing involves tasks such as following the storyline, keeping track of the various characters, and understanding the plot of the show, at which viewers can feel competent. We hypothesize that viewing competence may be a significant precursor to intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others (H2). For example, the more effectively viewers can follow and understand the storyline of a drama show, the more likely it may be that the show pulls at their volitional interests and keeps them engaged, and that they recommend it others.

Eudaimonic themes. Eudaimonia refers to living a life in which an individual pursues meaning, virtues, and excellences, engages in deep reflection and deliberation regarding one's actions and intentions, and strives to fully realize his or her best human potential (Huta, 2017; Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Eudaimonia often is contrasted with hedonia, which refers to seeking pleasure, amusement, and positive affect (Huta, 2017; Huta & Ryan, 2010). Entertainment media, such as TV shows and films, have been previously understood primarily to be hedonically satisfying; however, researchers recently have demonstrated that media also contains rich eudaimonic themes (Bailey & Ivory, 2016; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth, Hoffer, & Schramm, 2012; Rigby & Ryan, 2017; see also Vorderer, 2011 for a 2-factor model of hedonic and nonhedonic dimensions of media enjoyment). For example, TV shows can be intellectually stimulating (e.g., thought provoking), and can convey meaningful and virtuous messages (e.g., moral challenges). Rigby and Ryan (2017) also suggest that the eudaimonic themes in TV shows and films often stem from tragic or sad content, rather than more hedonically pleasure-toned content.

SDT contends that eudaimonia yields rich satisfactions of basic needs, which, in turn, enhance motivation (Ryan et al., 2008). In addition, Vorderer's (2011) similar nonhedonic driver of enjoyment (appreciation) is closely tied to intrinsic need satisfaction. Thus, we hypothesize that eudaimonic themes in TV shows may bring about need-related experiences. We propose that eudaimonic themes may enhance intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others, in part by facilitating a sense of relatedness with characters (H3). Specifically, the extent to which characters are perceived to be part of meaningful, touching, and thought-provoking storylines (eudaimonic themes) may enhance viewers' feelings of connection and attachment to them. A focus on eudaimonic themes may also help explain the strong connection of viewers to shows even when the main characters have questionable "likeability." For example, many viewers may not have endearing attitudes toward Walter White from the drama *Breaking Bad*, who frequently engages in extreme forms of antisocial behavior. Yet, the fact that Walter struggles with profound moral conflicts between intrinsic values of intimacy and love for his family, and extrinsic pursuits of power, money, and notoriety, may evoke senses of meaning and poignancy among viewers, fostering a sense of connection to Walter. Simply put, although viewers may not like Walter, they may feel connected to him, at least in part because he plays an integral role in a story that affords rich eudaimonic themes that are salient to the viewer.

Novelty. SDT posits that novelty is a common characteristic of tasks that people find interesting (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Given that viewers cannot actively seek out novel stimuli in a show, they depend on the show to present novel themes or storylines to them. Research has shown that appraisals of novelty for a variety of stimuli predict higher interest ratings for the stimuli (Silvia, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize that the novelty of a show's storyline and plot will predict intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others (H4).

Surprise. In addition, surprising content of stories, such as unexpected events or outcomes, are posited to increase story interest (Bae & Young, 2009). For example, Hoeken and van

Vliet (2000) demonstrated that a written story containing a surprising event was appreciated (including items assessing interest) more than a story that contained little surprise. In the current research, we hypothesize that surprising content in TV dramas pulls at viewers' volitional interests and predicts intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others (H5).

Identification with the protagonist. According to Cohen (2001), identification with media characters refers to the degree to which audience members experience and interpret the events of a story "from the inside," as if they were experiencing the story vicariously through the characters. Furthermore, identification with characters can be distinguished from experiences of relatedness with characters, in that identification involves a vicarious experience, whereas judgments of attachment to characters require the viewer to be self-aware, and to experience the story from the outside as a spectator (Cohen, 2001). In the current research, we hypothesize that the more viewers feel they are experiencing the story vicariously through the protagonist (i.e., higher identification), the more connected they may feel both to the protagonist and other characters in the show (i.e., higher relatedness with characters), in turn enhancing intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others (H6).

Study 1

In Study 1 we preselected two drama shows that differed in mainstream popularity; one of the shows was renewed for a second season, whereas the other show was cancelled after the first season. Consistent with these differences in mainstream popularity, we predicted that the more versus less popular show would be rated higher in terms of the target experiences, themes, features, and sustained engagement outcomes. We then created a descriptive process model to test our hypotheses in which the experiences, themes, and features of the shows under investigation predicted intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others. We employed a new assessment developed from our application of SDT, the *Assessment of Media Engagement and Satisfaction Questionnaire* (AMES; see online supple-

mental Appendix A), which measures our different variables of interest.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants consisted of 190 undergraduates (67% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years, 1 month) who were recruited via the psychology participant pool and through campus posters. This study was approved by the university ethics board, and participants received 1.5 research credits as compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to watch the pilot episode of either *Jessica Jones*, which was renewed for a second season, or *Killer Women*, which was cancelled after one season. To avoid assigning participants to watch a show that they had already seen, participants were asked if they had ever viewed either show, prior to assigning them a condition and this portion of the sample were assigned to watch the show that they had not seen. Sixteen percent of the sample had seen *Jessica Jones*, and 1% had seen *Killer Women* (no participants reporting having seen both of the shows).¹ After watching the show, participants reported on the AMES variables of interest.

Measures and materials. All AMES variables were assessed with items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*). Internal consistencies are provided via Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

Intrinsic viewing motivation. This 9-item scale assessed participants' autonomous preference to continue viewing the show (e.g., "given the chance I would watch the next episode of this show in my free time") and the degree to which the show pulled at participants' volitional interests (e.g., "events and characters in the show tap my interests"). The items were averaged to create an intrinsic viewing motivation score ($\alpha = .95$).

Willingness to recommend the show to others. A 3-item scale assessed participants' willingness to recommend the show to others, with including items such as "I would recommend this show to a friend or family member." The items were averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .95$).

¹ The pattern of results did not change when these participants were removed from the analyses.

Relatedness with characters. A 4-item scale assessed the degree to which the participants felt a sense of relatedness to the characters in the show, with items such as “The show makes me feel a sense of connection to the characters” and “I feel attached to the characters in the show.” The items were averaged to create a viewer relatedness with characters score ($\alpha = .95$).

Viewing competence. Viewing competence was assessed with a 4-item scale assessing the degree to which participants could follow and understand the storyline of the show. Sample items include “I can understand the events in the show” and “I can follow the plot.” The items were averaged to create a viewing competence score ($\alpha = .83$).

Eudaimonic themes. A 12-item scale assessed the degree to which the show afforded eudaimonic themes, such as meaning, similar to Oliver and Raney’s (2011) eudaimonic motivations for media scale. Sample items include “I find deep meaning in the story” and “The show is thought provoking.” Items were averaged to create a eudaimonic themes score ($\alpha = .91$).

Novelty. A 4-item scale assessed the novelty of the storyline and plot of the show, with items such as “the storyline of the show is novel” and “the plot of the show is original.” The items were averaged to create a novelty score ($\alpha = .80$).

Surprise. The degree to which the show was surprising was assessed with a 5-item scale, with items such as “events in the show surprise me” and “the story often goes in directions I did not see coming.” The items were averaged to create a surprise score ($\alpha = .90$).

Drama shows. *Jessica Jones* is a Netflix drama show about the Marvel female private investigator in New York City. In the pilot episode, the viewer learns that Jessica engages in excessive alcohol use and struggles with sleep problems, which stem from the memory of a man named Kilgrave, who previously had some sort of malevolent control over her. In addition, Jessica has special powers, such as superhuman strength, which she usually keeps hidden from others. As the episode progresses, Jessica works on a case of a missing girl, only to discover that Kilgrave has the girl and that he sent the case to Jessica to try to get back into her life. Jessica is terrified of Kilgrave, and attempts to flee from him by leaving the country. Then,

after further consideration, she decides to stay and help save the missing girl. Jessica eventually finds the girl and returns her safely to her parents. Soon after the family is reunited, however, the girl shoots and kills both of her parents as commanded by Kilgrave, before Jessica can intervene. The episode ends with Jessica making the arduous decision to go after Kilgrave rather than run away.

Killer Women is a drama show about a female Texas Ranger named Molly Parker. In the pilot, Molly works a case in which a woman shoots and kills the assistant district attorney on the victim’s wedding day; a murder that appears to be motivated by jealousy. The viewer also learns that Molly was recently separated from her abusive husband who is a State Senator. Molly is intimidated by her husband, and although she wants to end the relationship, he refuses to divorce her. As the episode progresses, Molly discovers that the killer was coerced to commit the murder by the Mexican drug cartel who have kidnapped the killer’s mother and daughter. Molly convinces the killer to testify against the cartel and promises to save her family. Molly procures the help of a DEA agent named Dan and together they embark on a secret mission to Mexico to rescue the kidnapped family, at which they succeed after a gun fight with members of the cartel. After closing the case, Molly finds the courage to confront her husband and demands that he signs divorce papers or she will go public about his abusive nature. The episode ends with Molly surprised to see the DEA agent Dan arrive at the bar where she is performing with her band.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses. First, we examined the bivariate correlations between the main study variables (see Table 1). There were significant and expected relations between all of the variables, with the exception of viewing competence, which was not associated with novelty or willingness to recommend the show to others.

Main effects of show on the main study variables. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine whether the mean scores on the main study variables were higher for *Jessica Jones* versus *Killer Women* (see Table 2). The omnibus test

Table 1
Correlation Table for Main Variables in Studies 1 and 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Show	—	.43***	.47***	.33***	-.38***	.32***	.67***	.65***	.38***
2. Recommend	.37***	—	.83***	.61***	-.02	.67***	.62***	.65***	.38***
3. Intrinsic viewing motivation	.33***	.84***	—	.66***	-.05	.73***	.70***	.71***	.37***
4. Relatedness with characters	.18*	.62***	.71***	—	-.05	.74***	.48***	.57***	.35***
5. Viewing competence	-.36***	.14	.18*	.19**	—	-.08	-.18*	-.27**	-.20*
6. Eudaimonic themes	.21**	.70***	.72***	.78***	.21**	—	.50***	.59***	.38***
7. Novelty	.61***	.56***	.58***	.41***	-.07	.44***	—	.80***	.46***
8. Surprise	.60***	.60***	.63***	.50***	-.16*	.51***	.74***	—	.49***
9. Attention requirements	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	—

Note. Study 1 ($N = 190$) correlations are below the diagonal and Study 2 ($N = 150$) correlations are above the diagonal. Attention requirements was not assessed (n/a) in Study 1. In terms of show, *Killer Women* = 1; *Jessica Jones* = 2. Recommend = willingness to recommend the show to others.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

for show was significant $F(7, 182) = 27.65$, $p < .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .52$. As expected, *Jessica Jones* was rated higher than *Killer Women* in terms of our AMES variables. In contrast, *Killer Women* was rated higher in terms of viewing competence than *Jessica Jones*, and thus participants felt more competent at following the less versus more popular show. However, an examination of the viewing competence mean score for each show suggests that participants felt fairly competent at following both shows.

Descriptive process model results. To test our main hypotheses, we estimated a path model in Mplus to examine a descriptive pro-

cess model in which the experiences, themes, and features of the shows under investigation predicted sustained engagement with these shows (see Figure 1). Specifically, we estimated paths from show to relatedness with characters, viewing competence, eudaimonic themes, surprise, and novelty, from these variables to intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend the show to others (H1, H2, H4, H5). We also included a path from eudaimonic themes to relatedness with characters in order to test this indirect effect on sustained engagement (H3). Covariances were estimated between the variables to the left of intrinsic viewing moti-

Table 2
Mean (SD) Differences Between *Jessica Jones* and *Killer Women* on the Main Variables in Studies 1 and 2

Study variable	Study 1				Study 2			
	Show		F^a	Partial η^2	Show		F^b	Partial η^2
	<i>Killer Women</i>	<i>Jessica Jones</i>			<i>Killer Women</i>	<i>Jessica Jones</i>		
Recommend	2.25 (1.21)	3.24 (1.28)	30.27***	.14	2.26 (1.24)	3.19 (1.36)	33.51***	.19
Intrinsic motivation	2.86 (1.15)	3.63 (1.08)	22.56***	.11	2.80 (1.12)	3.85 (.87)	41.03***	.22
Relatedness	2.28 (1.02)	2.67 (1.15)	6.20*	.03	2.17 (.98)	2.86 (.98)	18.39***	.11
Viewing competence	4.38 (.66)	3.82 (.77)	27.84***	.13	4.42 (.60)	3.92 (.63)	25.17***	.15
Eudaimonic themes	2.43 (.83)	2.80 (.88)	8.95**	.05	2.38 (.82)	2.88 (.68)	16.73***	.10
Novelty	2.12 (.61)	3.26 (.84)	112.61***	.37	2.16 (.74)	3.50 (.74)	123.08***	.45
Surprise	2.01 (.79)	3.33 (.97)	105.30***	.36	2.04 (.93)	3.59 (.89)	109.05***	.42
Attention requirements	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.97 (1.04)	2.86 (1.13)	25.02***	.14

Note. Attention requirements was not assessed in Study 1. Study 1 $N = 194$; Study 2 $N = 150$. Intrinsic motivation = intrinsic viewing motivation; Relatedness = relatedness with characters; Recommend = willingness to recommend the show to others.

^a $df = 1, 188$. ^b $df = 1, 148$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

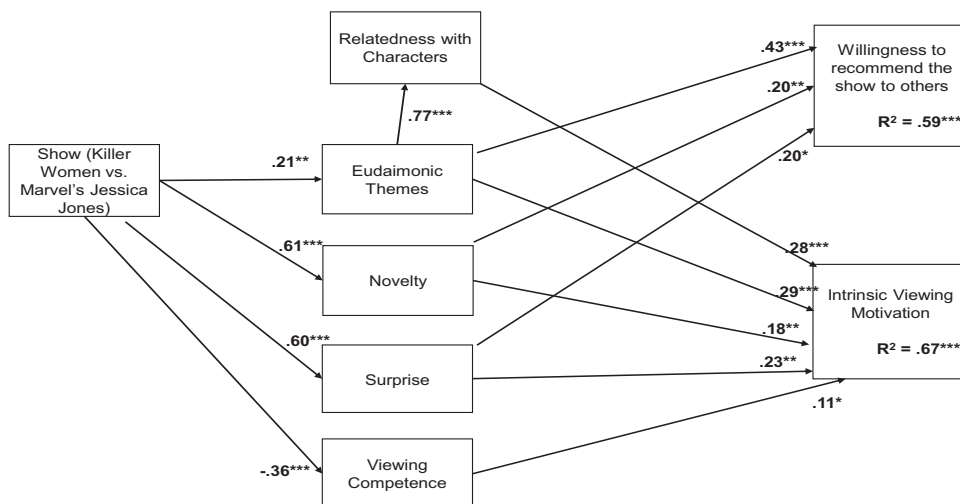


Figure 1. Study 1 descriptive process model assessing the predictive effects of show on the sustained engagement outcomes via the AMES variables. Only significant paths are reported. Correlations among variables at each level are not shown due to model complexity. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 190$.

vation (except for a path from eudaimonic themes to relatedness with characters), and between the sustained engagement outcomes.

Model fit was excellent $\chi^2(2) = 3.00$, $p = .22$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .05 (.000-.162), SRMR = .008. The significant paths are displayed in Figure 1. Show significantly predicted eudaimonic themes, novelty, surprise, and viewing competence (the negative predictive path from show to viewing competence suggests that *Killer Women* was easier to follow than *Jessica Jones*). Eudaimonic themes significantly predicted relatedness with characters and the two sustained engagement outcomes. Relatedness with characters and viewing competence each significantly predicted intrinsic viewing motivation. Novelty and surprise each significantly predicted the two sustained engagement outcomes. Surprise and viewing competence significantly predicted intrinsic viewing motivation. Overall, these findings offer support for our hypotheses.

Given these significant paths, we assessed the indirect predictive effects of show on the sustained engagement outcomes through the AMES variables of interest, using bias-corrected bootstrapping (bootstrap samples = 2,000; see Table 3). There were nine significant indirect effects. Importantly, the significant in-

direct effects from show to eudaimonic themes, to relatedness with characters, to intrinsic viewing motivation, and from eudaimonic themes to relatedness with characters, to intrinsic viewing motivation offer support for H3.

Gender as a moderator. We explored for any interactions between show and gender in the prediction of the main study variables. Gender did not interact with show in the prediction of these variables ($F[7, 180] = 1.17$, $p = .32$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$).

Summary and conclusions. Study 1 represents the first investigation of our SDT-based descriptive process model. Specifically, we employed a lab-based design to examine whether our process model could predict sustained engagement with two preselected TV dramas that reputedly differed in terms of popularity. In support of our hypotheses, we found that the AMES variables explained a large amount of variance in the two sustained engagement outcomes. We also found support for H3, as relatedness with characters was a mechanism through which eudaimonic themes predicted sustained engagement. These findings suggest that our SDT-based model may represent a valuable contribution to our understanding of the motivational pull of TV dramas, particularly viewers' intrinsic motivation to view the next

Table 3
Indirect Effects of Show (Killer Women vs. Jessica Jones) and AMES Variables on the Sustained Engagement Outcomes in Studies 1, 2, and 3

Indirect effect	β	95% CI
Study 1 ($N = 190$)		
Show → eudaimonic themes → recommend	.09*	.03, .17
Show → surprise → recommend	.12*	.03, .22
Show → novelty → recommend	.12*	.03, .23
Show → eudaimonic themes → intrinsic	.06*	.02, .13
Show → surprise → intrinsic	.14**	.04, .23
Show → novelty → intrinsic	.11**	.03, .19
Show → competence → intrinsic	-.04*	-.08, -.01
Show → eudaimonic themes → relatedness → intrinsic	.04*	.02, .09
Eudaimonic themes → relatedness → intrinsic	.21***	.10, .32
Study 2 ($N = 150$)		
Show → eudaimonic themes → recommend	.11**	.05, .20
Show → surprise → recommend	.16*	.03, .29
Show → novelty → recommend	.14*	.02, .27
Show → competence → recommend	-.05*	-.09, -.01
Show → eudaimonic themes → intrinsic	.12**	.06, .21
Show → novelty → intrinsic	.23***	.12, .35
Eudaimonic themes → relatedness → intrinsic	.10 [†]	.01, .22
Study 3 ($N = 294$)		
Eudaimonic themes → relatedness → recommend	.08*	.02, .16
Identification with protagonist → relatedness → recommend	.12*	.02, .22
Eudaimonic themes → relatedness → intrinsic	.06**	.02, .10
Identification with protagonist → relatedness → intrinsic	.08**	.03, .16

Note. Bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (bootstrap samples = 2,000). In terms of show, *Killer Women* = 1; *Jessica Jones* = 2. Intrinsic = intrinsic viewing motivation; relatedness = relatedness with characters; recommend = willingness to recommend the show to others.

[†] $p = .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

episode and willingness recommend the show to others.

Study 2

In Study 2 we sought to replicate the findings from Study 1 and further demonstrate the potency of our AMES predictors on sustained engagement after controlling for a potential confound, namely the level of attention required to view the shows. For example, a show with novel and surprising content and that is rich in eudaimonic themes may require higher levels of attention and focus to follow the storyline and plot compared to a show with lower levels of these features. Furthermore, attention requirements may predict higher levels of intrinsic viewing motivation and willingness to recommend. For example, viewers may be less likely to become distracted and, in turn, lose interest in a show that requires higher versus lower levels

of attention. Given Study 1's findings that *Jessica Jones* afforded higher eudaimonic themes and contained higher levels of surprise and novelty than *Killer Women*, we expect that the former may require higher levels of attention for engagement than the latter. In Study 2, therefore, we add attention requirements to the model. Importantly, if the results from Study 1 replicate even after controlling for the potential confound of attention requirements, then the robustness of our model would be further supported.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants consisted of 150 undergraduates (70% female; M age = 20 years, 1 month) who were recruited via the psychology participant pool and through campus posters. The study procedures were the same as in Study 1. In addition, 16% of the

sample had seen *Jessica Jones*, and less than 1% had seen *Killer Women* (no participants reporting having seen both of the shows), and so this portion of the sample were assigned to watch the show that they had not seen.²

Measures and materials. All items were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

Internal consistencies (Cronbach's alphas) for AMES variables were as follows: *Intrinsic viewing motivation* $\alpha = .95$; *Willingness to recommend the show to others* $\alpha = .94$; *Relatedness with characters* $\alpha = .92$; *Viewing competence* $\alpha = .76$; *Eudaimonic themes*, $\alpha = .90$; *Novelty* $\alpha = .86$; *Surprise* $\alpha = .93$. An additional control variable was added, namely *Attention requirements* that consisted of two items (e.g., "engaging in this show requires a large amount of my attention"). The correlation between these items was $r = .75$, and thus they were averaged to form a composite score.

Results

Preliminary results. First, bivariate correlations between the study variables were examined (see Table 1). Consistent with Study 1, there were significant correlations between all of the study variables, with the exception of viewing competence, which was not associated with eudaimonic themes, relatedness with characters, or the sustained engagement outcomes. In line with our predictions, attention requirements for engagement was significantly correlated with show (i.e., higher attention requirements associated with *Jessica Jones* vs. *Killer Women*) and the AMES variables. These correlations suggest that the show rated higher in terms of the AMES variables required higher levels of attention for engagement, and that attention requirements was positively linked to the sustained engagement outcomes. Thus, these bivariate correlations support the inclusion of attention requirements into the prediction model.

Main effects of show on the main study variables. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine mean differences between *Jessica Jones* versus *Killer Women* on the main variables (see Table 2). The omnibus test for show was significant $F(8, 141) = 21.50$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .55$. Consistent with Study 1, *Jessica Jones* was

rated higher than *Killer Women* in terms of the AMES variables, supporting H3. In addition, *Killer Women* was rated higher in terms of viewing competence than *Jessica Jones*.

Descriptive process model results. To Test H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5, we estimated an identical path model in Mplus to the model in Study 1, and added attention requirements as a predictor of intrinsic viewing motivation and sustained engagement (see Figure 2). Model fit was excellent, $\chi^2(2) = .52$, $p = .77$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000 (.000–.107), SRMR = .003. The significant paths are displayed in Figure 2. Show significantly predicted eudaimonic themes, novelty, surprise, viewing competence, and attention requirements. Eudaimonic themes significantly predicted relatedness with characters and the two sustained engagement outcomes. Relatedness with characters significantly predicted intrinsic viewing motivation. Novelty and viewing competence both significantly predicted the two sustained engagement outcomes. Surprise significantly predicted willingness to recommend the show to others. Overall, these results offer support for our hypotheses. Of interest, attention requirements did not predict the sustained engagement outcomes after controlling for the other variables in the model. Thus, although attention requirements was correlated with sustained engagement at the bivariate level, the AMES variables were more robust predictors of sustained engagement when competing with attention requirements for explained variance.

Given these significant paths, we assessed the indirect predictive effects of show on the sustained engagement outcomes through the AMES variables of interest, using bias-corrected bootstrapping (bootstrap samples = 2,000; see Table 3). There were seven significant indirect effects. Importantly, the significant indirect effect from eudaimonic themes to relatedness with characters, to intrinsic viewing motivation offer support for H3.

Summary and conclusions. In Study 2 we aimed to replicate our findings from Study 1 regarding the predictive effects of our AMES variables on sustained engagement with two TV drama shows. Importantly, the results replicated

² The pattern of results did not change when these participants were removed from the analyses.

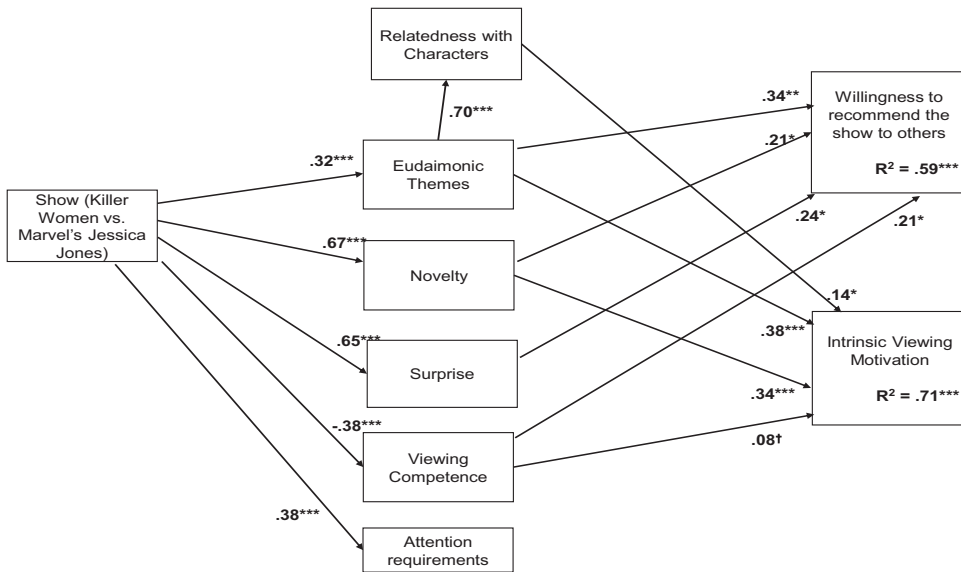


Figure 2. Study 2 descriptive process model assessing the predictive effects of show on the sustained engagement outcomes via the AMES variables. Only significant paths are reported. Correlations among variables at each level are not shown due to model complexity. † $p = .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 150$.

even after controlling for an additional potential confounding variable, namely the attention requirements of the show. The inclusion of this control variable provides further evidence of the robustness of the AMES variables in predicting sustained engagement. Moreover, this replication increases our confidence in the reliability of the process model.

Study 3

Building from Studies 1 and 2, the goal of Study 3 was to investigate our SDT-based descriptive process model of sustained engagement with TV dramas that people voluntarily watch on their own time to test the ecological validity of our model with a sample of TV viewers rating self-selected shows. In addition, we add identification with the protagonist to the model, as this concept is germane to viewers who have had the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the protagonist from seeing multiple episodes of a show (vs. having seen only a pilot episode as in Studies 1 and 2).

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants consisted of 294 American TV viewers (65% fe-

male; $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ years 9 months) who were recruited online via TurkPrime (an interface for interacting with Amazon Mechanical Turk), which is an online platform that allows individuals to participate in surveys or tasks. Participants were 79.3% Caucasian, 7.1% African American, 5.4% Hispanic, 4.4% Asian, and 3.7% other. The survey asked participants to report on their perceptions and experiences of watching TV dramas (e.g., their within-show need experiences) and their media preferences (e.g., preference for continued viewing). Participants chose this survey from a list of other surveys and tasks on MTurk and were compensated \$1.00 for participating. Missing data were very minimal (less than 1% missing on any study variable).

Measures and materials. All items were assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*) unless otherwise specified.

Drama shows. To determine the specific TV drama show that each participant would refer to when responding to the survey questions, a list of 23 TV drama shows (e.g., *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Breaking Bad*, *House of Cards*) was provided to participants. From this list, participants were asked to indi-

cate the shows that they had watched within the last month but had not seen all of the episodes in the series (i.e., there were more episodes of the show that they had not yet seen or the show was still releasing new episodes). It was necessary that participants had not yet seen all of the episodes of the reference show in order for the questions about their preference for continuing to watch the show to be relevant. From this narrowed list, the show that participants reported having watched most recently was used as the reference show to which the survey questions pertained. In addition, participants reported the total number of episodes of the reference show that they had seen so that we could control for differences in the amount of episodes watched.

Demographic factors. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female) and age were assessed.

AMES variables were measured as in Studies 1 and 2. Cronbach's Alphas in this sample were: *Intrinsic viewing motivation* (10 items; see online supplemental Appendix A) $\alpha = .89$; *Willingness to recommend the show to others* $\alpha = .93$; *Relatedness with characters* $\alpha = .92$; *Viewing competence* $\alpha = .76$; *Eudaimonic themes* $\alpha = .94$; *Novelty* $\alpha = .69$. To assess *Surprise* a 6-item scale was used, consisting of the same 5 items used in Studies 1–2, plus an additional item that pertains to a show that an individual is currently watching “there is a predictable plot within each episode” which was reverse scored ($\alpha = .84$).

Identification with the protagonist.

Cohen's (2001) 10-item scale was used to assess identification with the protagonist with items such as “I think I have a good understanding of the protagonist” and “at key moments in the show, I felt I knew exactly what the protagonist was going through.” The items were averaged to create a composite score, with higher scores reflecting stronger identification with the protagonist ($\alpha = .92$).

Results

Preliminary results. From the list of 23 TV dramas, participants selected 19 as shows they had watched. Bivariate correlations between the main study variables were then examined (see Table 4). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, there were significant correlations between all of the main study variables.

Descriptive process model results. To Test H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6, we estimated a similar path model in Mplus to Studies 1 and 2, and we added identification with the protagonist as a predictor of relatedness with characters and sustained engagement (see Figure 3). Covariates included gender, age, number of episodes watched, as well as 18 dummy codes representing the different shows that were reported on, in order to control for the specific show that was watched. The model was fully saturated. The significant paths are displayed in Figure 2. Eudaimonic themes and identification

Table 4
Correlation Table for Main Variables in Study 3

Variable	1	2	4	5	6	7	8	9
	<i>M</i> = 4.45 <i>SD</i> = .82	<i>M</i> = 4.51 <i>SD</i> = .55	<i>M</i> = 3.90 <i>SD</i> = .98	<i>M</i> = 4.38 <i>SD</i> = .62	<i>M</i> = 3.48 <i>SD</i> = .90	<i>M</i> = 3.76 <i>SD</i> = .79	<i>M</i> = 3.90 <i>SD</i> = .71	<i>M</i> = 3.63 <i>SD</i> = .82
1. Recommend	—							
2. Intrinsic viewing motivation	.60***	—						
4. Relatedness with characters	.47***	.58***	—					
5. Viewing competence	.39***	.63***	.44***	—				
6. Eudaimonic themes	.44***	.45***	.64***	.32***	—			
7. Novelty	.31***	.49***	.30***	.24***	.30***	—		
8. Surprise	.33***	.53***	.37***	.20***	.39***	.62***	—	
9. Identification with the protagonist	.44***	.51***	.69***	.40***	.67***	.38***	.40***	—

Note. *N* = 294. Recommend = willingness to recommend the show to others.
*** $p < .001$.

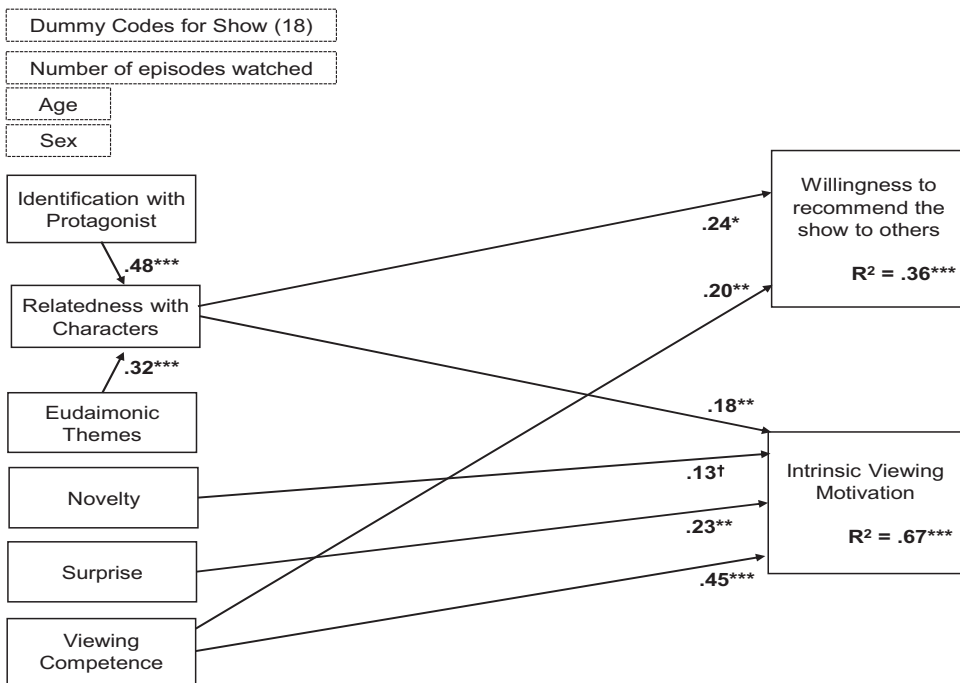


Figure 3. Study 3 descriptive process model assessing the predictive effects of the AMES variables and identification with the protagonist on the sustained engagement outcomes. Covariates indicated with dashed lines. Only significant paths from main variables are reported. Correlations among variables at each level and paths from covariates are not shown due to model complexity. † $p = .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 294$.

with the protagonist each significantly predicted relatedness with characters. Relatedness with characters and viewing competence significantly predicted the two sustained engagement outcomes. Surprise and novelty both significantly predicted intrinsic viewing motivation. Taken together, these results offer support for our hypotheses.

Given these significant paths, we assessed the indirect effects from eudaimonic themes and identification with the protagonist on the sustained engagement outcomes through relatedness with characters, using bias-corrected bootstrapping (bootstrap samples = 2,000; see Table 3). There were four significant indirect effects from eudaimonic themes and identification with the protagonist to the sustained engagement outcomes via relatedness with characters, providing support for H3 and H6. Overall, the pattern of results is consistent with Studies 1 and 2, supporting the ecological validity of our SDT-based descriptive process

model with a sample of self-selected TV viewers.

Summary and conclusions. In Study 3, we tested our SDT-based process model with a variety of drama shows that a sample of self-selected TV viewers reported watching on their own time. In addition, we added the construct of identification with the protagonist of the show to the model. The pattern of results was consistent with Studies 1 and 2, offering additional evidence in support of the model's reliability. Furthermore, the fact that consistent results were found using a different design (i.e., survey vs. lab study) and with a different participant pool (i.e., MTurk vs. undergraduate samples) than Studies 1 and 2, offers support for the ecological validity of the model. In addition, the fact that participants reported on 19 drama shows and the results held after controlling for the predictive effect of show, suggests that the model may be generalizable across a range of dramas.

General Discussion

Researchers have long been interested in the question of why people watch TV, the importance of which is highlighted by the extreme popularity of TV series and the evolving methods of how shows are accessed (e.g., streaming services such as Netflix vs. traditional network-scheduled services). Yet, few formal theories of motivation have been utilized to elucidate elements that drive sustained engagement with TV shows. In these studies we built upon an emerging literature on intrinsic satisfactions in media (e.g., Vorderer, & Reinecke, 2015; Tamborini et al., 2010), by applying self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) to create a descriptive process model of sustained engagement with one of the most popular TV genres, namely serial dramas. The results of three studies converged to show that the AMES variables (i.e., need-related experiences and the themes and features of shows that bring them about) explained a large amount of variance in the sustained engagement outcomes, suggesting that the current work may contribute to our understanding of the motivational pull of TV dramas.

Overall, we note that the eudaimonic themes afforded by the shows was a particularly robust and consistent predictor of sustained engagement in these dramatic shows, adding to a growing literature investigating eudaimonic themes in TV and film (Bailey & Ivory, 2016; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Reinecke & Oliver, 2017; Wirth et al., 2012). In fact, eudaimonic themes consistently predicted relatedness with characters and sustained engagement (indirectly in Study 3) across the three studies. This finding suggests that storylines that are meaningful, thought provoking, and moving, bring viewers into connection with the characters and enhance their intrinsic motivation for the shows. Moreover, this finding is in line with SDT's contention that the eudaimonic pursuit of meaning yields rich satisfactions of basic psychological needs, which, in turn, have positive effects on motivation outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan et al., 2008). These findings also are consistent with Vorderer's (2011) two-factor model of enjoyment, which posits that in addition to providing pleasure and positive affect, entertainment media can provide deeper and more meaningful satisfactions (termed appreciation) that are closely

linked with intrinsic needs. Novelty and surprise also predicted sustained engagement across the three studies, although these associations were less consistent than for eudaimonic themes.

In Study 3, identification with the protagonist was a significant predictor of sustained engagement via relatedness with characters, suggesting that the degree to which viewers experienced the show vicariously through the protagonist, the more connected they felt to the characters in the show. In addition, viewing competence was a significant predictor of sustained engagement, suggesting that the more effectively that viewers can follow and understand the storyline of drama show, the more likely it may be that they volitionally choose to continue viewing the show. However, there are potential limitations of our measure of viewing competence that we elaborate on below. Of course, the models presented in the current research are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of predictors of sustained engagement with TV dramas, but instead, to provide a starting point for our understanding of the motivational pull of these shows from an SDT lens.

Importantly, the current research has practical implications for understanding why people, once watching a show, might take personal interest in the show and volitionally choose to continue to view subsequent episodes. For example, pilot episodes are tasked with the role of sparking initial interest in a show with the overarching goal of encouraging viewers to tune in to episode 2. To that effect, the results from Studies 1 and 2 help to elucidate some of the experiences, themes, and features that explain viewers' willingness to watch the second episode of a show after seeing the pilot episode. In addition, our model was effective in predicting viewers' sustained engagement with dramas that they were currently watching on their own time and of which they may have already seen multiple episodes or seasons. Indeed, in Study 3 we found evidence suggesting that even among shows that may have already captured viewers' initial interest, the degree to which the shows afforded the target experiences, themes, and features, predicted sustained engaged with the show. Overall, the results from the three studies converged to support our motivational model of sustained engagement with TV dramas, and highlighted the model's potential to address a

broad range of questions regarding people's motivation to view TV shows.

The current work also contributes to our theoretical understanding of motivation. Specifically, this is to our knowledge the first attempt to apply SDT to a passive motivational context. Previous applications of SDT have focused on people's motivation to act, and resultant need satisfaction. TV viewers, rather than being actors, are consumers. Our premise was that individuals' engagement would be a function of contents that may or may not elicit need-related experiences. The finding that need-related experiences, themes, and features of TV dramas were reliable predictors of sustained engagement suggests that this SDT-based focus on understanding the particular satisfactions yielded by passive media is promising. Similar approaches might also advance understanding of motivations for a variety of related passive consumption behaviors, including comedic, educational, news, game show and other specific genres.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A limitation of our measure of viewing competence is that it did not consider the degree to which following the storyline of the shows was optimally challenging. For example, it is not clear whether a show that is rated very highly in terms of viewing competence is too easy to follow, perhaps due to an oversimplified plot or a lack of story complexity. Given that SDT posits that feeling competent at an optimally challenging task, but not a task that is too easy, facilitates motivation for that task, future research could focus on refining the measure of viewing competence to include an assessment of optimal challenge. In addition, the *thwarting* of viewing competence (i.e., the feeling that one's ability to be capable and effective is being actively undermined by others or situational deprivations; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011) may have a significant impact on impeding engagement with TV shows. For example, research has shown that competence thwarting in the context of sports leads to negative outcomes such as burnout, depression, and negative affect (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2011). Furthermore, competence thwarting during video game play has

been shown to elevate players' aggressive feelings, thoughts, and behavior (Przybylski, Deci, Rigby, & Ryan, 2014). Thus, a storyline that has too many subplots or jumps too quickly between characters, might make it difficult for viewers to effectively follow and understand the plot, which, in turn, may hamper viewers' sustained engagement. Thwarting of viewing competence, therefore, is an interesting avenue for research that we only superficially addressed in this study.

It is also important to reiterate that our process models were descriptive in nature, rather than causal. Research systematically manipulating different AMES variables to directly test their causal effects on sustained engagement is in order, analogous to similar research in video games (e.g., Peng, Lin, Pfeiffer, & Winn, 2012). In addition, although we focused this initial investigation on TV dramas given their popularity, research is needed to examine how this model applies to other TV genres. For example, hedonic themes such as content that is humorous, happy, or fun (Oliver & Raney, 2011), may be a stronger predictor of sustained engagement with comedy shows, than dramas. Yet, eudaimonic themes may also be pertinent to sustained engagement with some comedies. For example, in addition to providing feel-good humor, the comedy show *Modern Family* typically concludes each episode with a meaningful message about family relationships or child development, which also may contribute to the attraction of this show. In other words, the factors and experiences that prime intrinsic viewing motivation for drama shows may be different for other genres such as comedy, horror, or reality shows. An interesting direction for future research, therefore, would be to investigate how well our model explains sustained engagement with a variety of TV genres.

To complement our work examining sustained engagement as the outcome of focus, researchers could examine how the AMES variables predict well-being (see Reinecke & Oliver, 2017, for a review of media use and well-being). For example, according mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988, 2000), people often select certain media in order to restore or maintain a positive mood. Extending mood management theory research, Reinecke et al. (2012) found that psychological need satisfaction during media use (video game play)

predicted positive affect. Furthermore, Bailey and Ivory (2016) demonstrated that hedonic and eudaimonic media clips impacted fun and meaningful affect respectively. Thus, future research could examine how the AMES variables are associated with different mood states, such as positive affect, as well as more poignant feelings.

Our motivational model also may have predictive value for films. For example, eudaimonic themes that emerge early in a film may bring viewers into connection with the characters, which, in turn, may enhance engagement with the film. Furthermore, similar to intrinsic viewing motivation for episodes of a TV series, our model may be useful in predicting sustained engagement with film franchises that contain multiple sequels that are released sequentially, such as *Lord of the Rings* or *The Avengers*. Hence, future research could expand the model's focus beyond TV shows to film.

Strengths and Conclusion

Overall, the current research offers an important contribution to our understanding of the experiences, themes, and features, afforded by TV dramas that drive viewers' sustained engagement with these shows. Furthermore, the work represents a significant theoretical advancement of our understanding of motivation, as we are the first to our knowledge to apply SDT to investigate motivation in a passive context. The current studies had several strengths. First, the associations in the model were replicated in two experiments and a survey study, supporting the model's reliability. Next, we found consistent results using mixed methodology (i.e., experimental vs. survey design) across different participant pools (i.e., undergraduate vs. MTurk samples), which supports the ecological validity of the model. Furthermore, the fact that participants reported on 19 drama shows in Study 3, and the results held after controlling for the predictive effect of show, speaks to the generalizability of the findings across a range of dramas. Our two-measure assessment of sustained engagement also represents an important strength, as we demonstrated that the need-related experiences, themes and features of shows not only enhanced participants' volitional engagement and personal interest in the show, but also motivated partici-

pants to go a step further and recommend the show to others. Ultimately, the current research may serve as an initial foundation for continued investigations of the motivational pull of TV shows from the lens of SDT.

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