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All joking aside

Towards an understanding of humor and aggression in adolescents' media entertainment

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English Summary

All Joking Aside: Towards an Understanding of Humor and Aggression in Adolescents' Media Entertainment

The desire to seek out entertainment is inherently human. As such, it is unsurprising how much time is spent by all of us consuming entertainment content. However, some of this entertainment content has raised questions about its potential effects on users – most notably, young users. Aggressive media entertainment content, in particular, has been a hot topic for over fifty years with scholars and practitioners asking about the conditions which may augment or depress potential effects. One factor that has often been raised in these discussions is humor. Namely, whether the frequent pairing of aggression and humor in media entertainment may trivialize aggression (as it is “just a joke”) and subsequently send the message that this is acceptable behavior to replicate.

This concern has been sharply raised for adolescent audiences, given their high preponderance of media entertainment use and their proclivity towards contentious behaviors. However, empirical work on adolescents' preferences for aggression and humor in media entertainment as well as the ways in which both aggressive and humorous content (co-)occur is lacking. Against this background, three empirical studies have been carried out to provide an in-depth understanding of adolescents' differential preferences for types and contexts of aggression and humor in media entertainment and the possible lessons they may gain from this content (Chapter 2, 3, and 4). Taken together, these studies offer important theoretical, methodological, and societal contributions to the field of youth and media research.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Prior to this dissertation, theory development about humor in media entertainment was virtually at a standstill. This is largely due to the multifaceted nature of humor, which makes doing research difficult and has led to fragmentation of the research that has been done (in, for example, communication science, psychology, sociology, and health). To move the field forward, Chapter 3 offers an important theoretical contribution: namely, the development of an intertheoretical framework of humor in media entertainment. By combining explanations for the popularity of different types of humor from different theories, ten different humor types were

identified. Subsequent testing of the framework showed that all ten humor types were present in adolescents' favorite television shows, emphasizing the versatility of humor in adolescents' media entertainment. In addition, Chapter 3 revealed popular combinations of humor types, which has taught us that it is not only important to take type of humor into account, but also to consider the context in which it occurs.

In addition to moving the theoretical needle forward, this work also tried to push the methodological space forward in two ways. First, the method for measuring media entertainment content in this dissertation is one of the most rigorous approaches known to date. In previous research, both aggression and humor have usually been treated as a dichotomous construct that is either absent or present in a particular type of media entertainment. This dissertation took a different approach by utilizing content analysis to examine the different types and contexts of humor and aggression in adolescents' favorite television shows on a *scene-level*.

While undeniably more complex (manually coding over 15,000 scenes is very labor-intensive), this methodology has allowed for a nuanced and meaningful interpretation of aggression and humor in adolescents' favorite shows. To illustrate, if we had just taken the dichotomous approach from previous research, the conclusion would have been that aggression is featured in nearly two thirds of adolescents' favorite shows. This sounds alarmingly high. The more nuanced scene-level approach presents a less concerning, more balanced, picture. Specifically, the in-depth scene-level approach in this dissertation shows that aggression only makes up a small portion of the show (on average, aggression is featured in 9% of scenes). In contrast, humor occurred in more than half of all scenes, showing that humor is a very important feature of adolescents' favorite media entertainment.

A second methodological contribution of this dissertation is that it employed a relatively novel approach in the field of youth and media research called *linkage analysis*. Specifically, the content analysis data from adolescents' favorite shows were linked to survey data regarding their level of aggression, sex, and age. This approach revealed that adolescents' sex is a much stronger factor than aggression level in guiding their preferences for aggression and humor in their favorite television shows. To illustrate, boys showed a much greater preference for physical aggression as well as for realistic, justified, graphic, rewarded, and punished aggression in television

shows than girls (Chapter 2). In addition, boys showed a greater preference for disparaging and especially slapstick humor compared to girls, who in turn showed a greater preference for shows containing coping humor (Chapter 4).

Even more so, this linkage analysis was extended via a *longitudinal linkage analysis* in Chapter 4 to estimate the development of adolescents' humor type preferences from age 10 to 17. Here, we see that sex and development seem to be intertwined in guiding differential preferences. Boys and girls showed similar preferences for aggressive humor types (i.e., disparaging and slapstick humor) at age 10, yet, these preferences diverged with age (with girls showing a sharp decline in their liking of aggressive humor types in their favorite shows). In contrast, at age 10, girls showed a much larger preference for coping humor than boys, while these preferences grew closer together over the course of adolescence. Together, these findings indicate that adolescents' media entertainment preferences are strongly guided by individual differences. As the adolescent period signifies many biological, physical, and personality changes, determining what exactly causes these differential preferences is an important aim for further research.

Societal Implications

This dissertation also provides meaningful insights to the polarized debate surrounding the relationship between aggressive media content and adolescents' real-life aggression. The detailed examination of adolescents' favorite television shows revealed that aggression is not as prevalent in adolescents' media entertainment as is often feared (although there were a few highly aggressive shows in the sample as an exception to the rule). And reassuringly, the research described in Chapter 4 demonstrated no relationship between adolescents' aggressive humor preferences and real-life aggression. Of course, further research is needed to determine the exact conditions that may lead to aggressive content influencing its audience, especially for boys, who did show a preference for aggression portrayed with features most likely to encourage imitation (i.e., aggression portrayed as realistic, justified, graphic, and rewarded). Yet, the findings as a whole provide room for calmness and optimism. Lastly, the versatility of humor as shown across this dissertation indicates that there may be many ways in which humor in adolescents' media entertainment could have a positive impact on adolescents' lives. Whether it might help teen viewers cope

with something as scary and uncertain as the recent pandemic or perhaps to get across important health messages, the versatility of humor suggests it can serve as a powerful tool in media entertainment and provides a clear starting point for empirical research on this topic.

Conclusion

Through careful and innovative measurement and interdisciplinary theoretical conceptualization, this dissertation sheds light on adolescents' consumption of aggressive and humorous media content. Altogether, across a series of three studies, the research highlights that (1) humor is highly present in teens' preferred television entertainment; (2) when aggressive content is present, humorous content frequently co-occurs; and (3) overall, humor does not seem to enhance the influence of aggressive content, but attention to sex differences is worthwhile. The versatility of humor seen throughout this dissertation suggests that the time is ripe for a shift towards positive media psychology where we ask how humorous entertainment content can play a positive role in the lives of adolescents. That said, the versatility of humor also makes studying it difficult: humor is not a straightforward, context- and culture-free construct that can be implemented successfully in every form of media entertainment. Its success depends on many factors (including audience characteristics such as sex and age, as this dissertation has shown). And indeed, it may even backfire when it causes the message not to be taken seriously, is perceived as offensive, or perhaps even worst of all, not funny. However, above everything else, it has great potential to make a positive difference in the lives of adolescents. Walt Disney is famous for saying "laughter is no enemy to learning" – here is to laughing while learning more about humor in the years ahead.

Nederlandse Samenvatting
(Dutch Summary)

Niet Alleen om te Lachen: Naar een Beter Begrip van Humor en Agressie in Media Entertainment voor Tieners

De hang naar vermaak is de mens eigen. Het is dan ook niet verwonderlijk dat mensen zoveel tijd besteden aan het consumeren van media entertainment. Echter, media entertainment kan enorm in inhoud verschillen en bepaalde typen inhoud hebben vragen opgeroepen over de mogelijke effecten van frequente blootstelling daaraan op – met name jonge – consumenten. Vooral de aanwezigheid van agressie in media entertainment is al meer dan vijftig jaar een “hot topic”, waarbij wetenschappers en andere betrokkenen zich afvragen welke omstandigheden potentiële effecten kunnen vergroten of verkleinen. Een factor die in deze discussies vaak aan de orde wordt gesteld is humor. Het gaat dan vooral om de vraag of de frequente combinatie van agressie en humor in media entertainment de agressie mogelijk bagatelliseert (omdat het “slechts een grap” is) en daarmee aan de kijker de boodschap stuurt dat dit acceptabel gedrag is om te kopiëren.

Deze zorg is met name scherp geuit met betrekking tot tieners, vanwege hun hoge media-entertainmentgebruik en hun vatbaarheid voor antisociaal gedrag. Empirisch onderzoek over de voorkeuren van tieners voor agressie en humor in media entertainment en de manieren waarop zowel agressieve als humoristische inhoud (samen) voorkomen, ontbreekt echter. Tegen deze achtergrond zijn in dit proefschrift drie empirische studies uitgevoerd om inzicht te geven in de differentiële voorkeuren van tieners voor soorten en contexten van agressie en humor in media entertainment en de mogelijke lessen die daaruit te trekken zijn (hoofdstuk 2, 3 en 4). Samen leveren deze studies belangrijke theoretische, methodologische en maatschappelijke bijdragen aan het jeugd- en mediaonderzoek.

Theoretische en Methodologische Bijdragen

Voorafgaand aan dit promotieonderzoek lag de theorievorming over humor in media entertainment nagenoeg stil. Dit kwam grotendeels door het pluriforme karakter van humor, wat onderzoek doen bemoeilijkt en heeft geleid tot fragmentatie van het onderzoek dat er wel is (in bijvoorbeeld de communicatiewetenschap, psychologie, sociologie, en gezondheidswetenschappen). Om uit deze impasse te komen biedt hoofdstuk 3 een intertheoretisch raamwerk voor humor in media entertainment.

Door verschillende theorieën te combineren, zijn tien verschillende humortypen geïdentificeerd. Hoofdstuk 3 laat vervolgens zien dat alle tien de soorten humor ook daadwerkelijk aanwezig zijn in de favoriete televisieprogramma's van tieners. Daarbij werden er in hoofdstuk 3 ook populaire combinaties van humortypen gevonden, wat aangeeft hoe complex humor in media entertainment is.

Daarnaast biedt dit proefschrift ook in methodologisch opzicht het veld twee manieren voor verdere ontwikkeling. Ten eerste is de methode voor het meten van inhoud van media-entertainment in dit proefschrift een van de meest rigoureuze benaderingen die tot nu toe gebruikt is. In eerder onderzoek werden zowel agressie als humor meestal behandeld als een dichotoom construct dat af- of aanwezig is in een bepaald type media entertainment. In dit proefschrift is een andere benadering gehanteerd, namelijk een inhoudsanalyse van humor en agressie in de favoriete televisieprogramma's van tieners op *scènenniveau*. Hoewel ontegenzeggelijk bewerklijker (het handmatig coderen van meer dan 15.000 scènes is zeer arbeidsintensief), heeft dit wel geleid tot een genuanceerde en betekenisvolle interpretatie van agressie en humor in de favoriete shows van tieners. Ter toelichting, op basis van de dichotome benadering uit eerder onderzoek zou de conclusie zijn geweest dat agressie voorkomt in bijna twee-derde van de favoriete shows van tieners. Dit klinkt alarmerend hoog, maar dit moet wel in context geplaatst worden. De subtielere scène-niveaubenadering in dit proefschrift laat namelijk zien dat agressie slechts een klein deel van de show vormde (gemiddeld kwam agressie voor in 9% van de scènes). Humor kwam daarentegen voor in meer dan de helft van alle scènes. Daaruit blijkt dat humor een zeer belangrijk aspect is van het favoriete media entertainment van tieners.

Een tweede methodologische bijdrage van dit proefschrift is dat er een relatief nieuwe benadering in jeugd- en mediaonderzoek is gebruikt, de zogeheten *linkage analyse*. Hierbij werden de inhoudsanalysegegevens van de favoriete shows van tieners gekoppeld aan vragenlijstdata over hun agressieniveau, sekse en leeftijd. Deze aanpak laat zien dat het geslacht van tieners een veel sterkere factor is dan hun agressieniveau bij het bepalen van hun voorkeur voor agressie en humor in hun favoriete televisieprogramma's. Ter illustratie, jongens hebben een ruim twee keer zo grote voorkeur voor fysieke agressie en voor realistische, gerechtvaardigde, grafische, beloonde en bestrafte agressie in televisieprogramma's dan meisjes (hoofdstuk 2). Daarbij hebben jongens een grotere voorkeur voor agressieve humortypen – zowel

het (non-)verbaal belachelijk maken van mensen als fysiek agressieve “slapstick” humor – vergeleken met meisjes, die op hun beurt een grotere voorkeur tonen voor shows met coping humor (hoofdstuk 4).

Daarbovenop werd in hoofdstuk 4 deze linkage analyse uitgebreid met een *longitudinale linkage analyse* om de ontwikkeling van humorvoorkeuren van tieners van 10 tot 17 jaar te schatten. Deze liet zien dat sekse en ontwikkeling verweven lijken te zijn in het sturen van differentiële voorkeuren. Jongens en meisjes toonden bijvoorbeeld een vergelijkbare voorkeur voor agressieve humortypen op 10-jarige leeftijd, maar dit groeide met leeftijd uit elkaar (waarbij meisjes een sterke afname vertoonden in hun voorkeur voor agressieve humortypen in hun favoriete shows, terwijl jongens relatief stabiel bleven). Daarentegen toonden meisjes op 10-jarige leeftijd een veel grotere voorkeur voor coping humor dan jongens, terwijl deze voorkeuren in de loop van de adolescentie juist naar elkaar toe groeiden. Samen laten deze bevindingen zien dat de voorkeuren van tieners voor media entertainment sterk geleid worden door individuele verschillen. Daarbij moet wel opgemerkt worden dat de adolescentie een periode van vele veranderingen is (biologisch, fysiek, en qua persoonlijkheid), waardoor de precieze oorzaak van deze differentiële voorkeuren lastig vast te stellen is. Dit is dan ook een belangrijke richting voor toekomstig onderzoek.

Maatschappelijke Implicaties

Dit proefschrift levert ook betekenisvolle inzichten die het maatschappelijke debat over de relatie tussen agressieve media-inhoud en agressie bij tieners minder gepolariseerd kunnen maken. De gedetailleerde analyse van de favoriete televisieprogramma's van tieners in hoofdstuk 2 toonde aan dat agressie niet zo vaak voorkomt als vaak wordt gevreesd (hoewel er – als uitzondering op de regel – wel een paar zeer agressieve shows tussen zaten). Daarbij werd in het onderzoek beschreven in hoofdstuk 4 geen verband gevonden tussen de agressieve humorvoorkeuren van tieners en hun agressiviteit. Natuurlijk is verder onderzoek nodig om de exacte omstandigheden te bepalen die eventueel kunnen leiden tot ongewenste invloed van blootstelling aan agressieve inhoud. Hierbij moet vooral gekeken worden naar jongens omdat die een voorkeur hebben voor agressie weergegeven als realistisch, gerechtvaardigd, grafisch en beloond – een context die volgens de theorie imitatie aanmoedigt.

Al met al geven de bevindingen in dit proefschrift aanleiding tot kalmte en optimisme. Daarbij biedt de in dit proefschrift getoonde veelzijdigheid van humor in media entertainment het perspectief dat humor in media entertainment ook een positieve invloed kan hebben op het leven van een tiener. Of het tieners nu kan helpen om te gaan met zoiets engs en onzakers als de recente pandemie of om belangrijke gezondheidsboodschappen over te brengen, humor kan dienen als een krachtig hulpmiddel in media entertainment. Dit biedt ook een duidelijk startpunt voor toekomstig empirisch onderzoek over dit onderwerp.

Conclusie

Door een zorgvuldige en innovatieve methodologische benadering en interdisciplinaire theoretische conceptualisering kon in dit proefschrift een genuanceerd beeld worden gegeven van de consumptie van agressieve en humoristische media-inhoud door tieners. Samengenomen benadrukken de drie studies dat (1) humor zeer aanwezig is in het favoriete entertainment van tieners; (2) wanneer agressieve inhoud aanwezig is, dit vaak samengaat met humor; en (3) over het algemeen humor de invloed van agressieve inhoud niet lijkt te vergroten, maar sekseverschillen moeten hierbij in acht genomen worden.

Deze bevindingen suggereren dat de tijd rijp is voor een verschuiving naar positieve mediapsychologie, waarin we nagaan hoe humoristisch entertainment een positieve rol kan spelen in het leven van tieners. Dat gezegd hebbende, de in dit proefschrift gedemonstreerde veelzijdigheid van humor maakt het tegelijkertijd ook zo lastig om het te onderzoeken: humor is geen rechttoe rechtaan, contextvrij en cultuurloos construct. Het is ook geen construct dat zonder meer succesvol in elke vorm van media entertainment kan worden toegepast. Succes hangt af van vele factoren (waaronder kenmerken van het publiek als geslacht en leeftijd, zoals in dit proefschrift is aangetoond). En ja, humor kan zelfs averechts werken als het ervoor zorgt dat de boodschap niet serieus wordt genomen, wordt ervaren als beledigend, of misschien zelfs het ergste van allemaal, als niet grappig. Het heeft echter vooraleerst een enorme potentie om een positief verschil te maken in het leven van tieners. Zoals Walt Disney altijd zei "lachen is geen vijand van leren". Laten we dit ter harte nemen en met plezier de komende jaren meer leren over humor.

**Author Contributions
(Chapters 2 to 4)**

Chapter 2: What’s in it for Them? Teens’ Differential Preferences for Types and Contexts of Televised Aggression

Researchers involved (with initials): Amber van der Wal (AvdW), Karin M. Fikkers (KF), and Patti Valkenburg (PV).

Author Contributions	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)		AvdW, KF, PV
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)		AvdW, KF, PV
Data Collection		AvdW
(Statistical) Analysis	KF	AvdW
Writing (Original draft preparation)		AvdW
Writing (Review and editing)		AvdW, KF, PV
Visualization		AvdW
Funding acquisition		PV

Chapter 3: More Than Just a Laughing Matter: A Coding Framework of Humor in Media Entertainment for Tweens and Teens

Researchers involved (with initials): Amber van der Wal (AvdW), Jessica Taylor Piotrowski (JTP), Karin M. Fikkers (KF), and Patti Valkenburg (PV).

Author Contributions	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)		AvdW, JTP, KF, PV
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)		AvdW, KF, PV
Data Collection		AvdW
(Statistical) Analysis		AvdW
Writing (Original draft preparation)		AvdW
Writing (Review and editing)	KF	AvdW, JTP, PV
Visualization		AvdW
Funding acquisition		PV

Chapter 4: Just a Joke? Adolescents' Preferences for Humor in Media Entertainment and Real-Life Aggression

Researchers involved (with initials): Amber van der Wal (AvdW), J. Loes Pouwels (LP), Jessica Taylor Piotrowski (JTP), and Patti Valkenburg (PV).

Author Contributions	Limited Contribution	Substantial Contribution
Conceptualization (Main idea, Theory)		AvdW, JTP, PV
Methodology (Design, Operationalization)	LP	AvdW, JTP, PV
Data Collection		AvdW
(Statistical) Analysis		AvdW, LP
Writing (Original draft preparation)		AvdW
Writing (Review and editing)		AvdW, LP, JTP, PV
Visualization		AvdW, LP
Funding acquisition		PV

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However, I am not done yet, because I could not have done it without my friends and family.

Let's start with my friends. My dear LGB's, hardly ever has an app-group name been so appropriate: "Lachen, Gieren, Brullen," that we did. Thanks for all the fun nights out (and in). Inge, Suur, and Mats, even though some people (I am not naming names → Oscar) may have made fun of our nerdy "wetenschapsclubje," it has been a luxury to be able to talk to you guys when I was having setbacks or doubts about my research

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Then to my own family. Geke, my dearest auntie, thank you for exploring Amsterdam's best restaurants with me and your continuous support and interest over the years. Floris, Vanessa, Zeger, and Marjanne. You all mean so much to me. I always feel at ease when I am with you (even though we tease each other a lot). Zeeg, thirteen years after being your paranymp, you are now mine. I am not sure yet how to pay you back for making me wear a "rokkostuum" and telling me that I would have to take over if you would be incapacitated – something that was not unthinkable at the time ;) – causing me to read your dissertation three times. But I'll think of something. I really hope that one day we will write that paper together (with our dad as the third author).

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and motivating words (and meals 😊) have kept me going. I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done and still do for me. I love you both so much.

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About the Author

About the Author

Amber van der Wal (July 31st, 1987) obtained her bachelor's degree (with merit) in Psychology with a specialization in Psychonomics at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 2009. After a gap year, she completed a second specialization in Social Psychology (UvA, 2011, cum laude), followed by a master's degree in Social Psychology (UvA, 2012-2015, with merit). As part of the master track, Amber did a year-long internship under supervision of prof. dr. Patti Valkenburg, consisting of an extensive literature review of humor development in children, followed by a master thesis (under supervision of dr. Disa Sauter) in which she examined children's ability to distinguish between genuine and polite laughter. After these two projects, it was clear that Amber wanted to continue doing research on children and humor. To that end, together with prof. dr. Patti Valkenburg and dr. Karin Fikkers, she wrote a PhD-proposal that got approved in June of 2015 by the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR). After completing a transfer program into Communication Science (summa cum laude), Amber started her PhD in January of 2016, focusing on adolescents' differential preferences for humor and aggression in media entertainment. During her PhD, Amber was also the chair of the 'Eetmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2020' conference organization committee. In addition, at the beginning of the corona pandemic, she coordinated (together with Bert Bakker and Rens Vliegthart) an institute-wide collaboration between 35 researchers in the form of a five-wave panel study on corona-related issues. Furthermore, on September 1st 2020, Amber started as ASCoR's research manager, which she continues to be now that she has finished her dissertation (September 2021). As of October 2021, Amber also teaches in the Communication Science master track and works as a postdoctoral researcher on Project AWeSome, led by Patti Valkenburg.