

Study: Depending on the problem, media may be an escape or a way to cope

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The last thing most people in a bad love affair want to do is to read informational articles about romance. But people facing financial difficulties often choose to read articles which may help them cope with their money problems.

Those are some of the findings of a new study that aimed to discover whether people use the news media to escape from their problems or find information on how to cope with them.

Results showed that people with deeply personal, emotionally-charged problems - such as issues of love and romance -- tend to avoid reading articles concerning those difficulties.

But people with problems that may carry less emotional baggage - such as finances - seek out articles that may help them cope.

"People want to avoid reading about topics that may bring up unpleasant thoughts and emotions," said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, co-author of the study and associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"But people seek out information that may help them find solutions for less personal problems."

Knobloch-Westerwick conducted the study with Matthias Hastall of the University of Erfurt and Maik Rossman of the Dresden University of

Technology, both in Germany. Their results appear in a recent issue of the journal *Communication Research*.

The study involved 287 German college students. The students were told they would participate in two separate, unrelated studies, although they were actually both part of the same project.

In the first study, the students took a life satisfaction questionnaire which asked how satisfied they were in five areas of their life: health, finances, friendship and kinship, college and career, and romantic relationships.

In the second, supposedly separate study, the students were asked to evaluate an online news magazine. The magazine had 10 sections, five of which corresponded to the five subject areas that they were questioned about earlier. Some articles offered hints and guidance on the topic areas, while others highlighted personal stories or statistical information.

Students were told they didn't have enough time to read all the articles and they should choose to read the ones that most interested them.

A software program tracked which articles the participants clicked on and how much time they spent reading them.

The researchers then compared the issues participants read about with the issues that were causing them the most problems in their lives.

Results showed that people's satisfaction levels for four of the five life areas influenced whether they wanted to read about those topics. Only their satisfaction with relationships with friends and relatives seemed to have no effect on reading patterns.

People who were in an unhappy romantic relationship avoided any

articles about the topic. But people who were happily in love "indulged themselves by reading more about romance," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

Those who were unhappily single sought more information about romance, at least compared to the happy singles - presumably, she said, because they were seeking ways to find true love.

Results showed people's health status affected whether they wanted to read health-related articles. People who were most satisfied with their health and those who were least satisfied tended to avoid health-related content. The biggest consumers were those whose health status fell somewhere in the middle.

"Healthy people don't need to read about how to improve their health, and those who feel least satisfied about their health probably think there's nothing they can do, so they avoid the topic," she said.

When considering college, career, and financial matters, people who reported they had greater problems were more likely to read articles about those issues.

"These may be the kind of problems, at least for college students, that are seen just as problems to be solved, and don't bring up unpleasant emotions," she said. "In this case, they are motivated to read about steps they can take to improve their situation."

Knobloch-Westerwick noted that this study only looked at informational media - other studies need to examine how people's satisfaction levels affect their use of entertainment media.

"We are really just starting to study about how people use the media to deal with everyday strains," she said.

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