



**International Journal of Arts and Technology**

ISSN online: 1754-8861 - ISSN print: 1754-8853

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijart>

---

**Emotion, enjoyment, empathy and identification with characters in cinema**

Miguel Herrero Herrero, María Pilar Jiménez Sánchez

**DOI:** [10.1504/IJART.2023.10058989](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJART.2023.10058989)

**Article History:**

Received:	06 December 2022
Last revised:	22 May 2023
Accepted:	31 May 2023
Published online:	28 September 2023

## Emotion, enjoyment, empathy and identification with characters in cinema

---

Miguel Herrero Herrero\* and  
María Pilar Jiménez Sánchez

School of Psychology,  
The National Distance Education University (UNED),  
C/ de Juan del Rosal, 10, 28040 Madrid, Spain  
Email: miguelherreroherrero@gmail.com  
Email: mpjimenez@psi.uned.es

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** It has been theorised that one of the main explanatory factors for the enjoyment of narrative formats such as cinema is identification with the characters. However, there is little research on it. In this way, we present a quantitative study on the relationships between identification with the characters, empathy, the affective state and the processes of reception and impact of the cinematographic drama. We studied the affective impact of a dramatic film (*Cuerdas*) in a sample of 50 university students (25 men and 25 women). One of the most relevant aspects of this research is having contrasted the importance of empathy and identification with the characters when it comes to predicting enjoyment and the affective impact caused by viewing a short film. Another of the main contributions of this study is related to the measurement of enjoyment. We have considered enjoyment as a multidimensional construct, an aspect that other investigations have not considered.

**Keywords:** entertainment; effects of emotion; transportation theory; persuasion; information processing; cognition.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Herrero, M.H. and Sánchez, M.P.J. (2023) 'Emotion, enjoyment, empathy and identification with characters in cinema', *Int. J. Arts and Technology*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.320–332.

**Biographical notes:** Miguel Herrero Herrero is a filmmaker, writer, editor and Professor. He earned his Doctorate in Psychology from the UNED in Madrid. He obtained his Master's in Research in Psychology. He has been the author of 15 essays on cinema and audiovisuals. He is a director of the production company and publisher Cinestesia and of the Sax International Film Festival, a qualifier for the Goya Awards. He is a member of the Spanish Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences.

María Pilar Jiménez Sánchez is a researcher and Professor at the Department of Basic Psychology II of the UNED in Madrid. She obtained her Master's degree in Research in Psychology and Postgraduate in Psychopathology and Health and Healthy Aging. She is a specialist in the psychology of emotion with more than 30 research articles and book chapters published.

---

## **1 Introduction**

The feel of a movie is a complex phenomenon. Tan (1995) affirms that a film is a machine of emotions. The narrative controls the development of any emotion over time. It is the filmmakers who not only direct the film but also the emotions of the public (Taberham, 2018). When watching a movie, as when reading a book, an absorption process can be provoked that has been explained by concepts such as narrative transport (Green and Brock, 2000) or identification with the characters (Cohen, 2001). There is a whole line of research that has shown that listening to music, reading certain narratives, watching scenes or complete films, induce mood changes (Tan, 1996). There is a positive relationship of the appreciation of cinema, and other media such as theatre, in mental health (Sun and Luo, 2020). Dramatic movies are experienced as psychologically beneficial (Bartsch and Oliver, 2016). The cinema is a stimulus that offers the possibility of exploring the experience of affective comprehension through the process of identification with the characters of the cinematographic story. The immediate connection between the language of images and the world of affections, turns the cinema into a powerful tool that allows the viewer to accept the characters emotionally. Cinema offers us the way to exercise empathy. Film narratives, as well as written narratives, can facilitate understanding of the mental states and emotions of others (theory of mind) (Black and Barnes, 2015). Empathy, that capacity for affective understanding that we put into play in everyday social situations, can occur in situations posed in a film. The academic study of media entertainment, such as cinema, has been identified as one of the most important challenges for communication theory and research. In research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly by Zillmann and his colleagues in the USA (for example, Zillmann and Vorderer, 2000) and by Bosshart and Macconi (1998) in Europe, entertainment it has been generally defined by them as an affective response to entertainment products be it movies, television shows, music or books. This research work is framed within the psychology of entertainment that explores the psychological variables that can influence the enjoyment and the processes of reception and impact of a fictional product, such as cinema.

## **2 Empathy and identification with the characters**

The origin of the term empathy derives from the Greek *empátheia* (to get excited). Currently, empathy is understood as the process by which we capture and understand the emotional states of other people. Howard Gardner calls it interpersonal intelligence referring to the ability of one person to understand the emotional universe of another. We can understand the affective world of the other because we have been able to connect with the feelings of others. Empathy as a capacity for affective understanding that we put into play in everyday social situations can occur in situations posed in a film. Cinema is a stimulus that offers the possibility of exploring the experience of affective understanding through the process of identification with the characters. Empathy is defined as an other oriented to the emotional response congruent with the perceived well-being of another person; if the other is in need, empathic emotions include feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like. Empathy is not a unitary phenomenon but encompasses different subcomponents.

People commonly use expressions such as ‘the movie has moved me’ or ‘I have fun watching this movie’ to refer to their experience as viewers of content designed for entertainment such as a movie. Obviously, other more negative reactions are possible: the most dramatic feature films or with tragic content come to cause a certain emotional discomfort in the viewers. In both examples, the viewer’s experience is linked to the emotional experience. The research results indicate that affective induction, identification with the characters, personal resonance and the viewer’s cultural closeness to the characters and situations play a main role in explaining the enjoyment caused by fiction.

Characters are a central component of any fiction work and constitute an element to explain its affective impact on viewers. Identification with the characters has been indicated as a central process to explain the impact of works of fiction, be it a written narrative or a film production (Cohen, 2001, 2006; Igartua and Muñiz, 2005). It does not seem that there is an agreement regarding the definition of the concept of identification with the characters, despite the studies that have been carried out on this subject. Cohen (2001) carried out one of the most comprehensive reviews of the concept of identification with characters. For this author, identification with the characters is the process through which people experience and interpret a narrative from within, as if the events that appear in the story were happening to themselves. In addition, Cohen points out that this process comprises different dimensions:

- a emotional empathy, the ability to feel what the characters are saying and to become emotionally involved in a vicarious way
- b cognitive empathy, adopting the point of view or putting oneself in the shoes of the characters, which implies understanding their motivations and behaviours
- c absorption in the story, referring to the experience of ‘becoming the character’, the viewer lives or imagines the story as if it were one of the characters
- d personal attraction to the characters, linked to the positive assessment of the characters, the perception of similarity with them and the desire to be like one of them (Cohen, 2001).

Considering this multidimensionality, most of the authors share that empathy is one of the basic dimensions of identification (Cohen, 2001, 2006; Igartua and Páez, 1998; Oatley, 2002). It is necessary to differentiate between empathy as general trait or tendency to respond to everyday social situations in which other people with whom one interacts are involved, and empathy as a state or process linked to the reception of fiction (implies putting oneself in the place of the characters and feeling themselves affective states) and that constitutes a central dimension of identification with the characters (Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo, 2005).

The main objective of this research is to study the relationships between factors or variables related to media entertainment, specifically cinema, such as empathy, affective state, identification with the characters, enjoyment, and reception and impact processes of the film drama. Therefore, the following hypotheses are postulated:

- Hypothesis 1 Empathy is related to identification with the characters.
- Hypothesis 2 The level of empathy is related to the level of enjoyment. The higher the level of empathy, the greater the enjoyment.

- Hypothesis 3 Identification with the characters is related to enjoyment. The higher the level of identification with the characters, the greater the enjoyment.
- Hypothesis 4 Empathy and identification with the characters are predictive factors of enjoyment and affective impact.

### **3 Participants**

The sample is made up of a group of 50 adult college students, 25 men and 25 women with ages ranging from 20 to 42 years. The mean total age of the sample was 23.66 (SD = 5.37), the mean age of men being 24.52 (SD = 6.01) and the mean age for women was 22.80 (SD = 4.61). The participants are students from the Miguel Hernández University of Elche (UMH).

### **4 Procedure**

The study was approved once permission was obtained from the academic authorities of the university. The screening of the short film and the application of the self-report instruments were carried out collectively in a university classroom. Before the screening of the film, the participants completed a basic questionnaire of sociodemographic data, the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI), to measure the empathy trait, and the positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS), to evaluate their affective state. Next, the Spanish animated dramatic short film *Strings* (2013) was screened and the participants responded again to the PANAS scale to assess whether there has been a change in their mood after viewing the short film. Finally then the participants completed the scale of empathy and identification with the characters (EDI) and the film appreciation questionnaire in order to assess the degree of enjoyment experienced.

### **5 Instruments**

#### *5.1 Stimulus material and measures*

In this research, the Spanish animated dramatic short film *Strings* (2013) by Pedro Solís García has been used to induce the affective state. *Strings* currently holds the Guinness record for being the most awarded animated short film in history, with 241 awards internationally in 2016. The film tells a tender story of friendship between two very special children. The qualification is ‘for all audiences, with the addition of special interest for children’, being recommended by the Ministry of Culture of Spain for its educational vocation. The plot revolves around María, a happy girl at school whose daily routine will be altered by the arrival of a paralysed boy in her class. They will become inseparable friends until his sudden death. Maria will overcome her death and will become a teacher in the future, recalling her friendship with the child. It should be said that the work is inspired by real events from the lives of the director’s own children. The film seeks realism, surprising its ending, being tragic and unusual. The choice of this cinematographic work as an inducer of emotions is also based on its artistic and technical quality, the number of awards received, and the following theoretical aspects with

empirical evidence related to enjoyment in media entertainment. Among them: personal resonance (as the protagonists are children, it is easier and more common for most to recall experiences similar to the story), the realism of both the story and the characters (the more realistic typical situations and people in a fictional drama were more interesting and more pleasant) and also the short film reveals aspects related to moral judgment. Due to these characteristics, it is considered that this short film is conducive to the study of empathy and identification with the characters, two of the variables studied in this research work.

## 5.2 *Mood*

To measure the affective state we have used PANAS (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988). The Spanish adaptation of PANAS has been used (Sandín et al., 1999). The scale was completed in two moments: before watching the film (pre-test) and immediately after finishing the viewing of it (post-test). In both cases, the state of affective is evaluated by setting the time interval at these moments. The alpha coefficients of the positive affect and negative affect subscales were calculated from the items that specifically make up each subscale (10 items each). These were remarkably high, both for the group of men (alpha = 0.89) positive affect and 0.91 negative affect and for the group of women (alpha = 0.87) positive affect and 0.89 negative affect, which corroborates the high internal consistency that these dimensions of affect possess.

## 5.3 *Empathy*

To measure empathy we use IRI by Davis (1980) (adapted in Spanish by Pérez-Albéniz et al., 2003). This scale is made up of 28 items that measure the four dimensions of empathy proposed by Davis:

- a fantasy (item example, 'when I see a good movie I easily put myself in the place of the protagonist')
- b perspective taking (example of an item, 'when I get angry with someone I try to put myself in their place for a moment')
- c empathic concern (example of an item, 'when I see that someone is being taken advantage of, I experience feelings of protection towards that person')
- d personal distress (example item, 'I often feel quite affected by things that happen').

For each item, a six-point response format is used, so that before each statement, people must indicate a numerical value between 0 and 5, with 0 being 'nothing characteristic of me' and 5 'very characteristic of me'. It has been observed that the scale presents adequate stability or external consistency (mean correlations, according to the test-retest method, with a two-month interval between 0.61 and 0.81, and between 0.70 and 0.78 in a two-year interval). Likewise, the internal consistency of the scale evaluated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient fluctuates between 0.70 and 0.78.

#### 5.4 Identification with the characters

Scale of empathy and identification with the characters (EDI) of Igartua and Páez (1998). This scale is made up of 17 items that refer to the dimensions of: cognitive empathy (example of an item: 'I have tried to see things from the point of view of the protagonists'), emotional empathy (example of an item: 'I myself have experienced emotional reactions'), attraction to the characters (item example: 'I liked the way of being or acting of the protagonists'), and the feeling of becoming the character or melding (item example: 'I have felt as if I were one of the protagonists'). The response format is a five-point intensity scale (from 1 = nothing to 5 = a lot) and offers a global indicator of identification with the protagonists ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

#### 5.5 Enjoyment

To measure perceived enjoyment we use the Film appreciation questionnaire.

This instrumentation has been carried out ad hoc based on the proposals of Bartsch and Oliver (2008). According to this author, enjoyment can be defined as a global hedonic judgment on the entertainment value that people make at the end of exposure to specific content, such as a fictional feature film (Oliver et al., 2000).

Furthermore, Oliver (2008) has pointed out "the enjoyment reaction may not capture all the dimensions of the responses or reactions to media entertainment". Considering appreciation, enjoyment, as a multidimensional construct, we used the following five items in this questionnaire:

- 1 perception of enjoyment ('to what extent did you like the movie?')
- 2 fun (example item, 'I've had a good time watching this movie')
- 3 lasting impression ('I know I will never be able to forget this movie')
- 4 deep meaning ('this movie really made me think')
- 5 suspense ('no I could detach myself from my chair while watching the movie, the experience was very intense').

The items were evaluated with an eleven point scale (from 0 = I did not like it at all, to 10 = I liked it very much).

## 6 Data analysis

An initial descriptive was conducted by analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and of the variables empathy, identification with the characters and the mood was carried out. As a starting point, it is analysed whether the short film *Strings* had an affective impact on the participants. For this, the Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to observe the differences between the pre-test and post-test of positive and negative emotions (PANAS). Correlations (Spearman's Rho) have been used to know the relationship between the study variables. To study the differences between men and women in relation to the variables of empathy, identification with the characters and enjoyment, the Mann-Whitney U test was used for independent samples. Finally, several models and regression analyses were carried out to know the effect of the variables of

empathy, identification with the characters and affective state as predictive factors of enjoyment and affective impact.

## 7 Results

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and the variables empathy and mood prior to viewing the short film *Strings* are shown in Table 1.

The results show that the short film *Strings* produced a change in the mood of the participants. There are significant differences between the pre-viewing mood and the post-viewing mood of the short film. These significant differences between PANAS pre-test and PANAS post-test are observed: positive emotions decrease significantly ( $p = 0.003$ ) and negative emotions increase ( $p = 0.014$ ).

**Table 1** Descriptive of the sociodemographic characteristics, empathy and previous affective state

		Gender					
		N = 50 (sample)		Female (N = 25)		Male (N = 25)	
		Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD
PANAS (affective state)	Age	23.66	5.378	22.80	4.619	24.52	6.015
	Positive emotions PRE	27.58	7.415	27.64	8.421	27.52	6.430
	Negative emotions PRE	17.36	5.329	15.76	4.085	18.96	5.996
IRI (empathy)	Perspective taking	26.12	4.801	26.52	5.339	25.72	4.267
	Fantasy	25.80	4.664	26.28	4.826	25.32	4.543
	Empathic concern	27.00	4.295	28.64	3.839	25.36	4.162
	Personal discomfort	18.26	4.095	18.60	3.240	17.92	4.847

When analysing the data on the differences in mood (pre-test and post-test PANAS) in men and women, the results show significant differences in the group of women: positive mood decreased significantly ( $p = 0.005$ ) and negative mood increases significantly ( $p = 0.019$ ).

In relation to Hypothesis 1, empathy is related to identification with the characters, the relationship between the IRI subscales scores and the total EDI score has been analysed, both in the total sample and separately men and women. The results show positive correlations between the IRI subscales of empathic preoccupation ( $r = 0.512^{**}$ ) and Fantasy ( $r = 0.313^*$ ) with the EDI scale, but the correlation indices are different according to the differences by gender. Character identification (EDI) correlates with the IRI subscale of empathic concern in men ( $r = 0.399^*$ ) and in women ( $r = 0.531^{**}$ ) but only the fantasy subscale in women ( $r = 0.520^{**}$ ).

In relation to Hypothesis 2, the level of empathy is related to the level of enjoyment, the higher the level of empathy the greater the enjoyment, the results show in the empathic concern subscale (IRI) is correlated with the enjoyment in the taste of the film ( $r = 0.510^{**}$ ), lasting impression ( $r = 0.445^{**}$ ), deep meaning ( $r = 0.361^{**}$ ) and suspense ( $r = 0.464^{**}$ ), except for the Fun item ( $r = 0.164$ ) (Table 2). We appreciate significant differences regarding gender. We observe that in the sample of women the empathic concern subscale (IRI) correlates with the like for the film ( $r = 0.521^{**}$ ), the lasting

impression ( $r = 0.645^{**}$ ), the deep meaning ( $r = 0.496^*$ ) and suspense ( $r = 0.604^{**}$ ). In men, the only correlations are found with like for the movie ( $r = 0.438^*$ ) and suspense ( $r = 0.410^*$ ).

**Table 2** Correlations between the subscales of the IRI, EDI and the movie enjoyment questionnaire

<i>N = 50 (sample)</i>		<i>Enjoyment film appreciation questionnaire</i>				
		<i>Taste for the movie</i>	<i>Fun for the movie</i>	<i>Lasting impression</i>	<i>Deep meaning</i>	<i>Suspense</i>
Empathy (IRI)	Perspective taking	0.130	0.161	0.065	-0.0043	0.181
	Fantasy	0.047	-0.089	0.107	0.060	0.083
	Empathic concern	0.510 <sup>**</sup>	0.164	0.445 <sup>**</sup>	0.361 <sup>**</sup>	0.464 <sup>**</sup>
EDI	Personal discomfort	0.108	-0.210	0.198	0.275	0.222
	Identification with the characters	0.628 <sup>**</sup>	0.274	0.710 <sup>**</sup>	0.682 <sup>**</sup>	0.687 <sup>**</sup>

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

In relation to Hypothesis 3, identification with the characters is related to enjoyment. The higher the level of identification with the characters, the greater the enjoyment. The results indicate that the scale of empathy and identification with the characters (EDI) correlates with the questionnaire of appreciation of the film (enjoyment) in the taste for the film ( $r = 0.628^{**}$ ), the lasting impression ( $r = 0.710^{**}$ ), deep meaning ( $r = 0.682^{**}$ ) and suspense ( $r = 0.687^{**}$ ), except for the fun item ( $r = 0.274$ ) for both men and women groups.

Before conducting the multivariate regression analyses, a series of univariate regressions was conducted to check if variables exerted a differential impact on enjoyment.

**Table 3** Univariate regression analysis model

		<i>Significant univariate models</i>					
		<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
IRI (empathy) (subscales)	Fantasy	0.101	0.277	0.076	4.529	3.974	0.52
	Empathic concern	0.161	0.478	0.228	3.812	14.208	0.000
	Liking for the movie	0.092	0.677	0.458	1.293	40.591	0.000
Enjoyment	Fun for the movie	0.034	0.272	0.074	1.550	3.846	0.056
	Long lasting impression	0.141	0.751	0.563	1.608	61.907	0.000
	Deep meaning	0.121	0.671	0.451	1.731	39.414	0.000
	Suspense	0.152	0.718	0.515	1.904	50.959	0.000

To contrast Hypothesis 4, empathy and identification with the characters will be predictive factors of enjoyment and affective impact, several models of regression analysis were carried out with which we were able to analyse the relationship between the indicators of empathy and identification with the characters with the criterion variables of the study (enjoyment, induction of negative affect and induction of positive affect). Different regression analyses have been carried out. We present the simple regression analysis models, which are the only models that have been significant mainly due to

having a small sample ( $N = 50$ ). Table 3 show the results of the significant regression analysis models of the IRI (empathy) of the fantasy and empathic preoccupation subscales and the sections of the enjoy questionnaire.

The identification variable with the characters (EDI) explains 22.8% of the variability of empathic concern,  $R^2 = 0.228$ ,  $F(14.218)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . For the explanation of the Enjoy variable, it is worth highlighting the taste for the film ( $R^2 = 0.458$ ), the lasting impression ( $R^2 = 0.563$ ), the deep meaning ( $R^2 = 0.451$ ) and the suspense ( $R^2 = 0.515$ ).

**Table 4** Regression analysis model

<i>Models</i>		<i>B</i>	$\hat{\sigma}$	$R^2$	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Film like = EDI +	EDI	0.087	0.643				0.000
IRI (fantasy and empathic concern subscales)	Fantasy (IRI)	-0.091	-0.245	0.529	1.230	17.255	0.028
	Empathic concern (IRI)	0.086	0.213				0.077
Movie fun = EDI		0.034	0.272	0.074	1.550	3.846	0.056
Long lasting impression = EDI		0.141	0.751	0.563	1.608	61.907	0.000
Deep meaning = EDI		0.121	0.671	0.451	1.731	39.414	0.000
Suspense = EDI		0.152	0.718	0.515	1.904	50.959	0.000

Note: Enjoy = EDI (identification with the characters) + IRI (empathy)

In Table 4 we present the regression analysis models of enjoyment = EDI (empathy and identification with the characters) + IRI (empathy). We can highlight the model of Like for the film (enjoyment) = EDI + IRI (fantasy) + IRI (empathic concern),  $R^2 = 0.529$ ,  $F(17.255)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . In the Like for the film ( $R^2 = 0.529$ ), 52.9% of the variability of the dependent variable is explained by the model. The independent variable is taste, which indicates that 52.9% of its variability is explained through the variable EDI and the Fantasy and Empathic Concern of the IRI. The variables of Durable Impression ( $R^2 = 0.563$ ), Deep Meaning ( $R^2 = 0.451$ ) and Suspense ( $R^2 = 0.515$ ).

**Table 5** Regression analysis model

<i>Models</i>		<i>B</i>	$\hat{\sigma}$	$R^2$	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Like for the film = EDI		0.092	0.677	0.458	1.293	40.591	0.000
Fun for the movie = PANAS (positive emotions post)		0.088	0.356	0.126	1.505	6.950	0.011
Deep meaning = EDI + PANAS (positive emotions post)	EDI	0.147	0.813	0.504	0.483	23.876	0.000
	Positive emotions post	-0.098	-0.270				0.030

Note: Enjoy = EDI + PANAS

In Table 5 we present the regression analysis models of Enjoyment = EDI (empathy and identification with the characters) + PANAS (affective state). We can observe from the models carried out that only the post-test positive emotions are significant in the PANAS. The most relevant model of those carried out is the one formed by the variables deep meaning (enjoyment) = EDI + PANAS (post positive emotions),  $R^2 = 0.504$ ,  $F(23,876)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

On the other hand, the results indicate that there are differences between men and women in the IRI's empathic concern subscale ( $p = 0.007$ ). Women were more concerned than men. We can say that women are more empathetic than men.

Finally, the results obtained when analysing the gender differences in relation to the enjoyment of the film, indicate that women enjoyed viewing more than men, but the significant difference is presented in the item that addresses the deep meaning ( $p = 0.019$ ) of the enjoyment questionnaire. It is appreciated that a higher level of empathy, specifically empathic concern, is key to enjoying a movie. Women have enjoyed the short film more.

## **8 Discussion**

The basic objective of this research is to study the relationships between the factors or variables related to media entertainment, specifically cinema, such as empathy, affective state, identification with the characters, enjoyment and the processes of reception and impact of the film drama in a sample of adults (university). The relationship of empathy, positive and negative affect, identification with the characters, with the appreciation (enjoyment) caused by a dramatic film (short film *Strings*) was examined. First, the results of the study show that the viewing of the drama film *Strings* elicited significant changes in the mood of the participants. These changes go in the following direction: a decrease in positive mood and an increase in negative mood. In addition, variations in mood are associated with greater enjoyment. Taking into account the possibility that cinema offers us to experience emotions, it is currently one of the most used techniques to induce emotions in the laboratory to elicit differentiated basic emotional responses (Gross and Levenson, 1995; Fernández, 2013). In the review by Rottenberg et al. (2007) the advantages of using movie sequences are discussed. In the data on the relationship between the empathy variable and the identification variable with the characters, a positive correlation between the two is observed. These same data are consistent with other studies (Igartua, 2007). It was the people with a greater empathic capacity, women, who, in turn, identified more with the characters. They presented greater empathic concern and fantasy on the IRI subscale. The results are convergent with those obtained by Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005). They are also congruent with those proposed by Cohen (2001), who has pointed out that identification with the characters is an imaginative process whose basis is empathy. Empathy (empathic concern) and identification with the characters were the main explanatory variables of the enjoyment experienced by viewing *Strings*. Regarding the gender differences in the empathy variable, they agree with those of other investigations. There were significantly higher scores in women (Mestre et al., 2004). The results of the present study agree with those obtained in various investigations in which it has been observed that women obtain higher scores than men in this construct (Garaigordobil and García, 2006). Individuals with high levels of empathy experienced more empathic concern and enjoyed a dramatic movie more than those with low levels of empathy. In addition, women experienced greater empathic concern, distress, than men (Wied, 1994). It should be said that our research is also consistent with the following evidence: there appear to be gender differences in film tastes, women enjoy sad films more than men, while men enjoy adventure films more (Oliver, 2003, 2008). In general, we can say that gender is a prominent aspect to take into account. The content of the film or audiovisual work should

be previously considered in the studies to induce emotions in men or women. From the results obtained, we observe that the empathic discomfort experienced during the viewing of the film is associated with a better evaluation or perception of enjoyment. These results are consistent with previous research and with the so-called drama paradox (Oliver et al., 2000). The paradox of drama is the ability of the human being to feel with and for the characters of fictional works, to get involved affectively and cognitively in a very intense way, knowing that it is a fiction starring actors and actresses who are not going to suffer any harm (Cohen, 2006). When confronted with dramatic stories, people find the ‘pleasure of suffering’ gratifying, that is, they positively evaluate the aesthetic experience caused by dramatic materials (which induce negative emotions for most of the exposure time).

In addition, the enjoyment of sad, dramatic movies is associated with higher levels of empathy and being a woman. Wied (1994) for example found that the degree of empathic concern during the knot of a dramatic film (*Steel Magnolias*, 1989) was positively related to feelings of pleasure after the film ended. Individuals with the highest empathy showed more concern and enjoyment than those with low empathy. In other research, women reported experiencing more negative effects and lower levels of happiness in a sad movie than men, as well as more crying (Oliver et al., 2000). In general, we can say that one of the most relevant aspects in this research, with respect to previous studies in this field, is to have contrasted the importance of empathy and identification with the characters when predicting enjoyment and enjoyment affective impact caused by viewing a dramatic short film. Another of the main contributions of this study is related to the measurement of enjoyment. We have considered enjoyment as a multidimensional construct (Oliver, 2008) proposing five dimensions of movie appreciation: taste, fun, lasting impression, deep meaning and suspense, based on other studies carried out (Oliver, 2008; Bartsch and Oliver, 2008). We consider that this approach is a relevant aspect that other investigations have not taken into consideration (Igartua et al., 2009). In them, enjoyment has generally been used as a single item. The use of enjoyment as a single item supposes a limitation of other research (Igartua, 2007; Igartua et al., 2009). Despite this, Igartua’s studies are a reference in Spanish on this subject and their results are also consistent with those of our research.

## 9 Research transparency statement

The authors are willing to share their data, analytics methods, and study materials with other researchers. The material is available upon request.

## References

- Bartsch, A. and Oliver, M. B. (2016) ‘Appreciation of meaningful entertainment experiences and eudaimonic well-being’, in Reinecke, L. and Oliver, M.B. (Eds.): *Handbook of Media Use and Well-Being: International Perspectives on Theory and Research on Positive Media Effects*, pp.80–92, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Bartsch, A. and Oliver, M.B. (2008) ‘Exploring dimensions of movie enjoyment and appreciation’, *Comunicación presentada en la 58th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association*, Mayo, 22–26, Montreal (Canadá).

- Bartsch, A. and Oliver, M.B. (2008) 'Exploring dimensions of movie enjoyment and appreciation', *Comunicación presentada en la 58th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association*, Montreal (Canadá), May, pp.22–26.
- Black, J. and Barnes, J.L. (2015) 'Fiction and social cognition: the effect of viewing award-winning television dramas on theory of mind', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp.423–429, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000031>.
- Bosshart, L. and Macconi, I. (1998) 'Defining "entertainment"', *Communication Research Trends*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp.3–6.
- Chory-Assad, R. and Cicchirillo, V. (2005) 'Empathy and affective orientation as predictors of identification with television characters', *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp.151–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036810500130786>.
- Cohen, J. (2001) 'Defining identification: a theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters', *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp.245–264, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01).
- Cohen, J. (2006) 'Audience identification with media characters', in Bryant, J. and Vorderer, P. (Eds.): *Psychology of Entertainment*, pp.183–197, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Fernández, E. (2013) *Emociones positivas*, Ed. Pirámide.
- Garaigordobil, M. and García, P. (2006) 'Empatía en niños de 10 a 12 años', *Psicothema*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp.180–186.
- Green, M.C. and Brock, T.C. (2000) 'The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 5, pp.701–721, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.
- Gross, J. and Levenson, R. (1995) 'Emotion elicitation using films', *Cognition and Emotion*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp.87–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699939508408966>.
- Igartua, J. and Muñiz, C. (2005) 'Identificación con los personajes y disfrute ante largometrajes de ficción', *Una investigación empírica. Comunicación y Sociedad*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp.25–52.
- Igartua, J. and Páez, D. (1998) 'Validez y fiabilidad de una escala de empatía e identificación con los personajes', *Psicothema*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp.423–436.
- Igartua, J., Acosta, T. and Frutos, F. (2009) 'Recepción e impacto del drama cinematográfico: el papel de la identificación con los personajes y la empatía', *Global Media Journal Edición Iberoamericana*, Vol. 6, No. 11, pp.1–18.
- Igartua, J.J. (2007) *Persuasión narrativa. El papel de la identificación con los personajes a través de las culturas*, Editorial Club Universitario, Alicante.
- Mestre, V., Frias, D. and Samper, P. (2004) 'La medida de la empatía: análisis del Interpersonal Reactivity Index', *Psicothema*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp.255–260.
- Oatley, K. (2002) 'Emotions and the story worlds of fiction', in Green, M.C., Strange, J.J. and Brock, T.C. (Eds.): *Narrative Impact. Social and Cognitive Foundations*, pp.39–69, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Oliver, M.B. (2003) 'Mood management and selective exposure', in Bryant, J., Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. and Cantor, J. (Eds.): *Communication and Emotion: Essays in Honor of Dolf Zillmann*, pp.85–106, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Oliver, M.B. (2008) 'Tender affective states as predictors of entertainment preference', *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 58, pp.40–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00373.x>.
- Oliver, M.B., Weaver, J.B. and Sargent, S.L. (2000) 'An examination of factors related to sex differences in enjoyment of sad film', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol. 44, pp.282–300, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4402\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4402_8).
- Pérez-Albéniz, A.I., De Paúl, J., Etxeberria, J., Montes, M.P. and Torres, E. (2003) 'Adaptación de Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) al español', *Psicothema*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp.267–272.

- Rottenberg, J., Ray, R. and Gross, J. (2007) 'Emotion elicitation using films', in Coan, J.A. and Allen, J.J. (Eds.): *The Handbook of Emotion Elicitation and Assessment*, pp.9–28, Oxford University Press, London.
- Sandín, B., Chorot, P., Lostao, L., Joiner, T.E., Santed, M. and Valiente, R. (1999) 'Escalas PANAS de afecto positivo y negativo: validación factorial y convergencia transcultural', *Psicothema*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp.37–51.
- Sun, H. and Luo, J. (2020) 'Influence of drama and film appreciation on mental health education in college', *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica; Buenos Aires Tomo*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p.921, <https://doi.org/10.24205/03276716.2020.330>.
- Taberham, P. (2018) *Lessons in Perception: The Avant-Garde Filmmaker*, 1st ed., Berghahn Books, Oxford, NY, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znzvc>.
- Tan, E.S-H. (1995) 'Film-induced affect as a witness emotion', *Poetics*, Vol. 23, pp.7–32. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(94\)00024-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(94)00024-Z).
- Tan, E.S-H. (1996) *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film. Film as an Emotion Machine*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Wied, M.d. (1994) 'The role of temporal expectancies in the production of film suspense', *Poetics*, Vol. 23, pp.107–123.
- Zillmann, D. and Vorderer, P. (2000) *Media Entertainment. The Psychology of Its Appeal*, Routledge, New York.