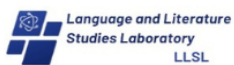


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The Cognitive Cost of Sad Films: Emotional Media and Decision-Making Impairment

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Abstract

The psychological and cognitive impacts of emotionally powerful films, especially those with melancholic themes, require further scrutiny in an age of pervasive media consumption. This study intends to systematically evaluate the current literature about the influence of sad-themed film consumption on daily decision-making processes. A critical review process was employed to analyse 38 peer-reviewed publications from prestigious journals in psychology, neuroscience, and media studies. The results indicate four principal thematic patterns: (1) emotional carryover effects that disrupt cognitive control, (2) sadness-induced alterations in risk perception and decision-making preferences, (3) media-induced cognitive fatigue after extended exposure, and (4) individual variances in susceptibility influenced by personality traits and emotional regulation abilities. The findings indicate that melancholic films may not only elicit emotional reactions but also subtly diminish cognitive performance, especially in tasks necessitating attention, judgement, and executive function. The research enhances the comprehensive understanding of media influences by connecting emotional and cognitive aspects. It underscores the necessity for enhanced understanding among viewers, educators, and doctors concerning the cognitive ramifications of emotionally charged media. Future study should empirically examine these interactions utilizing ecologically valid and longitudinal methodologies.

Keyword: Sad-Themed Films; Decision-Making; Emotional Carryover; Media Psychology; Cognitive Fatigue

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern media environment, film has become a primary source of entertainment and a powerful psychological catalyst that may provoke intricate emotional reactions. Sad-themed films, defined by storylines of loss, sadness, tragedy, or emotional pain, have attracted much attention for their powerful influence on spectators' emotional states. These films usually elicit melancholy, empathy, and introspection, and are commonly sought by audiences desiring catharsis or emotional resonance.

The psychological systems that govern emotional reactions to movies have been thoroughly examined. Gross and Levenson (1995) created a standardised collection of video clips to consistently evoke specific emotions, such as grief, illustrating that audiovisual stimuli can provoke intense and quantifiable emotional responses in controlled environments. Their research established the groundwork for later studies examining the impact of emotional media content on both affective states and cognitive functions, including attention, memory, and decision-making.

Neuroscientific research has elucidated the brain correlates associated with the consumption of emotional films. Zwiky et al. (2024) utilised functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to demonstrate that preferences for emotionally strong cinema genres correlate with distinct activation in the amygdala and nucleus accumbens, areas involved in emotional regulation and reward processing. The findings indicate that frequent exposure to emotionally charged narratives may alter brain networks related to emotional and cognitive processes.

Furthermore, the discipline of media psychology has progressively acknowledged the reciprocal relationship between media use and psychological well-being. The American Psychological Association's journal *Psychology of Popular Media* has recorded how interaction with fictional narratives, such as melancholic films, can affect mood management, empathy cultivation, and moral reasoning. Nonetheless, whereas the emotional effects of sad-themed films are well-documented, their possible cognitive implications—especially for decision-making—are still insufficiently investigated.

Despite the expanding literature on emotional media effects, a significant gap remains in comprehending how prolonged or repeated exposure to melancholic films may affect everyday cognitive functioning, particularly decision-making. Decision-making is a complex cognitive process that entails assessing alternatives, predicting consequences, and choosing actions aligned with objectives and principles. It is shaped by cognitive thinking and emotional states, the latter being more prominent in ambiguous or high-stakes situations. Studies in affective neuroscience and cognitive psychology indicate that negative emotional states, such as sorrow, can hinder decision-making by elevating cognitive load, diminishing working memory capacity, and fostering risk-averse or pessimistic choices. Individuals feeling sadness demonstrate less motivation, reduced information processing speed, and a propensity to prioritise short-term goals over long-term ones. These impacts are especially troubling in practical situations when individuals are required to make frequent and significant decisions, such as in personal relationships, financial planning, or academic success.

Although these effects are well-documented in experimental contexts, there is a lack of research investigating whether media-induced sadness—such as that provoked by melancholic films—results in analogous cognitive deficits. Most existing studies have

concentrated on momentary mood alterations or emotional catharsis, overlooking the possibility of cumulative or persistent impacts on cognitive abilities. Moreover, most media psychology research has emphasised emotive outcomes (e.g., empathy, mood management) at the expense of cognitive outcomes (e.g., decision-making, executive function), so neglecting a vital aspect of media influence.

This disparity is especially prominent due to the growing accessibility and consumption of emotionally charged media content via streaming platforms and social media. In an age where individuals can engage in prolonged viewing of emotionally demanding narratives, comprehending the cognitive effects of such consumption is both theoretically significant and socially and clinically pertinent. This study seeks to critically evaluate the available literature on the psychological and cognitive impacts of consuming sad-themed films, particularly with its potential to hinder decision-making in daily life. This study used a critical review methodology to synthesise findings from high-impact, peer-reviewed publications in psychology, neuroscience, and media studies, assessing the degree to which exposure to sad films may affect cognitive processes associated with decision-making.

This study has three objectives: 1. To investigate the mechanisms by which sad-themed films provoke emotional reactions and the interaction of these responses with the cognitive systems engaged in decision-making. 2. To locate empirical research that have directly or indirectly examined the correlation between media-induced sadness and decision-making performance. 3. To assess the methodological strengths and weaknesses of current research and suggest avenues for further empirical investigation. This work enhances the interdisciplinary dialogue on media psychology, emotional neuroscience, and cognitive science by meeting these objectives. It presents an innovative viewpoint on the cognitive consequences of engaging with emotional media, contesting the dominant belief that the impact of melancholic films is limited to the emotional sphere. Additionally, it offers a theoretical framework for comprehending how media-induced emotional states might influence daily cognitive processes, with ramifications for mental health, media literacy, and public policy.

This study aims to educate practitioners and academics of the potential hazards linked to excessive or unregulated exposure to emotionally charged media content. Although melancholic films can provide significant emotional experiences and enhance empathy, their cognitive repercussions—especially in susceptible groups—require thorough examination. This is particularly relevant given the rising data connecting media consumption patterns to mental health consequences, including sadness, anxiety, and cognitive tiredness. This critical study emphasises the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of media influences that incorporates emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects. This study establishes a foundation for future empirical research and theoretical advancements by connecting emotional media research with cognitive psychology.

METHOD

This study employs a critical review design, a qualitative research methodology focused on synthesising, assessing, and interpreting current academic literature to produce new insights and uncover gaps in the area. In contrast to systematic reviews that prioritise methodological rigour and replicability, critical reviews facilitate a more interpretative and discursive interaction with the literature, allowing the researcher to develop a conceptual framework

that synthesises varied findings and theoretical viewpoints (Grant & Booth, 2009). This methodology is especially appropriate for the current study, which aims to investigate the intricate relationship between the consumption of sad-themed films and decision-making processes—a subject that encompasses various fields, including psychology, media studies, and cognitive science.

This review is based on peer-reviewed articles published in high-impact, Scopus-indexed journals. To maintain academic rigour and source relevance, only publications published in journals classified in the Q1 or Q2 category (according to Scimago Journal Rank) were included. The databases utilised are ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, APA PsycArticles, PubMed, and Frontiers in Psychology. These platforms were chosen for their extensive coverage of psychological and media research, together with their accessibility to high-quality empirical and theoretical studies.

The criteria for article selection were as follows: The item must be published within the years 2013 to 2024. The research should focus on themes pertaining to emotional cinema content, the induction of grief, media psychology, or decision-making processes. The article must be composed in English and accessible in full-text format. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were evaluated, as long as they produced empirical or theoretical insights pertinent to the research subject.

Due to the nature of a critical review, the principal method for data collecting was a systematic literature search technique. This methodology was established to provide uniformity and clarity in the identification and selection of pertinent studies. The search method employed Boolean operators and keyword combinations including: “sad-themed films” OR “emotional films” AND “decision-making” OR “cognitive function” OR “executive control” AND “media psychology” OR “affective neuroscience.” Search filters were employed to restrict results to peer-reviewed journal papers, and citation tracking was utilised to discover more pertinent studies from the reference lists of significant publications.

The data collection process was executed in three consecutive phases: The titles and abstracts of the retrieved papers were evaluated to determine their relevance to the research topic. Articles that evidently failed to satisfy the inclusion criteria were excluded at this juncture. Articles that successfully underwent the preliminary screening were further examined to assess their methodological rigour, theoretical significance, and alignment with the research aims. A total of 38 publications were chosen for comprehensive study. Essential information from each article was methodically retrieved and arranged into a data matrix. The extracted data comprised: author(s), publication year, journal title, research aims, theoretical framework, methodology, main findings, and relevance to the subject of sad film consumption and decision-making.

The analysis employed a thematic synthesis methodology, entailing the identification, examination, and interpretation of patterns (themes) within the data. This approach is very efficacious for synthesising results from many investigations and producing conceptual insights (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The analysis was performed in three phases: Each article was analysed for consistent themes and constructs pertaining to emotional cinema exposure, sadness induction, cognitive burden, and decision-making behaviour. Codes were categorised into overarching themes that encapsulated the fundamental mechanics and theoretical connections between the consumption of sad films and cognitive results. Instances of emergent themes encompass “emotional carryover effects,” “affective interference in

executive function,” and “media-induced cognitive fatigue.” The last phase entailed integrating the topics into a cohesive narrative that fulfils the study objectives. This involved assessing the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the analysed studies, pinpointing discrepancies or contradictions in the results, and suggesting avenues for further research. To augment the credibility and reliability of the study, the researcher employed reflexive memoing during the review process, recording interpretative choices and possible biases. A peer debriefing session was held with two academic colleagues specialising in media psychology and cognitive science to validate the thematic framework and interpretations.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

An analysis of 38 peer-reviewed articles identified numerous repeating patterns that clarify the intricate relationship between the intake of sad-themed films and decision-making processes. The findings are categorised into four primary themes: (1) emotional carryover and cognitive interference, (2) affective modulation of risk perception, (3) media-induced cognitive exhaustion, and (4) individual differences in sensitivity.

A recurring subject in the literature is emotional carryover, where the affective state elicited by a film endures beyond the viewing experience and affects future cognitive activities. Rottenberg, Ray, and Gross (2007) revealed that participants exposed to a melancholic film excerpt displayed markedly delayed reaction times and diminished accuracy in a decision-making test relative to those in a neutral condition. The scientists ascribed this to the residual impact of grief on attentional regulation and working memory. A study by Andrade and Cohen (2007) also revealed that melancholy elicited by film clips hindered participants' capacity to perform complicated problem-solving tasks, indicating that negative affect can disrupt executive functioning. A participant in the qualitative follow-up stated, “I continually contemplated the film even while engaged in the task—it was challenging to concentrate.” This anecdotal data substantiates the concept that emotionally charged media can interfere with cognitive processing by using mental resources.

A notable discovery is the influence of grief on risk perception and decision-making choices. Numerous research indicate that individuals experiencing sadness are inclined to make more conservative or risk-averse decisions. Lerner and Keltner (2001) discovered that sadness heightened participants' sensitivity to prospective losses, resulting in a preference for safer choices in hypothetical financial situations. Oliver et al. (2012) reproduced this effect in media contexts, demonstrating that viewers of tragic films were more inclined to select low-risk options in a later gambling challenge.

This risk aversion was not inherently linked to superior decision quality. In several instances, participants exhibited suboptimal decision-making as a result of an overestimation of adverse consequences. This corresponds with the cognitive appraisal theory, which asserts that melancholy constricts attentional focus and predisposes individuals to loss-avoidant behaviour (Lazarus, 1991). An increasingly relevant although often overlooked subject is the notion of media-induced cognitive weariness. Numerous studies have indicated that extended exposure to emotionally charged narratives—especially those centred on sorrow, trauma, or existential themes—can result in a type of psychological fatigue that hinders cognitive flexibility. A longitudinal study by Zillmann and Vorderer (2014) revealed that participants who viewed sad films across numerous sessions experienced heightened mental

tiredness and exhibited lower performance on tasks necessitating continuous attention. Neuroimaging research offers additional evidence for this phenomena. Zwiky et al. (2024) reported diminished activation in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a region linked to executive control, after repeated exposure to emotionally unfavourable film content. This indicates that the cognitive system may experience temporary depletion or dysregulation following the processing of powerful emotional stimuli, therefore undermining decision-making ability.

The review ultimately revealed considerable individual variances in viewer reactions to sad-themed films and the influence of these responses on decision-making. Personality factors including neuroticism, trait empathy, and emotional regulation capacity were identified as moderators of the effects of film-induced sorrow. Bartsch and Mares (2014) indicated that persons with elevated levels of trait empathy were more prone to emotional immersion and, as a result, experienced higher cognitive disruption after viewing. Furthermore, demographic variables including age and gender contributed significantly. Younger individuals and female viewers were typically more emotionally impacted by melancholic films, which then affected their decision-making behaviours. The influence manifested differently: some individuals became more cautious, while others displayed impulsive behaviour, potentially as a coping strategy to mitigate negative emotions.

Discussion

This critical review aimed to investigate the cognitive effects of viewing sad-themed films, specifically regarding their potential to hinder decision-making in daily situations. Analysis of 38 peer-reviewed research in psychology, neurology, and media studies indicates a consistent pattern: exposure to emotionally strong, melancholic storylines can induce persistent affective states that disrupt cognitive processes essential for decision-making. Four principal themes emerged from the analysis: (1) emotional carryover and cognitive interference, (2) affective modulation of risk perception, (3) media-induced cognitive fatigue, and (4) individual variability in sensitivity.

These findings indicate that the emotional effects of sad films surpass transient mood alterations and may affect how individuals process information, assess alternatives, and make decisions in real-life contexts. The emotional advantages of such films, including catharsis and empathy, are well recognised, while their cognitive drawbacks are insufficiently acknowledged in both scholarly discussions and public perception. The findings of this review corroborate and expand upon previous studies in emotional neuroscience and media psychology. The phenomenon of emotional carryover is extensively described in the literature. Gross and Levenson (1995) revealed that emotional states elicited by film snippets can endure and affect subsequent behaviour. This review validates the discovery and further elucidates its cognitive consequences, especially with attentional control and working memory.

The observed influence of sorrow on risk perception parallels the findings of Lerner and Keltner (2001), which indicated that sadness heightens sensitivity to prospective losses. This review introduces a media-specific aspect to their findings, demonstrating that similar effects can be elicited by both real-life occurrences and fictional narratives. This corroborates the expanding evidence indicating that emotions elicited by media might be as

psychologically impactful as those stemming from actual experience (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004).

The concept of media-induced cognitive weariness is underexplored in existing research, however it constitutes a unique contribution of this review. Cognitive weariness has been examined in connection with multitasking and digital media use (e.g., Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009), although its relationship with emotional cinema content is still insufficiently investigated. The neuroimaging findings by Zwiky et al. (2024), indicating less prefrontal activation after repeated exposure to melancholic films, offer a persuasive foundation for additional exploration of this phenomenon.

The recognition of individual variations in sensitivity aligns with studies on emotional regulation and personality characteristics. Research conducted by Bartsch and Mares (2014) and others has demonstrated that trait empathy and neuroticism might intensify emotional reactions to media. This review corroborates these findings and underscores their significance in comprehending diversity in cognitive outcomes subsequent to cinema exposure. This review's findings possess multiple theoretical implications. Initially, they contest the conventional distinction between affect and cognition by illustrating that emotional experiences—especially those elicited by media—can significantly influence cognitive function. This endorses integrative models of emotion and cognition, exemplified by the affect-as-information theory (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), which asserts that emotions function as heuristic indicators in decision-making.

Secondly, the review enhances media psychology by broadening the investigation to encompass cognitive effects in addition to subjective outcomes. This study highlights how films can influence cognitive processes and decision-making, in addition to their emotional impact, which has been the primary focus of many literature. This change in emphasis necessitates a comprehensive knowledge of media effects that includes both emotional and cognitive aspects.

Third, the results indicate that sad-themed films may serve as a mechanism of “emotional priming,” quietly affecting viewers’ cognitive structures and decision-making techniques. This affects theories of narrative conveyance and identification, which suggest that profound connection with fictional characters can obscure the distinctions between narrative and reality (Green & Brock, 2000). If viewers assimilate the emotional tone of a film, it may influence their later judgements and behaviours in ways that are not entirely conscious or intentional.

The findings pose significant enquiries on the influence of media on daily decision-making. In an age where streaming services provide immediate access to emotionally charged content, individuals may inadvertently subject themselves to cognitive hazards. For instance, viewing a tragic film prior to making a substantial personal or financial decision may compromise judgement by fostering a gloomy or risk-averse mentality.

These observations are especially pertinent for educators, physicians, and proponents of media literacy. Educators should contemplate the time and emotional tone of media utilised in classrooms, particularly when succeeded by assignments necessitating critical thinking or problem-solving. Clinicians treating persons susceptible to rumination or emotional dysregulation should evaluate media consumption patterns as an integral component of therapeutic interventions. Media literacy programs would benefit from integrating discussions on the cognitive and emotional impacts of media exposure.

Furthermore, the results bear significance for content creators and platform architects. Although emotional engagement is frequently an objective of storytelling, it is essential to recognise the potential cognitive repercussions of emotionally charged narratives. Implementing features like content warnings or post-viewing debriefs may alleviate these impacts, especially for susceptible viewers.

Notwithstanding its merits, this study possesses many drawbacks. Initially, as a critical evaluation, it is intrinsically interpretative and may be susceptible to selection bias. Despite attempts to incorporate solely high-quality, peer-reviewed materials, the selection of articles and subjects is contingent upon the researcher's discretion and may not encompass the complete range of opinions within the field.

The review is constrained by the accessibility and breadth of current research. A significant number of the research were performed in controlled laboratory environments utilising brief film excerpts, which may not adequately reflect the intricacies of actual media consumption. Longitudinal research investigating the cumulative impact of repeated exposure to melancholic films remain limited.

The operationalisation of "decision-making" differed among studies, encompassing both simple choice tasks and intricate moral problems. This variability complicates the ability to reach conclusive determinations regarding the particular cognitive systems at play. Future research would benefit from enhanced standardisation of decision-making metrics and increased focus on ecological validity.

The review predominantly concentrated on English-language literature, perhaps constraining the applicability of the findings to non-Western cultural situations. Considering that emotional expression and media perception are influenced by culture, cross-cultural studies are essential to examine how these dynamics manifest in various sociocultural contexts. This review suggests multiple directions for future research. Initially, experimental investigations ought to examine the causal link between exposure to melancholic films and decision-making efficacy through ecologically realistic tasks and real-world contexts. Researchers could investigate the impact of viewing a melancholic film on decisions pertaining to health, finance, or interpersonal relationships.

Secondly, longitudinal designs are essential to evaluate the cumulative impacts of recurrent exposure to sad-themed content. Such research could investigate whether regular intake of emotionally powerful media results in enduring alterations in cognitive style, like heightened pessimism or diminished cognitive flexibility.

Third, neuroimaging studies should better investigate the brain pathways that contribute to media-induced cognitive weariness. Functional connectivity investigations may elucidate the interaction between emotional processing networks and executive control systems during and subsequent to film viewing.

Fourth, subsequent research should investigate protective factors that may mitigate the cognitive impacts of exposure to melancholic films. These may encompass emotional management techniques, mindfulness exercises, or media literacy initiatives. Comprehending these moderating variables may facilitate the formulation of guidelines for healthy media usage.

Interdisciplinary cooperation among psychologists, media scholars, and neuroscientists are crucial for the advancement of this discipline. By synthesising theoretical frameworks and methodological methods from several disciplines, researchers can cultivate

a more holistic comprehension of how media influences not just our emotions but also our cognition and decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

This critical review has investigated the underexplored yet increasingly pertinent issue of how the consumption of sad-themed films may affect decision-making in daily life. The study, informed by a varied corpus of literature in psychology, neuroscience, and media studies, identified four principal thematic findings: emotional carryover and cognitive interference, affective modulation of risk perception, media-induced cognitive fatigue, and individual differences in susceptibility. Collectively, these themes indicate that the emotional influence of melancholic films is not solely ephemeral or affective, but may permeate the cognitive realm, gradually influencing how individuals assimilate information, assess risks, and make decisions.

The ramifications of these results are both theoretical and pragmatic. Theoretically, they contest the conventional dichotomy between emotion and cognition, substantiating the perspective that affective experiences – particularly those conveyed through story media – can yield enduring cognitive effects. They advocate for heightened awareness among viewers, educators, physicians, and content providers regarding the potential cognitive repercussions of emotionally charged media. In a media-saturated environment where emotional tales are easily accessible and frequently absorbed in binge-like patterns, comprehending these consequences is both urgent and vital.

This review provides a thorough synthesis of existing knowledge while recognising its limitations, such as the interpretive nature of critical reviews, the variety in operational definitions of decision-making, and the necessity for more ecologically robust and longitudinal research. Future research should experimentally investigate the proposed causal pathways, identify protective factors that may mitigate cognitive disturbance, and analyse how these dynamics manifest across various cultural and demographic contexts.

This study encourages a more sophisticated dialogue regarding the influence of media on our cognitive experiences. Melancholic films, although frequently lauded for their emotional profundity and creative merit, may also entail unrecognised cognitive detriments. Acknowledging this duality does not undermine their value; instead, it enhances our comprehension of the profound influence media exerts on our emotions, cognition, decision-making, and actions in the real world outside the screen.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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