*International Journal of Cultural Studies*
1–21

DOI: 10.1177/13678779251337761
journals.sagepub.com/home/ics

*Original Article*

# Smarter, better, faster, kinder? The problems with claiming that media and popular culture has positive effects

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## Abstract

For much of its history, popular culture has been seen as a threat to audiences. This paper identifies a parallel but powerful discourse that runs counter to these narratives: that popular culture is beneficial and makes us 'smarter', 'better', 'faster' or 'kinder'. While media and cultural studies have robustly criticized 'negative' media effects, they've been slower to address 'positive' effects. This paper corrects that oversight by examining the politics of these discourses in the online press. Through a thematic analysis of 111 articles, the paper suggests positive effects can be critiqued using the criteria of simplicity, morality and ideology. 'Positive' claims about popular cultural consumption may seem appealing, but they oversimplify complex scientific research and social phenomena, moralize cultural consumption, and uphold ideological norms. Such discourses perpetuate troubling common senses about 'good' and 'bad' audiences that align with existing systems of power.

## Keywords

media effects, media audiences, media psychology, fan studies, cultural sociology, neoliberalism

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## Introduction

Popular culture's history is filled with examples of cultural forms seen as moral threats. Throughout the twentieth century, pop music, television, cinema, comics, and video games were accused of brainwashing audiences while encouraging laziness, delinquency, and violence (Butsch, 2008). This paper identifies a parallel but powerful discourse that runs counter to these narratives: popular culture is beneficial and makes us 'smarter,' 'better,' 'faster,' or 'kinder' (among other things). These ideas circulate in a knotty discursive environment, from government policy to corporate social responsibility statements to funded academic research, but are most potently expressed in the online popular press. Here, vague 'scientific' findings about the 'positive' effects of media meet search engine optimization strategies, advertorials, and declining standards of science reporting.

While media and cultural studies have historically been vigilant in debates about 'negative' effects, they have been slower to address 'positive' effects. In some cases, media and cultural studies have been the *source* of 'positive' effects claims. This article aims to address that oversight by focusing on the popular press and by contextualizing and analyzing the claims being made there. I begin by outlining the history of 'effects' research in the academy, including its 'prosocial' history, focusing on classic criticisms of 'media effects' research developed by cultural studies: simplicity, morality, and ideology. After cataloguing and thematically analyzing 111 online articles, I argue that criticisms of 'positive' effects can be critiqued using the same criteria. While 'positive' claims about culture may seem appealing, they oversimplify complex scientific research and social phenomena, moralize cultural consumption, and uphold ideological norms. Such discourses, I conclude, perpetuate troubling common senses about 'good' and 'bad' audiences that align with existing systems of power.

## Ill effects to skill effects

There is a pernicious long-standing tradition of social and political anxiety about the degrading and harmful influences of media and popular culture. Examples of historical newspaper headlines:

> Lure of "the Movies" Makes Thieves of Many. (Sheldon, 1913)
>
> Bad Comic Books Are Very Bad. (Washington Post, 1954)
>
> Boob Tube Brain Drain? (Oldenburg, 1992)
>
> How Computer Nasties Can Turn Children to Crime? (Poulter, 2000: 2)

Although these claims may now seem absurd, they were once taken seriously by moral entrepreneurs, and such claims echo across a wide range of media, forms, platforms, and genres. While these headlines offer only a snapshot, they illustrate common concerns about the potential 'negative' influence media and popular culture might have on

individuals, clustering around things like violence, crime, delinquency, sex and sexuality, drugs, depression and mental health, and eating disorders (see Butsch, 2008; Springhall, 1999). Tabloid articles offer the most potent expression of these anxieties, but operate as lightning rods for knotty discursive environments that incorporate academic paradigms, commercial and academic research, police and court reports, local and national government policy, and 'common senses' (Barker and Petley, 2001). Through studying *newspapers*, we gain access to that broader arena of struggle about the politics of popular culture and their imagined audiences (Hall et al., 1978).

Struggle is the right word. The influence of mass media has been one of *the* urgent public debates over the last century, underpinning everything from broadcasting policy to censorship trials. In academia, debates have generated as much heat as light, and, as Denis McQuail dryly notes, while 'the entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that there are effects from the media […] it seems to be the issue on which there is least certainty and least agreement' (1987: 251). Although the question of 'effects' was the key paradigm of early communication studies, its failure to demonstrate a causal relationship between the media, individual behaviour, and long-term social change has, since the 1970s, splintered the discipline into two distinct branches: media psychology and cultural studies (Lang, 2013). The expansion of digital media into all facets of society has unsurprisingly not produced greater consensus, and those two disciplines seem to now operate in parallel fields (Livingstone, 2007).

Scholars in cultural studies traditions instinctively distrust the type of 'media effects' research aligned with media psychology, fairly and unfairly (Livingstone, 2007). Cultural studies, moreover, has been scathing of the nature of public debates about 'media effects', and how highly compromised evidence, scientific or otherwise, is leveraged (Barker and Petley, 2001). As a response, there is a rich tradition of 'media effects' critics countering moral panics in the arenas in which they are generated, including in the academy, government, and the popular press itself (see Barker and Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 2005). One of media and cultural studies' great successes has been confronting narrow 'effects' claims with robust, well-rehearsed counterarguments, albeit ones not always responded to by 'effects' researchers (Livingstone, 2007). These counterarguments have been built with three critical pillars.

Firstly, such claims are simplistic. They refuse to grant agency to the 'mass' that the claimer would insist for themselves. They swap real people in their everyday contexts, with their contradictions and distractions, for audience 'figures' and naïve 'cultural dupes' (Barker and Austin, 2000). Their methods are seriously flawed, drawing on small samples in experimental settings that blow up statistically noisy data into overblown claims (Gauntlett, 2005). And the theories developed to help explain the mechanism of effect are likewise seriously flawed or non-existent, hence widespread discussion in culturalist audience research of the apocryphal 'hypodermic needle' metaphor (Lubken, 2008).

Secondly, such claims are rooted in morality. They view media as corrupting forces, making sweeping judgements about behaviour and taste, and in doing so morally regulate intensive hierarchies about 'good' and 'bad' behaviours that more accurately map onto contingent cultural distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984; Halewood, 2023; Hunt, 1999). Such distinctions unfairly discriminate against the cultural

expressions of the young, the working class, those not racialized as white, women, and queer people (and intersections thereof), misreading taste differences through the lens of morality and disgust, shame and guilt (Alasuutari, 1996; Skeggs, 2005). Such people are at once positioned as *corruptible* and in need of paternal protection and a *corrupting* force to be protected from.

Thirdly, such claims are ideological. They reproduce simplistic but alluring ideologically conservative narratives about family values, work and leisure, and personal responsibility that distract from conversations about complex social processes, policy, or structural inequalities (Barker and Petley, 2001; Egan, 2007). As above, it provides a screen for the ideological and real policing of sexualities, minorities, behaviours, and tastes that fall afoul of dominant conservative values (Hall et al., 1978). And for legitimate social problems, they provide easy targets for blame or policy intervention – 'ban this sick filth' – that are cheap and/or easy to institute but fail to address more complex wider social tensions or problems and potential causes (Gauntlett, 2005).

Cultural studies have drawn on humanities and social science theories and methods that locate media influence (rather than direct 'effect') in a tangled web of ideological relations. The discipline's self-narrative is one where media consumers are taken seriously, capturing the complexities of everyday mediated and cultural experiences; where polysemic texts belong to complex global systems of industrial, economic, technological, and cultural reproduction; and where media exists in a matrix of social relations where multifaceted social issues have multifaceted causes. Audience and user engagement is active and participatory, usually focusing on pleasure, identity, and community. While concerns about 'negative' media effects frustratingly persist in the wider culture and research, the tools to challenge these claims are well-established.

Intersecting with the history of 'negative' effects are discourses interested in the *positive* influence of culture. Certainly, cultural hierarchies have long operated on the belief that certain cultural forms hold higher moral and social value precisely because they can improve (Levine, 1990). During the twin forces of industrialism and colonialism, 'improvement' predominantly linked leisure with labour: a 'leisure ethic', emphasizing physical health, education, and structured activities over unstructured traditions, mirrored the industrial 'work ethic' (Clarke and Critcher, 1985). Popular cultures were 'morally regulated' (Hunt, 1999) into 'rational recreations' (Bailey, 1978) and 'productive leisure' (Gelber, 1999) or adapted within a nascent commercial culture, balancing transgressive spectacles with productive leisure's logics through (self-)regulation. Popular cultural consumption was tolerated, but often contrasted with 'rational' past times. Twentieth-century mass media, particularly public service broadcasting logics, arose from this rational recreational framework, in addition to shaping things like museums and arts councils (Ouellette and Lewis, 2000).

Nestled among that already complex terrain were pockets of debates about the potential for 'low' mediated culture to have 'positive' or 'prosocial' effects on individual consumers (Gauntlett, 2005). If mass media had the power to passively *corrupt* its audiences, why not passively *improve* its audience? The history of this tradition is yet to be written, but the contours can be seen from early educational experiments in mediated subliminal messaging (Acland, 2011) to representations of gamers as 'geniuses' in 1980s family movies. As Neil Narine and Sara Grimes describe about representations of the latter,

'young gamers are either idle, delinquent, and/or violent, or ingenious, naturally adept cyberchildren with bright futures in the Information Economy' (2009: 321). Such discourses have not supplanted debates about crime, violence, and delinquency, but point towards a discursive binary of 'positive' and 'negative' effects.

As with their 'negative' counterparts, 'positive' claims emerge from knotty intersections of the popular press, academic and commercial research, government policy, and 'common senses.' In the academy, early interventions by Patricia Marks Greenfield attempted to counter the predominance of 'negative' discourses by arguing that 'television and the newer electronic media, if used wisely, have great positive potential for learning and development' (1984: 2). Such claims have since blossomed and expanded beyond the 'prosocial' research initially identified by Livingstone (1996) and Gauntlett (2005). Since the 1980s, 'positive' effects discourses have been scattered across several related subfields, coalescing into several coherent bodies of literature, mutually reinforcing policy and popular attitudes to mediated popular cultures.

Media psychology, influenced by positive psychology (Peterson, 2006), frequently explores how media fosters well-being, happiness, and personal growth (Reinecke and Oliver, 2017). 'Positive media psychology' (Raney et al., 2019) has been particularly interested in entertainment (Vorderer and Reinecke, 2015), represented in the growth of journals like *Psychology of Popular Media* (2011–). Positive media psychology has significantly influenced policy and design approaches in Silicon Valley around 'positive computing' (Calvo and Peters, 2014). Cultural sociology has reframed culture within the metrics of productivity, health, and well-being, termed the 'instrumentalization of culture' (Belfiore, 2012; Brook et al., 2020). Such claims have significance in local, national, and international arts and culture policy and have been advocated by policymakers, governments, and NGOs (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). Taking its cues from cultural studies and feminist research that stressed the pleasure and resistance of media texts in audience's everyday lives, fan studies has shifted the debate from one that pathologized fans to one that celebrates them as creative and productive (Fiske, 1992), with 'participatory cultures' fostering skills transferable to work (Jenkins, 2009: 3). Such arguments have significant impact in debates around education and media literacy, and have been incorporated into Hollywood corporate social responsibility statements (Wood et al., 2020). To be clear: there is exciting and nuanced scholarship across all the fields and subfields (see Sullivan, 2019) and there is poor and undercooked scholarship there, too.

As with earlier conjunctures, though, 'positive' effects discourses are most vivid in popular reporting, and studying these gives access to broader struggles about the value and meaning of popular culture. Steven Johnson's influential pop-sci book, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter,* exemplifies how *some* of this research, and the broader discursive shift, has been expressed to the public (2005). He argues that the complexity of video games and 'quality' television acts as a form of 'positive brainwashing' (2005: xiii). Johnson is evangelical, but the book has served as a weathervane for related claims across the digital popular press. Noticing trends about 'binge watching,' De Keere et al.'s (2021) discourse analysis of newspapers found significant attempts to reframe television consumption from morally problematic to something of quality, psychologically valuable, and,

under the right circumstances, beneficial. Binge watching is just the tip of the iceberg, though. Variations of 'is good for you' are a common headline:

Watching Television Can Be Good for You, Says Science. (Epstein, 2012)

Playing Violent Video Games Makes You a Better Person. (Zawacki, 2014)

7 Scientific Reasons Watching Movies Is Good for Your Mental Health. (Thomas, 2021)

6 Reasons Why Your Porn Habit Might Actually Be Good for You. (Shackleton, 2015)

Why Reading Comics Makes You Smarter. (Riggs, 2016)

For references, see Appendix A[1]

Countering moral panics about popular culture remains a pillar of cultural studies, quickly deployed to counter new case studies ('screen time,' 'social media addiction'), but the discipline has been slower to challenge 'positive' discourses with the same rigor. As Sonia Livingstone identified in 1996 about small amounts of 'prosocial' research, 'the results … are far less controversial, although the same methodological problems apply' (308; see also Gauntlett, 2005). The reasons for this are complex. Identifying and pushing back against moral panics is harder than identifying moral celebrations, and critiquing something framed as 'beneficial' or 'good' is politically tricky (Mould, 2018). Claims of 'positive' effects, moreover, have been used as a counterweight to overwrought debates about 'negative' effects (a rhetorical move regularly used in much of the literature discussed).

Reasons for these celebrations run deeper. In a university system reshaped by neoliberalism, 'positive' effects research aligns research and teaching with commercial values and a need to justify arts and humanities disciplines as economic or social goods and producers of future knowledge workers (Mirza, 2006). Media studies, vulnerable to attack from global reactionary forces (Bennett and Kidd, 2017), has joined other disciplines in appropriating and producing these discourses to temper such criticisms. This has achieved short-term successes in challenging moral fears about media and shored up limited career security for its proponents but risks reproducing the same problematic debates that have circulated around 'negative' effects research for a century.

To understand these discourses more thoroughly, to see the precise claims that are being made, and to try and untangle some of the knotty intersections I have laid out here, I now turn to examining the articles underneath these headlines.

## Positive effects in the popular press

The discursive environment of 'media effects' debates has always been shaped by complex interactions between academia, governments, charities, NGOs, and the popular press (Barker and Petley, 2001). Historically, media effects research responds to public concerns articulated in the press, influencing research priorities and funding.

Simultaneously, the popular press uses research, often of questionable quality, to serve a moral regulatory agenda regarding culture and audiences. Cultural studies have long found fertile ground in capturing social debates about popular culture in studying such artefacts (Barker and Petley, 2001).

The discourse surrounding 'positive' media effects is no different, but changes in how journalistic content is produced, disseminated, and consumed complicate attempts to capture a coherent snapshot of these debates. I sought to collect and catalogue a broad representation of 'traditional' newspapers, but initial explorations of newspaper databases failed to capture the diversity of claims that I had noticed being shared on social media and Google. Bluntly, the popular press extends well beyond traditional magazine and newspaper sources to blogs, newsletters, and commercial website news sections. This reflects broader challenges in science communication and the role of digital platforms, particularly Google and social media, in shaping information ecosystems.

Instead, I piloted a search engine branching technique, a purposive sampling method that explores pathways and branches offered to users while simultaneously capturing a broader range of 'news' texts. Inspired by Johnson (2005), I began with searches like 'television is good for you' and 'television makes you smarter' and catalogued articles from the first three pages of Google results that made obvious claims about 'positive' effects. I expanded the search by clicking links in the 'people also ask' section (e.g. 'What are the 5 advantages of television?') and replicated the process for genres like pop music, video games, comics, and anime. When I reached saturation and repetition of claims I stopped. This generated a dataset of 111 articles and blogs.

Search engine branching sampling is inherently shaped by factors like geo-location, my search history, Google's algorithms, language settings, and snowballing search terms (Ørmen, 2016), so my data 'self' is present in ways difficult to be precise about. As the research took place in northern England, articles returned were English language, and the vast majority, where it was possible to tell, were North American or British. All articles were published between 2011 (the earliest article that Google returned to me) and 2022 (when I undertook the research).

This sample was then thematically analyzed, a technique of analyzing qualitative data that 'involves the searching across a data set … to find repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86). I carefully read and manually coded the articles, generating 156 codes which I then collated into a 'codebook' of ten themes. These were: productivity; problem solving and skills; creativity; IQ & intelligence; empathy & emotional intelligence; community & connection; brains; hearts & health; stress; and wellbeing. These offer a starting point for thinking about the general claims made in 'positive' effects discourses. While I coded these themes taking an inductive or 'bottom up' approach, 'without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 83), some of these codes emerged in-part due to the algorithmic recommendations of Google (e.g. 'Are comics good for your brain?'). The sampling process shaped some of the themes that emerged, and the search process itself is a component of the data (Ørmen, 2016).

While the search engine branching technique does not provide a 'neutral' probability sample, it *does* mimic the way many users seek information for news or 'fact-checking' (Antunovic et al., 2018). It reproduces the flows of links and clicks that define online

information ecosystems and gives a picture of things people *might* see when they Google to find out if television is 'bad' or 'good'. And what people might discover is a disorienting and worrying experience (see Bradshaw, 2019): a patchwork of churnalism, peculiar assertions, contradictory evidence, and poorly written articles interspersed with advertisements and sponsored content. This is not an information ecosystem conducive to informed public debate.

That ecosystem is a product of multifaceted contexts. Intersecting crises in journalism have seen a decline in subscriptions and readership, declining trust, and the decimation of editorial teams. While journalists can be guilty of selectively using experts, oversimplifying findings, or lacking the training to interpret results accurately (Bucchi and Trench, 2021), it is also the case that dedicated science reporters have often been the first cuts made. Studies of nutritional or health reporting find advice conflicted, exaggerated, or scientifically inaccurate, often making causal claims when causal claims cannot be made (Cooper et al., 2012; Sumner et al., 2014; Swire-Thompson and Lazer, 2022; Vijaykumar et al., 2021). Values around 'novelty, controversy and personal interest' (Cooper et al., 2012: 665) shape what science stories are reported, meaning that seemingly counterintuitive claims (like media consumption being 'good for you') might be more likely to be picked up by reporters.

Universities are just as guilty of prioritizing promotion over accuracy and overstating findings from limited research (Sumner et al., 2014). Research has an ambivalent role in the sample. Many articles do not reference academic scholarship, but 'common sense' summaries of effects. Some articles opt for a vague reference to unnamed 'science'. Some articles are write-ups of university press releases, some interview researchers, and some directly reference journal articles (See Appendix B for the full list of sources captured). Where studies were named in articles, I followed-up and read these. More worryingly, several articles cite commercial research, such as a study commissioned by Vue Cinema which was more promotion than academic research, with findings never published in a peer-reviewed journal (Vue Cinema, 2019). Media and tech industries are invested in positive framings of their products, sometimes paying researchers to support these claims, and know that press releases saying as much will garner press coverage and/or be returned highly on Google.

Finally, the articles are shaped by the logics of social media affordances and/or search engine optimization strategies (SEOs). Google has curatorial power in making these kinds of articles highly visible (Haim et al., 2017), and news sites have been shaped by logics of social sharing. The data illuminates the intersection of Google's commercial goals and SEO strategies that promote 'news' articles operating outside traditional publishing frameworks. Among the 111 articles, 11 were advertorials or sponsored posts, including pieces promoting casinos or health apps, and five advertised paid essay mills. Listicles were notably prevalent, recycling anecdotes and 'factoids.' Towards the end of the coding process, I recognized unattributed claims repeated across lists, occasionally finding the 'source' for the first claim that has been repeated in later articles. This suggests that many of these articles had been published by journalists using Google themselves as the primary resource.

Though the quality of the articles varies, they contribute to a confusing but potent discursive environment. Just as 'negative' effect headlines were lightning rods, revealing

embedded hierarchies, tastes and ideologies that structured wider society, 'positive' effects reporting does the same. Given the extent to which these discourses have taken root in places in the creative industries, the way it continues to shape funding and policy-making, and the taken-for-granted nature of some of those ideas, we must apply the criticisms of simplicity, morality, and ideology to these positive effects claims.

## 'Science says': Simplistic

The articles are emblematic of a problematic tendency towards simplification, occurring on two levels: first, in the simplistic representation of 'science' and 'studies' within journalistic narratives, and second, in academic research that oversimplifies the complex relationship between audiences and popular culture. This section highlights the issues of simplification in popular articles and, where relevant, in the research these articles (mis)represent.

As noted, scholars in science communication have argued that methodological complexities and nuanced conclusions are often discarded in press releases, popular articles, or both. This tendency is evident here, where methods are rarely detailed, and small-scale or short-term findings are inflated into overblown claims. For instance, an article in the *Daily Mail* poses the question, 'Could listening to Miley Cyrus make you more INTELLIGENT?' This claim traces back to a Spotify-funded study suggesting 'pop songs with 50 to 80 beats per minute allow the brain to learn and remember new facts more easily' (Griffiths, 2013). The study itself is problematic: it lacks public accessibility, independent testing, and replication. Moreover, the study's narrow claim is translated into a causal headline. While a particularly guilty example, such oversimplifications were pervasive.

If the history of communication studies has been shaped by repeated failures to pinpoint precisely how media influences audience behaviour (Lang, 2013), this struggle is echoed in the popular reporting. Precise mechanisms for explaining how popular culture might benefit individuals are vague or unstated. 'Positive' effects are frequently assumed to occur passively, without conscious audience engagement, mirroring outdated and discredited theories of 'brainwashing' (as already discussed about Johnson, 2005). When attempts to explain these effects are made, they remain inconclusive, incomplete, or incorrect. Articles frequently generalize truisms into specific claims, apply findings from controlled settings to broad populations, venture into unresolved scientific territories such as cognition or IQ, or propose physiological explanations unsupported by medical expertise. For example:

> Research has found that listening to music can relieve stress by triggering biochemical stress reducers. (NorthShore, 2020)

> The more TV a woman watched, the lower her cortisol levels were – indicating that she had lower levels of stress. (Finnerty-Myers, 2016)

The idea that watching TV or listening to music is relaxing is not new. The oversimplified 'science' framing, however, represents this as a cause-and-effect relationship that

borders on tautology: relaxing activities relax you. These accounts ignore factors like audience preferences, cultural tastes, and social contexts, all crucial in shaping experiences of relaxation.

Articles extrapolate narrow findings to make broad claims about media's effects on mental health, emotional resilience, and well-being. Headlines suggest that films, music, and television regulate mood, promote 'emotional release' (Hampton, 2018) or maintain 'mental and emotional balance' (Perry, 2022). These themes often draw from research from cultural therapy, especially cinematherapy (e.g. BREO BOX, 2020). One article highlights how 'the ring in *Lord of the Rings* … has been used by recovering addicts to understand their struggle' (Jennings-Edquist, 2019). Cultural studies have long known that audiences use media in ways aligning with their life experiences, so it is not surprising that, when supervised and under the right conditions, this might be therapeutically beneficial. Nevertheless, the reframing of this quite narrow point as a universal description of the healing potential of cinema disregards the myriad other ways where films do not 'help us process difficult life lessons' (Jennings-Edquist, 2019).

Studies in the sample often rely on experimental or lab-based research, predominantly stemming from media psychology. Since the 1980s, media psychology has shifted from focusing on behaviour to cognition, emphasizing how individuals process media content (Valkenburg and Oliver, 2019; Vorderer et al., 2019). While this shift to cognition represents a positive development with promising new approaches, challenges remain. Research often depends on small, homogenous samples in artificial lab settings, which limits relevance to real-world media consumption (Gauntlett, 2005). One popular study in the sample examined 100 participants, dividing them into groups to assess television's influence on emotional intelligence. One group watched 'high-quality' fictional dramas (more on which shortly), while another watched nonfiction shows. Participants who viewed fictional content scored higher when identifying emotions from 36 pairs of isolated eyes (Fulton, 2015). Similar experimental studies using tools like smartwatches were scattered throughout the sample (Vue Cinema, 2019). As critics of the media violence effects debates stressed, many of these studies struggle to articulate any sort of social or long-term impacts, but one article claims television 'will help to reduce the level of racism and conflicts we still have in the world' (Cora, 2011).

The scientific study of brains, IQ, and intelligence has a complicated history, but here it is reduced to claims that certain cultural forms or genres could 'make you smarter' (Firefold, 2019; Griffiths, 2013; Pardiwalla, 2020; Riggs, 2016; Smith, 2017) or 'increase IQ' (JOE, 2012). Experimental science is simplified into 'hacks,' framing popular culture as mere 'exercise' for the brain, capable of growing or maintaining its parts. Complex discussions about brain chemicals, waves, and functions were presented in simplistic terms. For instance:

> Jazz also activates certain brain waves that lead to better brain function. The alpha wave promotes relaxation, whereas the delta wave allows you to get a better night's sleep. Theta waves […] work by encouraging creativity. (Stutler, 2018)

This approach reflects a 'scientistic' perspective (see De Ridder et al., 2018), where the language of science is co-opted to create an impression of deeper truths about listening to music or reading, truths supposedly inaccessible through other disciplines in the humanities or social sciences.

Popular cultural forms are claimed to generate transferable skills, from improved empathy to faster and more accurate decision-making (Adair, 2021; Ashkenaz, 2022; Barone, 2018; Firefold, 2019). Claims bordered on the absurd, such as 'porn makes you better at math' (Pulley, 2017) or rock music improving math and physics scores (Mosh, 2020). Again, specifics for how this might work are vague. For example, 'while watching movies, you are observing the situation and actions that the characters take. You learn how do they solve the problems, which can improve your way of thinking. This can help you in real life, especially in the decision-making process'. (Top 10 Films, 2018) Despite the research cited, claims are often overstated and contradictory. Neuroscientific debates on cognitive training effects remain, at best, inconclusive (Sala et al., 2018), and even in well-researched areas, like video games and cognition, there is little evidence of skills transferring across domains (Sala et al., 2018). Nonetheless, articles suggest that IQs can be raised, brains trained, and skills learned as easily as by consuming the 'right' texts. Such blanket assertions seem highly unlikely given the lack of robust evidence.

Similar, and worse, problems are found in discussions of physical health. Countering long-standing criticisms of 'couch potatoes,' there are strained attempts to couple media consumption with physical health. If research about journalistic representations of health point towards a mess of simple 'cures' and quick, individualized fixes then the reporting around popular culture and heath are more damning, and potentially dangerous:

> One 90-min movie with scary scenes can burn 100–200 calories. It is equal to a small chocolate bar. (Varrati, 2021)

> Recent studies show that music boosts the production of antibodies and natural killer cells that help combat bacteria, viruses, and cancerous cells. (Boissoneault, 2020)

Efforts to reframe popular cultural consumption in this manner, though flawed, reflect longstanding concerns of policymakers and arts practitioners. This has led to headlines like 'opera goers live longer!' (Immling Festival, 2024), suggesting opera not only correlates with longevity but causes it. As Mirza points out about these bodies of literature, claims that the 'arts are good for health' are 'so vague and inconsistent that they are at best just common sense, or at worst, misleading' (2006: 96). Likewise, Clift et al. question the notion that 'widening cultural engagement' can 'challenge the structural forces which generate social and health inequalities and inequities,' describing it as 'implausible' (2021: 454). The same problems carry over into related discussions about popular culture.

Articles present inconclusive, emergent, or controversial research on topics like learning, mental health, and physical health, often in a reductive way. Limited research is presented without evidence of long-term or societal impacts. Claims, such as watching pornography improving math skills or horror fans having healthier hearts, are implausible. Yet, for Google users seeking media consumption advice, these claims are presented as meaningful 'scientific' guidance.

## 'Proven to make you a better person': Morality

Articles are emblematic of a desire to reframe popular culture as a source of personal, social, and moral good. They do this by reassuring readers of popular culture's prosocial effects and by seeking to clarify and reposition those cultures on a deeply moralized cultural hierarchy. Recognizing these shifting terrains, articles often acknowledge these counterintuitive ideas. As one wryly stated, 'that's right, good for us' (Chatel, 2015).

Popular culture's repositioning emerges amid two historical shifts. Firstly, long-term changes in culture's moral regulation. In earlier eras, culture was regulated through centralized institutions like workplaces, churches, and charities. By the twentieth century, authority had diversified, requiring individuals to make ethical choices for their 'self-constitution' (Hunt, 1999: 3–4). While mass media became tolerated, audiences were tasked with monitoring their own cultural consumption. With the decline of traditional leisure organizers, navigating media choices grew complex, fuelling anxieties about consuming the 'wrong' culture (Alasuutari, 1996; Skeggs, 2005). Lifestyle experts emerged to guide these pressures, reinforcing distinctions in legitimacy and worth (Bourdieu, 1984). Modern culture now emphasizes 'self-formation' over didactic governance (Hunt, 1999). Secondly, because of the ongoing destabilization of cultural hierarchies (Purhonen et al., 2018), mass and popular media consumption is now a dominant leisure activity for *all* classes, fostering the rise of the 'cultural omnivore' who attains distinction through a breadth *and* depth of cultural consumption (Peterson & Kern, 1996).

Individuals, therefore, are expected to balance multifaceted cultural consumption while also developing competencies and dispositions suited to navigating a fragmented and saturated media environment (Conlin et al., 2016). Like earlier models of rational recreation, these adaptations demand ongoing moral interventions, yet they are more dispersed, reliant on the active engagement of self-governing subjects, and shift rapidly according to (micro)trends. These articles serve as important nodes in the shaping of these pressures, and work to reassure and reposition popular cultural consumption as 'good.'

Many articles insist that popular cultural consumption makes people kinder, more empathetic, and a better person:

> Movies inspire us to be better people. It can inspire you to make positive changes in your life, forgive someone, makeup with your loved one, volunteer somewhere, or anything that will improve your life. (BREO BOX, 2020)

In so doing, depictions of 'moral beauty … such as acts of charity, generosity and self-sacrifice' are lauded for their ability to 'influence good behavior and even increase empathy toward people who are different from us' (Almendrala, 2016). A wide variety of popular cultural forms are claimed to make people more empathetic, helpful, kinder, more generous and, at least according to a couple of articles, a better romantic and sexual partner (Chatel, 2015; Headspace, 2022).

For popular culture's newfound moral worth, this framing often reintroduces moralizing tendencies that seek to (re)construct cultural hierarchies from the crumbling bricks of old ones. Popular culture is repeatedly measured against 'respectable' cultural forms, and

many articles display a quiet anxiety that popular cultural texts should be seen in the same light as more traditionally uplifting forms of culture. For instance:

> If you listen to rock music constantly, you can definitely achieve positive effects. According to scientists, heavy music helps to improve brain activity [… and] can be compared to classical music that improves the quality of processes occurring in the brain. (Mosh, 2020)

Articles, likewise, are eager to pit different forms of popular culture against each other. Judgments about how best to spend time are implicit in the taste assumptions of some articles. Niche taste cultures are reinforced by niche publications (e.g. *Metal Hammer* promoting the benefits of metal music, Daly, 2022), while others pit one type of cultural consumption against another:

> Do you like watching movies with frightening scenes? If so, you're healthier than other people who like to spend their time watching popular TV shows. (Johns, 2020)

Even when attempting to dismantle traditional canons, articles frequently replicate older hierarchical structures, framing certain cultural practices as more virtuous than others. While these pieces assure readers that their leisure time is 'well spent', they also reinforce the notion that time must always be optimized, contributing to new anxieties and pressures. In an era of boundless entertainment but finite leisure, audiences must make difficult decisions: do the cognitive benefits of video games outweigh the emotional intelligence gains from television? Is the potential weight loss from horror films more valuable than the improved mathematics skills claimed for porn consumption?

Distinctions are maintained in other ways. Taste valuations are evident in discussions surrounding 'quality TV'. The linkage of popular culture to improved morality frequently underscores value-laden analyses of 'high-quality fiction' (Jacobs, 2015). *IndieWire* translated such research into an article titled '8 Shows Scientifically Proven to Make You a Better Person' (Travers, 2015). The list predictably includes critically well-regarded series like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The West Wing*. The TV shows and films most frequently championed by journalists, academics, and policymakers – predominantly white, middle-class, and Western – conveniently align with moral goodness. While negative effects of media consumption have historically been tied to the denigration of the tastes and habits of the Other, 'positive' effects often celebrate the preferences of dominant groups. Although the cultural politics of these narratives differ – 'negative' effects typically manifesting as moral panics and the political regulation, and 'positive' effects as the celebration of elite cultural texts – the underlying logic remains: culture serves as a proxy for the moral standing of its audiences.

In a similar vein, some articles adopt the *tone* of self-help literature (Ouellette and Hay, 2008) or productivity 'life hacks' (see Reagle, 2019), providing tips and tricks to optimize consumption. One article advised readers on how to get the most value out of their media consumption. 'If you're willing to pause your favorite show,' it prompted, 'and think deeply for a few minutes, I'll show you how all that extra TV can actually increase your emotional intelligence' (Murphy, 2021). Tips included mindfully paying attention

to a character's expressions and discussing the character's motivations (Alcala, 2020; Murphy, 2021).

Beyond the difficulty of providing suitable evidence for such claims, this coupling of cultural texts with moral goodness produces fraught narratives about 'correct' culture, echoing older notions of culture as a vessel for 'sweetness and light.' If certain cultural texts have the power to make us better people, it raises questions about non-audiences of those texts. The moralization of cultural consumption perpetuates ideas of distinction and virtue, pressurizing audiences to make 'right' choices within an increasingly fragmented cultural landscape.

## 'Get back to work with more power': Ideology

Finally, these *moral* claims are ultimately reinforced by a deeply embedded ideology, most notably an implicit linking of good citizenship to productivity and labour. Historically, practices that purported to 'improve' the worker have been ascribed higher status, with cultural forms gaining social, aesthetic, and moral worth through their association with work (Clarke and Critcher, 1985). These articles do a good amount of cultural work to reassure readers that popular culture can now be aligned in these histories.

The leisure ethic's embrace of popular cultural consumption also needs to be placed into the context of longer historical shifts. In today's knowledge and service-driven neoliberal economies, the nature of work for much of the Global North has changed. Communication technologies have blurred the boundaries between work and leisure (Gregg, 2018), permeating industries from white-collar work to platform-dependent sectors like food delivery and sex work. The 'new spirit of capitalism', emerging in the 1970s, dismantled rigid management hierarchies, offering more freedom and an ostensibly more engaging, playful work, but with less security (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). It would be simplistic to suggest that work for all workers in the past was stable, based in secure communities and with strong labour organizing, but it is undoubtedly the case that work has increasingly become normalized around conditions of precarity for a greater number of workers (Lorey, 2015). Individuals are compelled to become resilient, entrepreneurial, and adaptable, assuming personal responsibility for their successes and failures (Brown, 2003; Gill and Orgad, 2018).

Leisure, then, must be justified as a 'future-oriented investment' (Taylor & Luckman, 2018: 10), and such values permeate self-help literature, reality television, self-tracking apps, yoga, mindfulness, psychotherapy, and many more (Davies, 2015; Gill and Orgad, 2018; Godrej, 2017; Gregg, 2018; Ouellette and Hay, 2008). These ideologies are fluid, appropriating new languages, practices, and styles. As William Davies argues:

> The psychology of motivation blends into the physiology of health, drawing occasionally on insights from sports coaches and nutritionists, to which is added a cocktail of neuroscientific rumours and Buddhist meditation practices. Various notions of 'fitness,' 'happiness,' 'productivity,' and 'success' bleed into one another, with little explanation of how or why. (2015: 108)

The consumption of once 'low' popular cultural forms is absorbed into this hodgepodge of discourses. Articles reassure readers that popular cultural consumption can be

positively integrated into a 'career'-based identity with the requisite skills, experience, and knowledge to succeed in the labour market (Farrugia, 2020). The emphasis on media consumption as 'productive' leisure (Lamerichs, 2018) reframes historically derided media consumption into a socially valued 'hobby' (Chia, 2020; see also Alasuutari et al., 2013), reinforcing notions of 'good' and 'bad' audiences (Hills, 2002), and further blurring the line between work and leisure (Driscoll and Gregg, 2011; Ouellette and Wilson, 2011).

These links are expressed across the sample in several ways. Most immediately, there is a continued desire to link popular culture with productivity, concentration, and multi-tasking. At their simplest, these tend to take general truisms that recuperation is healthy and link it back to specific forms of leisure:

> Giving your mind a break from work for something enjoyable could motivate you to be more productive when you get back to it and to ward off feelings of burnout. (Benton, 2022)

Other articles make specific claims about the productive nature of background music to generate productivity, based on highly limited research on background music or noise. As one suggested, 'a good specialist starts to do his work even better if he listens to his favorite songs' (Mosh, 2020). All, however, are adamant that popular culture could be beneficial precisely because it is more productive for workers.

Articles promised to improve other work-related capabilities, particularly around improving IQ or brain functionality, imparting skills, or expanding creativity, as we have seen. Such concerns refract anxieties about labour in the 'knowledge economy' (Marttila and Konings, 2018; Powell and Snellman, 2004). In post-industrial economies, 'knowledge' sustains productivity, with education and industry increasingly focusing on cognitive processing, problem-solving, and intelligence. Central to these skills is 'creativity,' now viewed as the key driver of economic growth (Gormley, 2020; Mould, 2018). Individuals are encouraged to develop a 'creativity dispositif' (McRobbie, 2016), essential for navigating precarious employment and solving both personal and professional challenges (Marttila, 2018). Proving one's 'ongoing value' makes productivity a deeply 'personal, everyday concern' pushing workers to adapt their skills and knowledge resiliently and continuously (Gregg, 2018: 3).

A focus on empathy and other prosocial behaviours, discussed in the previous section, are similarly refracted through the lens of contemporary work. Empathy and emotional management – both others' and one's own (Binkley, 2018; White, 2017) – are skills valued across various workplaces. Critics highlight the expansion of emotional and affective labour in domestic, service, and leisure work (Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Ouellette and Wilson, 2011), but these competencies are now sought across all sectors and interpersonal relationships. 'Emotional intelligence' has become a crucial 'professional competency' in business and management (Binkley, 2018: 582). Likewise, individuals are encouraged to view their networks as 'capital' and develop social skills to navigate multiple social fields, generating feelings of 'ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion, and a sense of community' (Hardt, 1999: 96). Many articles are keen to stress that 'prosocial' behaviours could also be converted into pro-work behaviours.

Finally, the continued focus on physical and mental health, discussed earlier, can also be linked back to these new leisure ethics. 'Wellbeing' has an ambivalent role in contemporary capitalism, having become a buzzword in recent years but always on the logic that 'wellbeing and increasing productivity are … twin objectives' (Frayne, 2019: 3). Individuals are encouraged to pay great personal attention to their bodies, which carry 'intensive moral worth' (LeBesco, 2011: 154), and mental health while simultaneously facing greater insecurities in the workplace and extensive cuts to public health providers. These trends are accompanied by a 'biologization of emotional life that draws from within neuroscience, neurobiology and brain imaging and evolutionary psychology' (Sugarman in Binkley, 2018: 590). Such processes mask wider questions about things like working conditions and healthcare, ultimately providing individualized solutions to responses to structural inequalities. 'Positive' effects offer simple solutions – watching the right TV show, listening to the right song – to long-term structural problems.

Readers looking to find concrete answers to difficult questions about the relationship between health and culture, work and leisure, or the effects of media on our everyday lives, are instead introduced to a 'figure' of the audience (Barker and Austin, 2000). The self-optimizing, self-governing subject remains an aspirational figure, impossible to achieve but nonetheless influential in shaping everyday practices (Didžiokaitė et al., 2018), modelling behaviours, ideologies, and practices. They maximize their leisure time or deploy popular culture at work to be more productive; they are emotionally intelligent, cognitively better equipped to handle the knowledge economy; and their leisure time is concerned with health and well-being. This figure uncritically reproduces the values of capital by demonstrating an 'ideal' atomized, individualized, self-optimizing, and entrepreneurial subject.

## Conclusion

It would be churlish to suggest some audiences some of the time cannot find meaning, value, and good feelings in the popular culture they consume; that relaxation can never be a good thing for wellbeing; or that engaging with media never provides short term benefits for some participants. Around such banalities, however, powerful 'common senses' form.

'Positive' effects reproduce cultural hierarchies that privilege dominant groups and mask the political complexities of many contemporary issues around worker rights, health, and happiness. They also surrender critical ground to ideologies that value academic disciplines and arts and culture solely for their contributions to workforce productivity. For readers seeking clarity on whether culture is 'good' or 'bad' face a sea of contradictory evidence from varied, and often unreliable, sources. This undermines trust in both scientific inquiry and effective communication. This is a problem that is only going to be exacerbated by the creep of AI into the web.

Media and cultural studies have been exceptionally well-attuned at resisting simplistic effects claims in relation to things like media violence, but positive effects are a spectre that has operated somewhat unnoticed in the shadows. These discourses are operationalized in way that are instinctively harder to argue against than the moral panics of negative effects, and often weaponize the insights from our own discipline into damaging hegemonies. Media and cultural studies, which have long challenged the simplistic

narratives of negative media effects, must now turn their critical gaze toward these ostensibly 'positive' claims.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Note

1. A complete list of primary sources referenced in the article is available in Appendix A and is available with the online version of the article.

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