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Can we talk? : the effects of daytime television talk shows on college students

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**Can we talk?:
The effects of daytime television talk shows on college students**

by

Zondra Irene Hughes

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

For The Major Program Journalism and Mass Communication

Major Professor: Dr. Kim Smith

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1996

**Graduate College
Iowa State University**

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Zondra Irene Hughes

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction to the Daytime Television Talk Show	2
Criticisms of the Talk Show	2
Talk Show Guests	6
Problem Statement	9
Purpose of the Study	10
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	12
Television and Stress	12
Validation Of Mood Adjective Checklists	13
King et. al's Study	14
Stress and the Daytime Television Talk Show	15
Talk Show Content	16
Talk Show Formats	18
Uses and Gratifications Theory	20
Uses and Gratifications of Talk Show Viewers	24
Perceived Reality	25
Hypotheses	26

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	29
Sample	30
Procedure	31
Treatment	33
Instrumentation	33
Index for Perceived Reality	33
Index for Viewing Motivations	34
Index for Stress	34
Method of Data Analysis	35
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	36
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	43
Limitations to the Study	50
Suggestions For Future Study	52
Recommendations	52
APPENDIX	53
REFERENCES	59

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Mean Levels of the Activation/Stress Index by Talk-Show Format	37
Table 2. ANOVA of the Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress	38
Table 3. Mean Levels of the Deactivation/Stress Index by Talk-Show Format	39
Table 4. ANOVA of Main Effect Talk-Show Formats on Deactivation/Stress	40
Table 5. Results of Entering Ritualistic Viewing Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress	41
Table 6. Results of Entering Instrumental Viewing Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect on Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress	42
Table 7. Results of Entering Viewing Frequency Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Stress/Activation	43
Table 8. Results of Entering Perceived Reality Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Stress/Activation	44

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Daytime Television Talk Show

Phil Donahue was a pioneer in the talk show arena. His was the only talk-back show on television until Oprah Winfrey appeared in 1987 (Woodward, 1996). Over the past 25 years the daytime television talk show's evolution has coincided with the growth of the "X" generation in American society (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991). For example, the Donahue show of the 1960s featured celebrity interviews of those interested in self-promotion of their books, movies, television programs or political agendas, (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991). The recent episodes of the now discontinued Donahue show have focused on a "relentless display of deviants, conflict and personal stories of real-life people trying to 'fix themselves' through therapy" (Zoglin 1991); meaning that talk shows began to cater to the "X" generation as the group became more visible.

The Donahue show's ratings have been on a steady decline because racier talk shows appeared almost overnight. After 29 years on the air, Donahue announced his retirement earlier this year.

Today, there are nearly 20 talk shows watched by an estimated 50 million viewers per week; children make up anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of the viewing audience. The salacious material presented on these shows is a major concern with most talk show critics (Mifflin, 1995).

Criticisms of The Talk Show

Along with the new wave of talk shows came a new wave of concern about the quality of the shows. According to Albronda et al., (1995) of *Ms.* magazine:

As the number of shows increased and the ratings wars intensified, the manner in which issues are presented has changed. Shows now encourage conflict, name-calling, and fights. Producers set up under-handed tricks and secret revelations. Hosts instruct guests to reveal all. The more dramatic and bizarre the problems, the better. (Albronda, 1995 p. 45)

In addition to conflict as the new staple of talk shows, Wilson et al. (1995) also suggest that there are underlying gender issues such as the negative portrayal of women, which need to be addressed. States Wilson:

The women of talk shows are almost always upset and in need. The bonding that occurs invariably centers around complaints about men or the worst stereotypes about women. In order to be a part of the sisterhood, women are required to be angry with men and dissatisfied with themselves. We need to look no further than at some of the program titles to recognize the message. Shows about men bring us a steady stream of stalkers, adulterers, chauvinistic sons, abusive fathers, and men who won't commit to women. (Wilson, 1995 p. 47)

Abt and Seesholtz (1991) suggest that daytime television talk shows blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, and acceptable behaviors and deviance. Seeking therapy, rather than taking responsibility for one's actions is the staple of these shows:

Rather than being mortified, ashamed or trying to hide their stigma, guests willingly and eagerly discuss their child molesting, sexual quirks and criminal records in a effort to seek "understanding" for their particular disease. After all, according to the talk show ideology, they are all "victims" rather than possibly being irresponsible, weak people. Of course the fact is that their bad behavior is their pass to get on television--the reason they're invited to participate is the provocative nature of their problem ... these people are unimportant except for their entertaining problem. Therapy as entertainment is the appeal of these shows. (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991 p. 178)

Talk show producers often use certain tactics to ensure high ratings, including *fast talking*, *heating things up*, and *introducing the element of surprise* (Heaton et al., 1995).

Fast talk. Fast talk is a method used by producers to develop a sense of intimacy in order to convince troubled guests that they won't "be seen as freaks" for appearing on the talk show. Usually it involves telling uncertain guests that their particular problem should be seen by the entire country to help others in their situation.

Heating things up. Producers often place guests with opposing views in different greenrooms. While the guests are led to believe that this measure is taken out of concern for them, the producers use this opportunity to run back and forth between the rooms to tell the guests all the unflattering remarks made about them by the others. This is referred to as "heating things up," because once the guests confront each other on-stage they are ready for war (Heaton, et al. 1995).

Surprise. The third tactic, which is the most common, is the surprise element. The shows surprise guests with a person or revelation that they did not expect. This surprise tactic may have led to the death of one Jenny Jones guest (a gay man) who surprised his neighbor (a heterosexual) by informing him on the show that he had a crush on him. Stating that the show had "eaten away at him," the man admitted shooting his gay neighbor to death once they were in their hometown (Stokes, et al., 1995).

The "Jenny Jones killing," as it is called, led to an onslaught of criticism of the talk show genre. In December of 1995, former Secretary of Education William Bennet, and two Democrats, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Sam Nunn of Georgia, began a war on "trash" talk shows by urging an advertising boycott of the programs. The activists produced a

commercial where they singled out companies and products, saying the companies should be urged “to refuse to sponsor this cultural rot “ (Mifflin, 1995). Says Bennet: “The point is to disassociate companies who through their dollars have the power to bring these shows to the public. If they withdraw from these shows, the shows will disappear.”

Some major advertisers heeded Bennet’s advice. Proctor & Gamble, the largest spender on daytime television, with more than \$20 million budgeted in 1995, and Unilever, another big spender, both said in November of 1995 that they would withdraw advertisements from shows that they deemed offensive (Mifflin, 1995).

Talk show hosts are feeling the pinch of criticism as well. Oprah Winfrey announced in 1994 that she was moving her show away from “dysfunctional discussion” to more motivational talk. Despite predictions that her “kinder, gentler format” would cause her to lose viewers, she remains at the top of the ratings with her numbers doubling those of her closest competitors, (Wilson et al. 1995).

Talk show host Jerry Springer insists that the war on talk shows led by Bennet has had little impact on the shows. However, there are other problems in the land of daytime television talk shows. With over 20 talk shows airing daily (up from seven just five years ago), there has been a steady decline in ratings for nine of last year’s 13 established shows (Impoco, 1996).

Some network affiliate stations are canceling the shows because of a lack of viewer interest. In January, the NBC station in Colorado Springs canceled the “Carnie Wilson Show” and “Jenny Jones” due to their salacious material (Impoco, 1996). Jack Fentress, a vice president and director of programming at Petry National Television, which books ad time on

talk shows, says the talk show “doldrums have more to do with audience burnout than with moral opprobrium,” because there is an outrageous number of shows doing the same things (Impoco, 1996).

Barbara Lippert (1994), a critic for *Adweek*, watched a month of talk shows during sweeps period, when stations track their audience numbers to decide which shows will be kept on the air. Lippert’s primary focus was to determine the messages that the talk shows were sending to the viewers.

Lippert described the talk shows as a “heated, exaggerated, version of reality that can eventually distort our own sense of what is genuine.” Aside from a skewed perceived reality, Lippert also suggests that watching the endless parade of dysfunctional conflicts will lead the viewer to become emotionally numb after awhile: “Studio audiences are primed to make judgments, and approve or censure guests with cheers or boos, and move on. The at-home viewer will hear the story, make a quick decision and move on without concern as well” (Lippert, 1994).

In the talk show world, talking about a problem is the first step toward solving it (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991). However, some psychologists say that television talk shows do more harm than good. Psychologists Jeanne Healon and Nona Wilson (1995) reported at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association that salacious and conflict-driven programs about family, violence, drug abuse and homosexuality are particularly harmful due to the “drive-by” psychology of such programs. (“Drive-by” is in reference to the psychologists and experts who appear at the end of the talk show to give brief advice to the guests).

Lippert (1994) shared the same concern: “Over and over on these shows, in interviews with couples, I saw so much pain. And it’s pain that will never be resolved in five minutes with an on-air psychologist plugging his latest book ... nor will it help other people in the same boat to watch” (p156).

Talk Show Guests

“The simple stupid truth [is] ... talk shows exist to entertain and exploit the exhibitionism of the walking wounded. If you want to explore your problems, you go to counseling. If you want to exhibit your life, attack and humiliate your spouse, or exact revenge for some misdeed, you go on a talk show” (Fischhoff, 1995. p41).

Talk show guests are the lifeline of the show. Who are the talk show guests, and where do they come from? Ehrenrich (1995) a reporter for *Time* magazine, describes talk show guests as:

People needy--of social support, education, of material resources and self-esteem--they mistake being the center of attention for actually being loved and respected. With few exceptions, the guests are drawn from trailer parks and tenements, from bleak streets and narrow, crowded rooms. Listen long enough and you will hear references to unpaid bills, to welfare, to 12-hour workdays and double shifts (Ehrenrich, 1995 p. 94).

Abt and Seesholtz (1991) conducted a content analysis of 60 talk shows for over a month. They state: “law abiding, privacy-loving, ordinary people who have had reasonably happy childhoods and are satisfied with their lives probably won’t get to tell their stories to Phil, Sally or Oprah.”

Priest et al. (1994) conducted a study of 29 former guests of the Phil Donahue show. The respondents of this study included transsexual lesbians, a “sex priestess,” a “former

homosexual,” a working prostitute, an intergenerational couple, swingers, rape and incest survivors, and people with AIDS. The respondents ages ranged from 12-68.

The focus of Priest et al.’s study was to investigate why the guests chose to discuss sensitive subjects on national television. The researchers identified the talk show guests as people who, under any other circumstance, would not be featured on television. Tucker (1990) describes the process of marginalization: “Any group can be ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible, and unheard ... while others are valorized” (p.7).

Marginalized groups, or out-groups, are seldom portrayed in the mainstream press, thus resulting in “symbolic annihilation,” a term used to describe the invisibility of such groups (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Talk shows offer exposure for these groups.

The researchers conducted two hour interviews with the former guests between May and November, 1991. The respondents were asked to describe: a) their initial decision to disclose on a talk show; b) their viewing habits; c) their preparation for the appearance on the talk show; and d) the consequences of appearing.

The researchers found that the respondents’ backgrounds were diverse, but they shared several important commonalities:

- Most of the respondents represented groups considered deviant to varying degrees by society.
- Other respondents were not members of the out-groups, but faced stigmatizing responses to a particular facet of their lives.
- Most had seen a therapist or participated in encounter groups to work through a difficult period in their lives.

- Most reported that they were totally unaware of the camera and monitors during the taping of the talk show.

The researchers concluded that television disclosure for this particular group of respondents was *not* prompted by the promise of money, the “15 minutes of fame,” or by the desperate need for an outlet for self-disclosure. However, most respondents reported an “evangelical” intent for disclosure--a “calling” to address injustices and remedy stereotypes.

In addition, the researchers found:

- Respondents believed television’s role in their lives was minimal.
- Several respondents linked *their* television disclosure to their outrage about the narrow and harshly unfavorable stereotypes they believed the media to perpetuate.
- Respondents’ attitudes toward Phil Donahue (the show on which the respondents were guests) were generally “pragmatic rather than fan-oriented.”
- Respondents held fairly tepid or negative views about daytime television talk shows.

Former media psychologist Stuart Fischhoff (1995) appeared on various talk shows as the panel expert. Fischhoff said that often before a show the guests would tell him with confidence that they were certain that the talk show would be a positive experience.

However, the lack of control that the guests have over the shows’ proceedings make them prey for the talk show. Thus, despite the preparations that the guests may make prior to their appearances, “once on-stage a guest’s self-restraint evaporates in the hot glare of the lights” (Fischhoff, 1995).

Outside of extreme cases (i.e. a lawsuit), most guests write-off their appearance as a “somewhat disappointing experience”--or that it was something they had to do to correct a

terrible social prejudice (Fischhoff, 1995). However, Fischhoff stated that guests soon realize the high price they pay for their “brief stab at celebrity,” although they are not totally responsible for the “spectacle” that they make out of themselves. Fischhoff states:

... People don't always have the sophistication to make the right choices or grasp the consequences of their decisions. I would argue that until people fully understand the risks of parading their life flaws for a few moments of cheap celebrity, until they understand that a talk show exerts an intoxicating pull on self-divulgence, they can't grasp sitting at home wishing for a chance to get on *Geraldo*, then they are far less responsible for the degrading spectacle than are the savvy producers of the talk shows (Fischhoff, 1995, p45).

Problem Statement

Strassburger (1995) argues that viewing daytime television talk shows can be harmful or even dangerous for the viewer for several reasons:

- Talk shows are creating feelings of *frustration*, by giving the viewer a close-up view of people desperate for help--that neither the viewer nor anyone in the TV studio can provide..
- Talk shows *shatters the trust and faith* in the way that people are expected to behave.
- By parading a never-ending cast of social deviants across the screen, talk shows give a false perception of reality. The world appears as a harsh place, filled with people driven by revenge, greed and retribution.
- The nightly news are getting more sensational to compete with the talk shows.

Bonapace et al., (1995), for example suggests that talk shows create feelings of frustration for the viewers by giving them a close-up of people desperate for help that the viewer cannot provide.

As a result, Abt and Seesholtz (1991) argue the viewer of talk shows has two options:

- “The viewer can, like the hero of Nathanael West’s tragic *Miss Lonelyhearts*, go crazy listening to these stories of hideous pain and pathology, or
- The viewer must become inured, apathetic or amused (amusing ourselves to death, as Neil Postman put it in 1985), or, to use the darkly delicious German word *schadenfreude*, the viewer may get a deep sense of glee at another’s misfortunes” (p. 177).

Other criticisms of talk shows include the belief that they “privatize our social concerns while collapsing boundaries between public and private spheres.” In other words, everything that is private becomes public, and “everything that is public gets reduced to private stories ... attention is paid to “therapy” not social change,” (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991). In addition, Abt and Seesholtz contend talk shows encourage people to “show and tell” without being sanctioned. Further, by showcasing abnormality, whether child abusers or mothers who sleep with their son’s best friends, talk shows inure the viewer to real tragedy.

Despite the immense popularity of talk shows, most of what is known about them is based on opinion. Scientific research, such as this present study, is needed to investigate the possible short-term and long-term effects on the talk show viewer.

Purpose of the Study

This study was inspired primarily by media analyst George Gerbner’s (Strassburger, 1995), suggestion that daytime television talk shows are dangerous to view because they may cause the viewer to suffer symptoms of stress. It is assumed that Gerbner is referring to the negative aspect of stress.

It is suggested here that stress can have both positive and negative aspects. For example, people who are thrill-seekers, or play competitive sports may exhibit symptoms of stress. However, it is positive stress--stress that feeds their desire to win. The Stress/Arousal checklist or SACL, uses adjectives such as: *lively, active, full of pep, energetic, vigorous* and *activated* to determine a person's state of activation or stress. These adjectives do not have a negative connotation; thus a person who has just completed an exhilarating task may score comparably to a person who exhibits the negative feelings of stress. This will be discussed in further detail in chapter five.

Talk show critics are abundant in voicing their concerns about how daytime television talk shows are “destroying the goodness of America,” Abt and Seesholtz (1991):

Television talk shows create audiences by breaking cultural rules, by managed shocks, by shifting our conceptions of what is acceptable, by transforming our ideas about what is possible, by undermining the bases for cultural judgment, by redefining deviance and appropriate reactions to it, by eroding social barriers, inhibitions and cultural distinctions (page 171).

Although criticism of the talk show genre is abundant, to date, no scientific research on television talk shows has been conducted to investigate how stressful they are to view.

The purpose of this study is to investigate: a) whether viewing certain talk show formats produces feelings of stress; and b) whether viewer motivations and their perceptions of reality affect the basic relationship between viewing certain talk show formats and stress.

The next chapter will focus on television and stress and communication theories that pertain to the present study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Very little research has been done on the talk shows; however, criticisms and opinions on the genre are abundant. This chapter will focus on: a) expert analysis of the genre and its effects; mainly media analyst George Gerbner's suggestion that talk shows can be stressful to view; and b) the perceived reality and the uses and gratifications theory, two theories which are the focal point of the present study.

Television and Stress

When an individual is threatened, symptoms of stress occur: rapid breathing, headaches, stomachaches, and heart palpitations. These responses are the body's way of fighting off perceived danger (Strassburger et al., 1995). Television can cause the symptoms of stress to occur because the body is unable to decipher real danger (i.e. someone yelling at the individual) from television danger, such as people yelling on television while the individual is watching (Gerbner, 1980).

Moshe Aronson of the Sackler Faculty of Medicine at Tel-Aviv University argues that television places unique psychological strains on the brain (Vines, 1993). Unlike reading, which allows the reader to pause and reflect on what has been read, television bombards the viewer with sights and sounds with "little chance of relating to what they have experienced." Television is psychologically damaging because of its drive for novelty and variety, Aronson argues. In addition, the stressful nature of much of television's content adds to the danger, as the passive viewer is unable to release the tension built up by watching sex and violence. At high levels, stress hormones are known to be capable of damaging nerve cells (Vines, 1993).

To test whether watching television coverage of traumatic events triggered symptoms of post-traumatic stress, (a syndrome that usually strikes *survivors* of tragedy)

researchers at James Madison University in Harrisburg, Va., chose coverage of the O.J. Simpson case, on the assumption that most people would be familiar with it (Wartik, 1996).

Within a week of O.J. Simpson's arrest, the researchers surveyed 200 college students about their reactions to the story. Among the questions asked were: *Have you been jumpier than usual? Have you been bothered by the thoughts of these events? Have you avoided things that remind you of these events?*

The researchers found that although the students weren't experiencing full-blown post-traumatic stress "many were quite upset by coverage of the murders" (Wartik, 1996). About a third reported experiencing uncontrollable thoughts or images of the murders or feeling depressed by them. Those who had seen or read more reported more turmoil.

Validation of Mood Adjective Checklists

The present study investigates whether viewing certain talk show formats can produce symptoms of stress. It has been previously suggested that the mood states of stress and arousal may be independent, and that they may have different psychological consequences (King et al., 1983).

Elevated arousal is associated with a coping response, whereas elevated stress appears "to indicate the presence of fear or doubts" about coping (King et al., 1983).

King et al. investigated Cox's Stress/Arousal Adjective Check List (SACL) to assess the ability of the SACL to distinguish between groups that should be expected to differ in either stress or arousal.

Previous research on Cox's SACL was based on responses on a sample of British university students; King's et al. study used the SACL on a sample of 126 Australian subjects. Twenty adjectives were chosen, ten from both the stress and arousal scales: *calm, contented, active, vigorous, comfortable, lively, uneasy, tired, sleepy, worried, distressed, uptight, drowsy, tense, relaxed, passive, energetic, alert, bothered,* and

aroused. These adjectives are representative of the adjectives used in Stress/Arousal checklist implemented in the present study: *tense, worried, apprehensive, bothered, uneasy, dejected, up-tight, jittery, nervous, distressed, fearful, active, energetic, vigorous, alert, lively, activated, stimulated, and aroused*.

King et al's. study

Prior to completing the SACL, the subjects completed a visual search/detection task involving slides of concealed men. The slides were presented at a rate which had been judged comfortable, or non-demanding during a pilot study. The subjects were taken from four sources:

- Forty-two civilians (26 males, 16 females) on a government-sponsored holiday, termed *civilians*.
- Twenty-one civilian parachutists (18 males, 3 females) including some novices and some experienced parachutists, termed *parachutists*.
- Thirty-eight (male) serving members of the Australian Army, involved in clerical duties. This group was divided into two subgroups comprising 16 subjects who completed the search/detection task at the standard rate (termed *army*) and 22 who were required to respond to the task at an accelerated rate deemed to be uncomfortably fast (termed *fast army*).
- Twenty-five in-patients (11 males, 14 females) in a psychiatric ward, termed *psychiatric*.

The groups which were expected to show elevated stress levels were the parachutists, the army subjects following a speeded task (*fast army*), and the psychiatric patients.

The fast army group indicated a higher stress and arousal level than the army group; the psychiatric group indicated higher stress level than the normal (*civilian*) group, the parachutists indicated higher stress and arousal levels than the normal group, and there

was no difference in the stress and arousal levels between the fast army and regular army group.

King et al. (1983) state:

Significant differences in both stress and arousal have been demonstrated between different groups of subjects using a 20-item version of the SACL. The independence of the two scales stress and arousal has been confirmed, and the results support the validity of the labels given to the two factorially derived scales. The results reported here suggest that the SACL may be of value in measuring environmentally induced changes of stress and arousal ... (p 29).

The present study implements Thayer's Stress/Arousal checklist, in which the adjectives are similar to the SACL previously discussed. The nature of the present experiment involves environmentally inducing change in the subject's level of stress and arousal; therefore, using the Stress/Arousal checklist is ideal for measuring the respondents' reactions to the stimuli. Thayer's Stress/Arousal checklist will be discussed in further detail in the methodology chapter.

Stress and the Daytime Television Talk Show

The daytime television talk show is a relatively new phenomenon and thus very little research has been done on the genre (Strassburger, 1995). However this section will focus on talk show analyses by media experts and professionals, and the proposed relationship between daytime television talk shows and stress. Of tremendous importance are the assumptions about the effects of daytime television talk shows proposed by Gerbner (1995).

Gerbner (1995) stated that the talk show is stressful to the viewers because, unbeknownst to them, the viewers bear the brunt of the stress that these shows create. Says Gerbner: "Studies have shown that if you see hate and violence all the time, you

begin to feel anger and stress yourself. There seems to be no limit to the anger, vulgarity, and obscenities aired on these shows" (p. 91).

Talk show content

The traditional daytime television talk show is defined as a show that deals with a personal dilemma or need. It presents people in conflict and emotional pain, bewildered and seeking advice (Welles, 1993).

Abt and Seesholtz (1991) describe in detail the format of a typical talk show:

Many of the shows are devoted to abuse and pathology...despite the topic, the talk show follows the same routine format. Cheerful theme music (slowed down for "serious" discussion) opens the show as the host's name is boldly flashed on the screen, along with shots of her/his smiling face. Guests are introduced at the beginning of the show and their narratives are highlighted by subtitles that summarize their stories: *Susan hasn't spoken to her mother in four years*. Feuding families are seated side-by-side on the stage as they are encouraged to scream at each other. Abused children sit next to their parents. Hosts, despite differences in style, are all adept at managing outrage, encouraging the telling of secrets, cooling off the proceedings if they threaten the continuity of the show, shutting off boring guests, putting people on the spot, summing up with clichés, and platitudes complex situations, making the audience feel comfortable witnessing private matters (pp. 181-182).

Sara Welles, a magazine editor, was hired by *Television Quarterly* to view 16 months of talk shows. Welles kept a journal to gather data on recurrent themes and patterns of the daytime television talk show format.

Welles stated that during the 16 months of viewing talk shows discussion of social issues began to surface. During the spring of 1992, Welles found several "relevant" topics discussed on the shows, including political campaigns, racial dialogue and debate, social justice and injustice, police brutality and cover-ups, sexual harassment, health frauds and safety.

A pattern of copycat topics and guests were also found. Welles cited the "progress" of a 44-year-old woman who married a 14-year-old boy (her son's friend), leaving her children and family behind. This woman appeared on Sally Jessy Raphael, Phil Donahue, and Jerry Springer. There are several explanations for the copycatting (Welles, 1993):

- Talk show producers often play 'musical chairs' by working for various talk shows.
- The talk shows must scrape for sensationalized themes within the narrow spectrum of subjects on which the shows are guaranteed high ratings.
- Talk shows are the medium of choice for publicists promoting books, movies, actors and musicians, as well as institutions and causes.

Greenberg et al. (1995) conducted a content analysis on eleven of the top rated talk shows to determine: a) what issues were discussed; b) who the guests were; and c) what feelings and reactions the guests expressed. Greenberg et al. found that the talk shows focused heavily on family relations, particularly those related to parent-child and marital problems. Sexual themes were second in terms of prominence followed by issues in dating, health, and crime.

Nelson et al. (1994) appeared as expert guest panelists on an American syndicated television talk show in the summer of 1992. Below they describe the content of today's daytime television talk show:

It seems noteworthy that sexual and/or gender "deviancy" appears to be a common focus of the television talk show. Incest victims and offenders, "swingers," table top dancers, self-proclaimed nymphomaniacs and their manager husbands, sex "addicts," transsexual "males," rubber enthusiasts, and the leather clad dominatrix brandishing her whip are routinely featured guests ... (p.54)

Aside from the rise of Generation X, the commercial nature of these talk shows is also one of the reasons for the evolution in guests from celebrities to ordinary people. These shows are now cheaper to produce. The producers do not have to pay for the

expensive celebrity guests that appeared on earlier forms of talk shows, they do not have to employ expensive screenwriters or actors, and they can count on an endless display of people waiting to get on the show (Abt and Seesholtz, 1991).

Abt and Seesholtz (1991) stated that the talk show producers do not have to employ screenwriters or actors for the talk show. However, Nelson et al. (1994) appeared on a talk show where a script was developed for the panelists to ensure the highest level of "surprise effect" for the at-home audience. The authors suggest that the "spontaneity or true confessions" of the talk shows may actually be deliberately scripted:

A biography was faxed on each of the guests as well as a structured interview "script" (or "blueprint," as it was designated in the heading), presumably created by the writers and producers from the pre interviews, that included not only the questions to be asked by the host but also the answers that were to be "spontaneously" provided by these guests during the taping of the show (p. 58).

The authors concluded that at no time did the other guests' comments depart from the prearranged script.

Talk Show Formats

Greenberg et al. (1995) classified four basic forms of verbal reactions on talk shows: anger, affection, denial, and rejection. His analysis showed that of the four talk shows used for the present study, the Jenny Jones and Jerry Springer talk shows had the highest number of verbal reactions, whereas Donahue had the least number of verbal reactions.

The Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a study of television talk shows in 1995, and found that hosts and guests talk mostly about family, personal relationships and sex (Associated Press, 1995). What the Kaiser Family Foundation researchers concluded in comparing hosts of the top-rated talk shows is listed below: (Only the shows used in the present study are outlined).

- **Jerry Springer:** “More sexual, dating, ‘getting together’ themes than other shows. More sexual orientation disclosures with three per show. Guests speak often, very animated, expressing anger, rejection and affection, yelling, laughing. No experts.”
- **Phil Donahue:** “Mostly parent-child, marital and physical health topics. Few disclosures, with least sexual disclosures with one per show. Guests rarely display verbal or physical reactions. Experts active.”
- **Jenny Jones:** “Dating, sex, marital themes, focusing on former lovers. Zero use of experts. More lively guests, hugging, laughing, yelling and expressing anger, rejection, surprise and affection. Most sex disclosures at seven per hour. Most embarrassing with five such disclosures per show.”
- **Sally Jessy Raphael:** “Focus on relationships, parents, children, siblings. Guests most likely to cry. Disclosure about others more frequent than other shows, while self-disclosures rare. Most abuse disclosures with six per show. Experts seldom speak.”

Based on the conclusions of the Kaiser study, it is suggested here that there are four basic talk show formats: *responsible*, *happy-talk*, *low-confrontational* and *high-confrontational*, these formats are operationalized in this study to determine which format will produce stress.

Responsible. (High Information/Low Entertainment value). The responsible talk show is concerned with discussions about social problems such as AIDS, racism, or sexual harassment. This type of show is high in information value, with very little entertainment value, as the purpose of this particular talk show is to bring a social issues to the forefront, and to inform the viewer. In the present study, Phil Donahue is the responsible talk show. This show, “Parents Who Are Falsely Accused of Child Abuse” deals with a daughter who wants to clear the abuse charges against her incarcerated father.

Happy talk. (High Entertainment/Low Information value). The happy talk show is a light-hearted, upbeat talk show that deals with humorous or heart-warming topics. This show is high in entertainment value, with very little information value. In the present study, Jenny Jones is the happy-talk show. This show, “Reuniting First Loves” deals with reuniting long lost loves.

Low-Confrontational. (High Entertainment/Low Information value). The low-confrontational talk show deals with controversial issues, which are generally of a more personal nature. This show is high in entertainment value, with very little information value. The guests on these shows often shout and argue at one another however *avoiding physical contact*. In the present study, Jerry Springer is the low-confrontational show. This show, “Sorry Isn’t Good Enough,” deals with people who have betrayed loved ones.

High-Confrontational. (High Entertainment/Low Information value). Often referred to as the “trash talk show,” this show deals with controversial issues and is identical in format to the low-confrontational show, except for one major difference: *physical violence erupts on this show*. In the present study, Sally Jessy Raphael is the high-confrontational show. This show, “The Baby-Sitter Slept With My Husband,” deals with husbands who have cheated on their wives with the baby-sitter. A fist-fight breaks out on this show.

The present study investigates whether viewing certain talk show formats will produce higher levels of activation/stress. This study suggests that talk shows of a more controversial nature (i.e. shows dealing with child abuse or adultery) will produce higher evidence of activation/stress in the viewers than talk shows of a less controversial nature, such as shows dealing with reuniting first loves.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory holds media audiences make active use of what the media have to offer because of a set of needs which the media in one form or another

gratify. Uses and Gratifications theory rests on several basic assumptions, all of which rely on an active audience:

- Individuals are influenced by social and psychological factors when seeking to communicate and selecting among media alternatives.
- Individuals are motivated and purposive in their communication behavior.
- Individuals take the initiative to select and use communication media and messages to satisfy needs and wants.
- The media compete with other forms of communication for attention, selection and use.
- Individuals are able to articulate their reasons for using the media.

McQuail et al. (1972) define four major categories of need which the media serve to gratify:

- *Diversion*: viewers tune in to escape from the constraints of routine; escape from the burdens of problems; or emotional release.
- *Personal Relationships*: viewers tune in for companionship or social utility.
- *Personal Identity*: viewers tune in for personal reference; reality exploration; or value reinforcement.
- *Surveillance*: viewers tune in to satisfy the need for information in the complex world--for example, "Television news helps me to make up my mind about things."

Although no two researchers will agree on exactly what needs the viewer intend to gratify, researchers have found that motives for watching television and its programs are interrelated. Rubin (1981) identified both *ritualistic* and *instrumental* viewing uses.

According to Rubin:

In my study of the popular television program "60 Minutes" I identified two types of viewers: a time-consuming (habitual) information seeker who is a more frequent, generalized user of television, and a non-time consuming (non-habitual) entertainment-information seeker who exhibits an affinity with the program. The habitual viewer watches to fill time and for companionship, relaxation, arousal, and

escape, views a great deal of television, and displays a definite affinity with the medium; and the selective viewer seeks information and watches news, talk and magazine programs ... (Rubin, 1984 p. 69).

Ritualized viewing reflects more habitual use of television for diversionary reasons and greater affinity with television. *Instrumental* viewing reflects more goal-directed use of television content (Rubin 1984). In other words, ritualistic viewers watch *television*, whereas instrumental viewers watch *television content*.

Rubin (1981) studied the relationships among motivations underlying television viewing.

Rubin studied 626 people ranging in age from 4 through 90, and asked them why they viewed certain programs. He comprised a list of viewers' motivations from their responses: viewing to pass time, for companionship, for arousal/excitement, to see a particular program content, for relaxation, for information, to escape/forget, for entertainment/enjoyment, and as a basis for interacting with others.

Blumler and Katz (1974) emphasized the social origin of the needs which the media tend to gratify. For example, when a social situation causes tension and conflict, the media can help to ease the individual, and when the social situation gives rise to questions about values, the media provide affirmation and reinforcement.

Rubin (1985) conducted a random sample of 1,023 students at 11 U.S. universities. His study investigated the use of daytime television soap operas by American college students.

Rubin found four primary motives for watching soap operas:

- Orientation or reality exploration: seeking to learn about, relate to, and understand others' ideas, modes of thinking, problems, problem solving, and lifestyles.
- Avoidance or escape: seeking to escape from problems, work, and life; putting off tasks, tension release, and time consumption.

- The content of the medium: reflected, for example, by preferences for particular programs, and planned exposure to certain news-information programs.
- The exposure to the medium: fulfilling needs such as those of entertainment, relaxation, excitement, withdrawal from present pressures, diversion from past experiences and avoidance of future pressures.
- The social context of media use: the presence or absence of other participants such as family members or friends and the role of television in substituting or complementing them.

Lemish found that the viewers had two basic motives for watching soap operas. The first motive was a preference and attachment to a particular soap opera. The second motive was time consumption. Most often students viewed whatever was on television at the time.

Uses and Gratifications of Talk Show Viewers

Sonia Livingstone (1994) studied Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Kilroy, and the British talk show "The Time The Place." Livingstone conducted 12 focus group discussions following the viewing of a talk show, a series of in-depth interviews with viewers and talk show guests, and a survey questionnaire from 500 respondents from a diary panel.

Livingstone found that the audience motivations for viewing the programs included their opinions of the topic, the host, the contribution of ordinary people to the discussion, and the arguments and relevance of the discussions to themselves. In addition, the researcher found little difference in male and female respondents' viewing motivations:

Thus men and women who watch audience discussion programs say they find them--both the topics and the contributions of the public--interesting...In contrast, women and men who don't watch are highly critical of them, not usually for the topics discussed but for the *manner* in which they are discussed (p.434).

However, Livingstone stated that fans of the talk show genre "want to discover what ordinary people are thinking and are themselves stimulated to think by the program discussions, finding these emotionally involving, relevant to their own lives, and of broader social influence."

The present study investigates how uses and gratifications of the viewer might affect reactions to talk show content. It is suggested here that those who view talk shows with instrumental motives (i.e. viewing to seek information) will evidence more feelings of stress than those who view talk shows with ritualistic motives (i.e. viewing to pass time).

Perceived Reality

Perceived reality can be defined as the degree of reality that people "see" in mediated messages (Potter 1986). Potter (1981), identified three dimensions of perceived reality: Magic Window, Instruction, and Identity. The Instruction Dimension will be discussed in detail, because it pertains this study.

In the Instruction Dimension, individuals view television as an instructional aid which helps them to expand on their experiences. Potter based this concept on the studies of viewing motives, in which informational motives are always found most important (Blumer and Katz, 1974; Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979). In this dimension, learning can be of a formal nature (i.e., acquiring facts from news programs) or social in nature (i.e., obtaining information about the kinds of problems others have and how their problems can be resolved).

People at one end of the instruction dimension believe that television programs, even if the programs are fictional, can help them work through problems vicariously and learn how to cope. People at the other end of the dimension believe that the televised problems are so unusual that they have no usefulness to them; so they don't expect to learn anything of importance from television.

Potter (1986) suggests that people who seek information from television probably feel a sense of identity with certain characters and believe that television is realistic.

Conducting a study of 92 high school students and 92 college students, Potter asked the respondents to estimate the chance in 100,000 that an average person would be the victim of a serious crime (rape, robbery, murder), or an auto accident during the next year. (A previous questionnaire was administered to the respondents to gather data on their demographics and viewing habits). The respondents were also asked to estimate the percentages of deaths that occur each year as a result of homicide, accidents, cancer, pneumonia and heart disease.

Potter found:

- When three demographic variables (race, age, gender) were used as controls, the relationship between the amount of television exposure and estimates of victimization and causes of death disappeared.
- The perceived reality variables were no better or worse in elaborating the relationship than were the demographic variables--although because of their different natures, the variables should have had different results in elaborating the relationship.
- Perceived reality measures were much more strongly related to victimization estimates than was the amount of television viewing. The relationship between viewing time was categorized as high, medium, or low on perceived reality dimensions.
- When subjects were grouped on the Instruction and Identity scales, (contrary to expectations) those *lowest* in belief that television can instruct were the most influenced by it. Potter concluded that the amount of television viewed is far less important than the attitudes and perceptions of the individuals being exposed.

This study suggests: a) those who believe talk shows to be an accurate representation of real life (perceived reality) will evidence more stress than those who do

not; and b) those who tune in to talk shows with instrumental motives will also evidence more stress than those who tune in with ritualistic motives.

Hypotheses

H1: Activation/Stress will be higher in the high and low-confrontational talk show formats than in the responsible and happy-talk show formats.

It is predicted that activation/stress levels will be higher for respondents who view the high and low-confrontational talk shows because these shows deal with highly emotional situations which are expected to have an effect on the viewer.

H1a: Activation/Stress will be higher in the high-confrontational than in the low-confrontational talk show format.

It is predicted that activation/stress levels will be higher for respondents who view the high-confrontational format because of the fight scene that is present. The low-confrontational format does not have a fight scene, therefore it is predicted that respondents who view this format will not become as stressed as those who view the high-confrontational format.

H2: Deactivation/Stress will be higher in the responsible and happy-talk formats than in the high-confrontational and low-confrontational formats.

On the contrary, respondents who view the responsible and happy-talk shows will have higher deactivation/stress levels because these shows are not as emotionally disturbing as the low and high-confrontational shows. Therefore, viewers of these particular talk show formats are expected to be more relaxed (with higher deactivation levels) than the viewers of the low and high-confrontational talk shows.

H2a: Deactivation/Stress will be higher in the happy-talk format than in the responsible format.

The happy-talk show format ("Reuniting First Loves") is less controversial than the responsible format ("Parents False Accused of Child Abuse"); therefore, it is expected that

the viewers of the happy-talk show format will be more relaxed and have higher deactivation/stress levels than the viewers of the responsible format.

H3: Stress/Activation will be higher for respondents who perceived the talk shows to be real.

It is predicted that viewers who believe the talk shows to be an accurate representation of real life (perceived reality) will become more stressed by the talk shows than viewers who do not believe talk shows to be real. Therefore, higher stress/activation levels are expected for respondents who exhibit levels of perceived reality.

H4: Instrumental viewers will have higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers.

Viewers who tune in to talk shows in search of information (instrumental viewers) are expected to become more stressed than viewers who watch talk shows for habitual reasons (ritualistic viewers). Therefore, it is predicted that instrumental viewers will evidence higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers.

The next chapter will focus on the manipulation of the four talk show formats and the methodology of the present experiment.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether viewing certain talk show formats would induce feelings of stress. Further, the extent to which several covariates--talk show viewing frequency, perceived reality, and viewer motivations--affected the basic relationship between viewing talk show formats and stress was examined. This chapter describes the research procedures used in the study: 1) sample, 2) procedure, 3) treatment, 4) instrumentation, and 5) methods for data analysis.

Sample

One-hundred twenty respondents from a large midwestern university were selected to participate in the experiment. Respondents ranged in age from 20-45 years, with the mean age of 21. The respondents were 41 percent male and 59 percent female.

Two journalism and two sociology classes were randomly chosen for the experiment for two reasons: a) these classes offered the most diverse majors and backgrounds, and b) these classes were attended by traditional and non-traditional students.

Students were considered appropriate for this study because talk show guests aged 18-25 are the primary focus of daytime television talk shows (Greenberg, 1995). Also, students usually have flexible schedules which give them access to the talk shows which air between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 a.m.

Approval was obtained from the Iowa State University Human Subjects Committee before the students respondents were tested.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted during the respondents' regular class time. Two female researchers introduced themselves as "graduate students conducting a talk show

survey." There was a previous agreement between the researchers and the respondents' professors that the details of the experiment were not to be disclosed to the students.

Respondents were offered treats (individually wrapped cookies and cakes) to make them feel comfortable about participating in the experiment. The researchers engaged in small talk with the respondents prior to the experiment so that the respondents would participate in the follow-up discussion. The small talk included questions like: *"How are you enjoying this class so far?"* and *"Who likes to watch talk shows?"*

Prior to beginning the experiment, the students were read a set of instructions pertaining to the experiment:

You have been asked to participate in this television talk show survey. We appreciate your willingness to participate and encourage you to be honest with your answers. All individual responses are anonymous, and it is not mandatory that you participate. Please read the first three pages of the questionnaire carefully and circle the appropriate responses. Once you have completed the first three pages, please put the questionnaire down. Do not look at the back page of the questionnaire until you are instructed to do so. (The back page of the questionnaire contained the Stress/Arousal checklist which was to be marked *after* the respondents watched the talk show).

Respondents were administered a four-page questionnaire booklet to assess their viewing habits and motivations. After the questionnaire, the group watched a 15-minute segment of a pre-recorded day-time television talk show. The talk show tapes were originals ordered from the Video Archives Company of Pennsylvania. All commercials were edited from the tapes, with the exception of future talk show promotions. The talk show tapes included two female hosts, Jenny Jones and Sally Raphael, and two male hosts, Jerry Springer and Phil Donahue. All talk shows used in the experiment are shows that are available in the respondents' television viewing area.

Immediately after watching the talk show, the respondents were instructed to turn to the back page of the questionnaire and mark how they felt at that exact moment.

After the experiment, a follow-up discussion was conducted to gain insight concerning the students' responses to the talk show, and to allow any questions concerning the experiment to be answered. At this time, students were told the true focus of the study, which was not a talk show *survey*, but rather an experiment to determine whether watching talk shows can produce feelings of stress.

Treatment

The four classes were randomly assigned to one of four talk-show formats. Four talk show tapes were chosen to give a diverse representation of the content of daytime television talk shows (Greenberg, 1995). The experimental groups will be identified as groups A, B, C and D.

- Group A watched the high-confrontational talk show format.
- Group B watched the low-confrontational talk show format.
- Group C watched the responsible talk show format.
- Group D watched the happy-talk show format.

Details of the talk shows are listed below:

Group A:

"The Baby-Sitter Stole My Husband"

(Sally Jessy Raphael)

The respondents watched a fifteen-minute segment in which a distraught woman claimed that her husband had an affair with her cousin, and that now he and the cousin have taken her children away from her. The husband and the cousin call the woman a liar and a bad mother. The cousin attacked the woman, repeatedly kicking her in the face and stomach. The cousin's small child was on-stage and was obviously in danger as the adults fought around him.

Group B:***"Sorry Isn't Good Enough"******Jerry Springer***

The respondents watched a fifteen-minute segment of this show. In this show, a pregnant woman revealed that her husband of six months threw her and her young son out on the streets. The woman claims that her husband is an uncontrollable liar, and that his lies had destroyed their marriage. The husband begs for her forgiveness; she replies that if he does not change the marriage is over.

Group C:***"Parents Falsely Accused of Child Abuse"******Phil Donahue***

Respondents watched a 12 year-old girl explain how her father was wrongly accused of sexually molesting her when she was three years old. Donohue shows the "evidence tape" of the girl, at age three, showing detectives (with the aid of a doll) what her father did to her. The tape shows the girl being coached by the detectives.

Group D:***"Reuniting First Loves"******Jenny Jones***

Respondents watched a woman describe her passion for her first love--a man she had not seen in nearly nine years. The man is brought on-stage and both reveal their never-ending love for one another. Both are single and hint toward marriage.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire contained 75 items, which operationalized several covariates, and the dependent variable stress.

Index for Viewing Frequency

The covariate viewing frequency was operationalized by 11 questions which asked the respondents to indicate how often they watched talk shows.

The items were:

Please circle the number of days that you watched a particular talk show last week.

1.	Jenny Jones	0	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Ricki Lake	0	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Oprah Winfrey	0	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Jerry Springer	0	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Carnie Wilson	0	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Geraldo Rivera	0	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Maury Povich	0	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Leeza Gibbons	0	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Sally Raphael	0	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Tempestt Bledsoe	0	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Montel Williams	0	1	2	3	4	5

A simple summed index was created from these items, with scores ranging from zero to fifty-five.

Index for Perceived Reality

The covariate perceived reality was operationalized by the sum of responses to two questions that indicated whether respondents believed that talk shows are a true representation of real life. Scores for the index ranged from zero to ten.

The items were:

29. Talk shows present things as they really are in the world.

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

30. Talk shows let me see how other people live.

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 3 5 Strongly Disagree

Index for Viewing Motivations

Rubin (1984) found two patterns of television use based on an analysis of television consumption and viewing motives: ritualistic and instrumental. Ritualistic use is defined as watching *television* for habitual, companionship, time consumption, and relaxation reasons.

Instrumental use is defined as watching *television content* for informational reasons, and is associated with perceived realism. Viewing motivations were operationalized by these questions:

The ritualistic items were:

Why do you view talk shows?

13. It's just something I do.
15. I just like to watch talk shows.
16. I watch so I can forget about things.
17. They help me pass time when I'm bored.
20. It relaxes me.
23. I watch when I have nothing to do.
25. Watching talk shows help me rest.
26. It gives me something to do.
27. Talk shows allow me to unwind.

The instrumental items were:

Why do you view talk shows?

12. Because they entertain me.
14. Talk shows are stimulating.
17. They help me learn about others.
18. They help me learn about myself.
21. So I can learn what can happen to me.
22. Talk shows are exciting to watch.

Simple summed indices were created from these items. Ritualistic item scores ranged from nine to forty-five; instrumental item scores ranged from six to thirty.

Index for Stress

Mood Adjective checklists are a popular method of gathering data about an individual's behavior and cognitive components of his/her reactions to different situations. In 1967, Thayer performed factor analysis on the responses of American undergraduates to a number of mood describing adjectives. Four monopolar factors were extracted loaded with arousal describing adjectives. The four factors and their dimensions were:

- General activation: lively, active, full of pep, energetic, vigorous, activated
- High activation: clutched up, jittery, stirred up, fearful, intense

- General deactivation: at rest, still, leisurely, quiescent, quiet
- Deactivation-sleep: sleep, sleepy, drowsy, tired

Later Thayer realized many intercorrelations of the dimensions, and determined that it should be bipolar--stress and arousal. The stress factor is a combination of the two original monopolar factors "high activation" and "general activation." The arousal factor is a combination of the "general deactivation" and the "deactivation-sleep" factors.

A new list of 45 adjectives was devised. The response scale is "definitely feel" (++) ; "feel slightly" (+); "definitely do not feel" (-); and "do not understand" (?). If a (++) has been marked, score 2, if a (+) has been marked score 1; otherwise score 0. Scores for all adjectives are added to obtain a total score for that factor.

The dependent variable, stress, was operationalized by summing the scores for 19 active adjectives (which indicate stress or arousal), and had a score range of 0-38; the 7 deactive adjectives (which indicate relaxation), had a score range of 0-14. The Active items were: tense, worried, apprehensive, bothered, uneasy, dejected, up-tight, jittery, nervous, distressed, fearful, active, energetic, vigorous, alert, lively, activated, stimulated and aroused. Simple summed indices were created from these items with scores ranging from one to nineteen. The Deactive items were: drowsy, tired, idle, sluggish, sleepy, somnolent, and passive. Simple summed indices were created from these items with scores ranging from one to seven.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS-PC analysis of variance program.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Hypothesis #1: Activation/Stress will be higher in the high and low-confrontational than in the responsible and happy-talk formats.

The results in Table 1 indicate that Hypothesis #1 is partially supported. As predicted, the high-confrontational talk-show format did produce more activation/stress. However, the happy-talk format unexpectedly produced more activation/stress than the low-confrontational and responsible talk-show formats. The ANOVA shown in Table 2 indicates a significant difference among the means.

Table 1. Mean Levels of the Activation/Stress Index by Talk-Show Format

Talk show formats	Number of cases	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>For entire population</i>	103	23.29	21.97
High-Confrontational	24	36.70	28.62
Happy-Talk	26	23.00	20.58
Low-Confrontational	28	20.71	18.13
Responsible	25	13.60	13.02

Table 2. ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress

Source		Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	p
Talk-show formats	3	6856.59	2285.53	5.338	.002*
Residual	99	42386.67	428.14		
Total	102	49243.26	482.77		

*p < .05

Hypothesis 1a: Activation/Stress level will be higher in the high-confrontational than in the low-confrontational talk show format.

As predicted, respondents who viewed the high-confrontational talk-show format evidenced higher activation/stress levels than those who viewed the low-confrontational talk show format (see Table 1). This hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis #2

Deactivation/Stress will be higher in the responsible and happy-talk than in the low-confrontational and high-confrontational formats.

The results shown in Table 3 partially support this hypothesis. As predicted, the responsible talk-show format did produce the highest level of deactivation/stress. However, the happy-talk show format produced the second *lowest* level of deactivation/stress. The ANOVA in Table 4 indicates a significant difference among these means.

Hypothesis # 2A

Deactivation/Stress will be higher in the happy-talk format than in the responsible format.

Table 3 shows that the responsible talk-show format produced the highest level of deactivation/stress of all the talk-show formats. The happy-talk show format however, produced *less* deactivation/stress than the responsible and low-confrontational format. Therefore this hypothesis was not supported.

Table 3. Mean Levels of the Deactivation/Stress Index by Talk-Show Format

Talk show format	Number of cases	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>For entire population</i>	118	2.24	3.28
Responsible	30	3.33	3.62
Low-Confrontational	29	2.82	3.39
Happy-Talk	30	1.86	3.49
High-Confrontational	29	.93	1.98

Hypothesis #3: Activation/Stress will be higher for respondents who perceive the talk shows to be real.

Table 8 indicates that the perceived reality covariate did not significantly predict levels of activation/stress. Therefore, activation/stress levels for viewers who perceive the

talk show to be an accurate representation of real life (perceived reality) was not significantly higher than for viewers who did not believe talk shows to be real. Thus, this hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis #4: Instrumental viewers will have higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers.

Instrumental viewers, or those who tune in to talk-shows looking for information, did have higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers, or those who tune in for habitual reasons. This hypothesis was supported. Tables 5 and 6 indicate that the covariates ritualistic and instrumental viewing were significant when tested with the main effect, activation/stress.

Table 4 shows there was a significant difference between the means of the talk-show formats when tested with deactivation/stress.

Table 4. ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Deactivation/Stress

Source	df	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	Significance of F
Talk show format	3	99.74	33.24	3.25	.024*
Residual	114	1166.13	10.22		
Total	117	1265.87	10.81		

* $p < .05$

Table 5. Results of Entering Ritualistic Viewing Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Stress/Activation

Source	df	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	Significance of F
Ritualistic viewing	1	3432.245	3432.245	8.512	.004*
Talk show format	3	5445.937	1815.312	4.502	.005*
Explained	4	9919.994	2479.999	6.150	.000*
Residual	96	38710.679	403.236		
Total	100	48630.673	486.307		

*p<.05

The remaining covariates viewing frequency, and perceived reality were insignificant when tested separately with the main effect of talk-show formats on activation/stress. However, the main effect, talk show format, remained significant at the .05 level when tested with the covariates.

Table 6. Results of Entering Instrumental Viewing Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress

Source	df	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	Significance of F
Instrumental viewing	1	4492.985	4492.985	11.570	.001*
Talk show format	3	6102.968	2034.323	5.238	.002*
Explained	4	11272.185	2818.046	7.257	.000*
Residual	97	37669.159	388.342		
Total	101	48941.343	484.568		

*p<.05

Table 7. Results of Entering Viewing Frequency Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress

Source	df	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	Significance of F
Viewing Frequency	1	124.737	124.737	.290	.591
Talk Show Format	3	7549.731	2516.577	5.857	.001*
Explained	4	7765.284	1941.321	4.518	.002*
Residual	96	41247.528	429.662		
Total	100	49012.812	490.128		

*p < .05

Table 8. Results of Entering Perceived Reality Covariate into ANOVA of Main Effect of Talk-Show Formats on Activation/Stress

Source	df	Sum of squares	Mean square	F-ratio	Significance of F
Perceived Reality	1	518.923	518.923	1.207	.275
Talk-Show Format	3	7331.578	2443.859	5.685	.001*
Explained	4	7852.885	1963.221	4.567	.002*
Residual	95	40841.625	429.912		
Total	99	48694.510	491.864		

*p < .05

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Activation/stress will be higher in the high and low-confrontational talk show formats than in the responsible and happy-talk show formats.

The first hypothesis predicted that activation/stress will be higher in the high and low-confrontational talk show formats than in the responsible and happy talk show formats. This hypothesis was partially supported.

Viewers of the happy-talk format evidenced more feelings of activation/stress than the viewers of the low-confrontational and responsible formats. This is the direct opposite of what was predicted. A closer look at the tape may provide an explanation.

The content of the happy-talk show tape may provide clues as to why it would produce feelings of activation/stress. The tape shows a couple who claim that they haven't seen each other for over nine years. The woman is in high anticipation, waiting to see if the man she has loved "forever" (as she stated) would be single and willing to rekindle their romance. A few minutes later, the man appears. She is obviously happy to see him, and he rushes to her side with a long-stemmed rose in tow as he tells her, *yes I am single*, and *yes I do want to be with you now* and *yes I've loved you forever* and *let's discuss marriage because I never want to lose you again*.

This is the classic example of a fairy-tale love come true, so what could have been stressful about viewing this tape? There are several reasons as to why this format could have

produced more feelings of stress/activation than the low-confrontational and responsible formats.

First of all, for the first few minutes the woman was proclaiming her love for this man and how she would give anything to be by his side again. The man was not present on stage, and in fact, she did not know whether he would even *want* to be with her again. The *surprise element* of this situation could have produced feelings of stress/activation because the woman appeared to be setting herself up for a big let-down. She had revealed that she did not *look* the same as she did over nine years ago (she had gained weight), and that she had last heard that he was married. Therefore, the high level of anxiety and anticipation of this guest could have been passed down to the viewer as well. Thus, when the tape stopped and the stress test began, the viewers never forgot that level of anticipation. This is highly likely, as Lang et al. (1995) discovered that “arousing messages are remembered better than calm messages.”

Perhaps the subject of love is a stressful one in itself. This means that the higher level of activation/stress evidenced by this group may be of a personal nature. Personal dispositions may have contributed to the results of the stress test for all of the groups. The tape showed a couple who have apparently found love in each other; this could have aroused amorous feelings for those viewers in good relationships or stressful feelings for those in bad relationships.

In all cases, the viewers of the high-confrontation talk show format evidenced more activation/stress than the viewers of all of the other talk show formats. The content of the high-confrontational talk show (i.e. the fight scene) provides a reason as to why the viewers would evidence more stress. Gerbner (1995) stated, “the more you watch violence and anger,

the more you stress yourself.” But what would cause viewers of a happy-talk show format to evidence more stress than viewers of a low-confrontational talk show?

Gender of host. Gender may play a role in the difference in stress/activation levels. Perhaps the style of the male hosts (Phil Donahue and Jerry Springer) is more soothing to the viewer than the styles of the female hosts Jenny Jones, a former comedian who is notorious for “putting her guests on the spot,” and Sally Jessy Raphael, whose style is to look dead into the camera (as if she’s talking to the viewers at home) when asking the guests intimate questions.

Studio audience. The energy level of the studio audience may offer clues as to why some shows are more stressful to view as well. For example, Jenny Jones’ studio audience members are known to jump out of their seats, and scream insults at the guests. In contrast, Phil Donahue’s audience members raise their hands to ask a question, and are generally more polite than Jenny Jones’ audience. This could explain why Jones’ show, which dealt with reuniting first loves, produced greater feelings of stress/activation than Donahue’s show, which dealt with child abuse. (The exact opposite was expected; Donahue’s show was predicted to produce greater feelings of stress/activation than the Jenny Jones show).

Group interaction. The happy-talk respondents appeared to be *more relaxed* with one another than the other groups. The group’s interactions with one another were more aligned with a family gathering than with a classroom. The respondents were clearly more comfortable with one another, and more familiar with the idea of taking part in an experiment, as if they had been subjects in other experiments before.

Hypothesis 1a: Activation/Stress will be higher in the high-confrontational than in the low-confrontational talk show format.

This hypothesis was supported. As predicted, the high confrontational talk show produced more feelings of activation/stress among the respondents than the low-confrontational talk show. It is suggested that the fight scene present in the high-confrontational show may have contributed to the respondents' higher level of activation/stress. No fight scene was present in the low-confrontational talk show, although the couple did exchange verbal insults.

Hypothesis 2: Deactivation/stress will be higher in the responsible and happy-talk show formats.

This hypothesis was not supported. The happy-talk format produced the second *lowest* level of deactivation/stress. Ironically, this means that for this particular group of respondents, watching a show about reuniting first loves (the happy talk format) was more stressful to view than watching a show about child abuse (the responsible format).

Time of day. This deviation can be explained by the time of day that the experiment was conducted. For example the experiment was conducted with the "responsible" group at 9:00 a.m. on a Monday morning. The Stress/Activation checklist asks the respondents if they feel *tired* or *somnolent* or *drowsy*. First-class-of-the-day tiredness could have contributed to the higher level of deactivation/stress by this group, and not necessarily the material presented in the talk show.

By contrast, the happy-talk group was given the experiment at 1:10 in the afternoon, in the middle of the week. This group could have been more alert than the responsible group.

Hypothesis 2a: Deactivation/Stress will be higher in the happy-talk format than in the responsible format.

Not only was this hypothesis not supported, the opposite of what was predicted occurred. The responsible format group's deactivation/stress level was higher than the happy-talk group's deactivation/stress level. Again, the time of day that the experiment was conducted could have been a major factor in this deviation from the prediction.

Hypothesis #3: Stress/Activation will be higher for respondents who perceive the talk shows to be real.

This hypothesis was not supported. Respondents who felt that the talk shows were an accurate representation of real life did not have higher activation/stress levels than the other respondents. The operationalization of the perceived reality index could hold explanations as to why this hypothesis was not supported.

The perceived reality index consisted of two questions. These items were:

Talk shows present things as they really are in the world.

Talk shows let me see how other people live.

These two items were originally used as a perceived reality index for a soap opera study (from which much of this research is drawn). It is suggested here that although the two genres (soap operas and talk shows) have their similarities, they also have their differences.

One major difference between the two genres is the format. Soap operas follow a story line, using each character more than once so that the audience member can get to know the character and understand his/her problems. Talk shows, on the other hand, use new characters and new story lines daily; the only familiar face would be that of the host and a few

repeat guests. The talk show guest literally gets “15 minutes of fame” to tell his or her unique situation, after which he or she is brushed to the side so that the next guest can vent his/her problems. Unlike the soap opera format, which uses real places and current events as a backdrop for its plots, the talk show format simply does not allow for the viewer to bond with the genre, which hinders the viewer from accepting the genre as a portrait of everyday reality.

Secondly, the relationships between viewers and soap operas and viewers and talk shows are different. Research has suggested that heavy viewers bond with the characters, and some even go so far as to mail gifts, letters, etc., to them. They just don't send mail, but letters requesting that the two characters “stay together” or “work things out.” Some fans of the soap opera believe these characters to be real people, thus allowing the fans to evidence a higher degree of perceived reality.

By contrast, viewers of the talk show genre may bond with the host, but not necessarily with the guests because the guests change daily, as do the topics. It is suggested here that some of the guests are so outrageous that it is *evident* that they are deviants of the norm. (After all, the guests' unique problems are their tickets to get on the talk show in the first place). So, talk show viewers are *more aware* of the fact that talk television is not representative of real life. Heavy viewers who call or write in to the talk shows may not be as concerned with the featured guests as they are with becoming guests themselves. There is very little chance for a soap opera viewer to become a featured character by contacting the show, thus a viewer's motives for contacting the soap opera is of an entirely different nature.

The differences between the two genres has been outlined here to illustrate that the soap opera perceived reality index used in this study may not have been an appropriate index

to measure the perceived reality of talk show viewers, for one major reason: the nature of most talk shows showcase the *abnormal* behavior of the guests, thus blocking most viewers from accepting the material as an accurate representation of the real world.

(Especially since the deviant guest is often told by the studio audience, the on-stage therapist, and the host, “that it is not normal to behave this way,” or “it is wrong for you to do...,” etc.).

Hypothesis #4: Instrumental viewers will have higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers.

This hypothesis was supported. It is suggested here that viewers who have specific motives for tuning in to talk shows will be more affected by them.

Using Rubin’s (1984) definition of the two types of viewers, (instrumental viewers seek information, whereas ritualistic viewers watch television out of habit) it is evident that the instrumental viewer would be more affected by television than the habitual viewer; this is supported in this study.

In addition, Bonapace et al. (1995), suggest that talk show viewers are becoming numb to society’s ills, are frustrated because they cannot offer a helping hand to the talk show guests, and are getting a skewed reality from these shows. Therefore, if instrumental viewers are paying closer attention than ritualistic viewers, it is assumed that they are more likely than ritualistic viewers to be affected by these shows. The results indicate that instrumental viewers evidence higher activation/stress levels than ritualistic viewers. By contrast, it is suggested that ritualistic viewers (i.e. those who view out of habit) are less motivated in their viewing, and thus less likely (than instrumental viewers) to be affected by what they see.

Limitations to the study

There are three major limitations to this study:

Lacking previous research. Aside from content analysis, very little research has been done on the talk show genre, thus requiring the present study to rely on soap opera research. Although the two genres are similar, there are differences between them that may have affected this study.

Viewing time. Viewing time was limited. The experiments were conducted in the respondents' classrooms during regular class periods. Class periods last approximately 50 minutes, whereas an entire talk show will run about 45 minutes (excluding commercial breaks). Therefore, talk show viewing time was reduced to 20 minutes because additional time was needed to administer the questionnaires, give the stress/arousal checklist, and conduct a follow-up discussion about the experiment. Cutting the talk show tape to about half of its running time may have skewed the results of the experiment because the cyclical nature of the talk show was interrupted. The flow of the talk show usually consists of: a) introduction of the guests and their situations; b) the introduction of conflicting views; c) the climax of the controversy; and d) the expert guest who takes control of the situation and offers soothing advice to the guests.

Sometimes the expert calms the guest, which may in turn, calm and relax the viewer. The results of the experiment might have been different if the respondents had viewed the final moments of the talk show when the expert appeared to calm the guests.

Demographics. The demographics of the four respondent groups was a limitation the study. The four groups were not comparable--the group of respondents that viewed the *low-*

confrontational talk show format contained the most minorities; whereas the group that viewed the *responsible* talk show format contained several older, non-traditional students. However, the evidence tends to elaborate that the respondents' race or age may not have been a contributing factor to the results.

Suggestions for Future Study

A replica of this study needs to be undertaken on a much larger scale. The results of this study indicate *yes* viewing certain talk show formats can lead to stress. However, it is not known which *aspect* of the talk show is producing the stressful feelings. Is it the studio audience, the style of the hosts, the emotional state of the guests, or the topics discussed? Every aspect of the talk show genre needs to be examined before we can say with confidence that 'talk shows are dangerous to view' (Bonapace et al., 1995).

Second, this study needs to be replicated across gender lines. For example, women are more often talk show guests, and are more likely to be crying or upset on the show (Greenberg, et al. 1995). Therefore, this leads to the question: are women more likely to be stressed by talk shows than men? This would be an interesting approach.

Third, the Stress/Arousal Checklist should be implemented to determine the viewers' stress/arousal levels in relationship to other types of programming.

Recommendations

The power of being on television is so overwhelming for talk show guests that they literally ignore the consequences of airing their personal problems in front of millions of people.

The power of judging and frowning upon social deviants is so overwhelming that millions tune into talk shows daily just to see others make a spectacle out of themselves.

This is the power of the media in all of their ramifications: instant “fame” for some, and instant entertainment for others. This study was primarily influenced by the often touted suggestion that talk shows are dangerous to view. Critics claim talk show viewers are prone to suffer a higher level of perceived reality, to accept other’s pain and suffering as banal and ordinary, and finally to become frustrated because they cannot lend a helping hand to that suffering individual on their television set.

This study found that certain talk shows can produce feelings of activation/stress, but in one instance a show about reuniting first loves proved to be more stressful to view than a show about child abuse that did not occur. The point is that it is not understood *why* they are stressful to view.

On a larger scale, if this study was conducted on soap operas, sitcoms, sports, and the evening news, the same result would be expected. Viewing these shows can prove stressful, but are there critics raging about canceling Monday Night Football? Absolutely not. Talk television is a relatively new phenomenon, and now it’s the talk show’s turn to be criticized, just as its predecessor, the soap opera, was criticized years ago.

This author contends that the relationship between stress and daytime television talk shows is one that should not be overlooked in the research community. Whether the stress produced is of a positive or a negative nature, it still pose a danger to the most impressionistic group of viewers: the children.

In addition, if talk shows do create feelings of frustration, shatters our faith in others, and gives us a false perception of reality as Strassburger (1995) contends, maybe daytime television talk shows might improve their usefulness if they allotted more on-air time to the *experts*, who really need to be heard the most.

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APPENDIX

April, 1996

Dear ISU Student,

You have been invited to participate in an experiment that deals with the effects of viewing daytime television talk shows. We are only requesting your help, **it is not mandatory that you participate.** The results of this experiment will be used as part of a thesis entitled *Can We Talk?: The Effects of Daytime Television Talk Shows on Its Viewers.*

The experiment will included a fifteen minute questionnaire and the viewing of a talk show. Following the talk show, you will be asked to choose from a list of adjectives to indicate how you feel at that moment. The entire experiment will last about an hour.

Please understand that nowhere on the questionnaire are there any special codes to identify you, nor will we ask your name. **Your individual responses are anonymous.** Also, this is a one-shot experiment, so you will not be contacted later for a follow-up to this experiment.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this experiment, please feel free to contact me, or my major professor Dr. Jane Peterson, at 294-4340, I'm really looking forward to working with you, and I appreciate your cooperation.

Thank you.

Zondra Hughes

JLMC graduate student

Television Talk Show Survey

You have been asked to participate in this television talk show survey. We appreciate your willingness to participate and encourage you to be honest with your responses. All individual responses are confidential. Thanks for your cooperation.

I. Your Viewing Habits

Please circle the number of days that you watched a particular talk show last week.

1.	Jenny Jones	0	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Ricki Lake	0	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Oprah Winfrey	0	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Jerry Springer	0	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Carnie Wilson	0	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Geraldo Rivera	0	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Maurry Povich	0	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Leeza Gibbons	0	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Sally J. Raphael	0	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Tempestt Bledsoe	0	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Montel Williams	0	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Phil Donahue	0	1	2	3	4	5

II. Why do you watch talk shows?

Please read the following statements that identify a possible reason for why you watch talk shows. Circle the number that identifies how strongly you feel about each statement.

	Strongly Agree			Strongly Disagree		
13. Because they entertain me.	5	4	3	2	1	
14. It's just something I do.	5	4	3	2	1	
15. Talk shows are stimulating.	5	4	3	2	1	
16. I just like to watch talk shows.	5	4	3	2	1	
17. I watch so I can forget about things.	5	4	3	2	1	
18. They help me learn about others.	5	4	3	2	1	
19. They help me learn about myself.	5	4	3	2	1	
20. They help me pass time when I'm bored.	5	4	3	2	1	
21. It relaxes me.	5	4	3	2	1	
22. So I can learn what can happen to me.	5	4	3	2	1	
23. Talk shows are exciting to watch.	5	4	3	2	1	
24. I watch when I have nothing to do.	5	4	3	2	1	
25. Watching talk shows help me rest.	5	4	3	2	1	
26. Talk shows amuse me.	5	4	3	2	1	
27. It gives me something to do.	5	4	3	2	1	
28. Talk shows allow me to unwind.	5	4	3	2	1	

III. In your opinion

Please read the following statements below. Circle the appropriate number that indicates to what extent you Agree or Disagree with each statement.

29. Talk shows present things as they really are in the world.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

30. Talk shows let me see how other people live.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

31. I would love to have my favorite talk show host as a friend.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

32. I feel as though I can really relate to my favorite host.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

33. Most people can be trusted.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

34. It is important for me to visit with friends, relatives or neighbors.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

35. Most people are charitable, if the situation calls for it.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

36. I feel like I am a part of a circle of friends.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

37. Most people can be depended upon to come through in a crisis.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

38. I am interested in what happens to people I know.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

39. Most people are basically honest.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

40. It's important for me to participate in activities with other people.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

41. Most people are concerned about the welfare of others.

Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

42. Being able to help others is a joy of living.
Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree
43. Most people will keep a promise.
Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree
44. Most people will try to be fair.
Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree
45. Most people will go out of their way to help someone.
Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree
46. Most people will lend a helping hand if given the chance.
Strongly Agree 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Disagree

IV. How do you feel right now?

Below is a list of adjectives that may describe how you feel. Please circle to what degree you feel a particular way. Use the scale below:

	Definitely Feel	Slightly Feel	Do NOT feel	Do not know
47. Tense	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
48. Worried	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
49. Apprehensive	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
50. Bothered	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
51. Uneasy	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
52. Dejected	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
53. Up-tight	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
54. Jittery	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
55. Nervous	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
56. Distressed	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
57. Fearful	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
58. Active	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
59. Energetic	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
60. Vigorous	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
61. Alert	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
62. Lively	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
63. Activated	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
64. Stimulated	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
65. Aroused	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
66. Drowsy	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
67. Tired	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
68. Idle	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
69. Sluggish	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
70. Sleepy	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
71. Somnolent	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)
72. Passive	(++)	(+)	(-)	(?)

V. Your background

Please tell us about yourself.

73. Your age: _____

74. Your major: _____

75. Sex: Male _____

Female _____

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