Sympathizing with a serial killer

An explanation of the success of

DEXTER

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Summary

Today's great range of drama series on television indicates that this format is very successful. The success of such television programs can be explained by different factors. The current research focuses on the series Dexter which tells the story of a police forensics expert. At night he becomes a serial killer of criminals who he believes have escaped justice. The investigated factors are the format of the series, moral judgment regarding the main character, identification, parasocial interaction, and transportation. The main objective is to determine whether these factors can explain the success of the show. A sample of 134 Dexter viewers participated in an online survey, answering statements about the five chosen factors and giving an overall evaluation of the show. Results show that all factors contribute to the success of the series. Especially the format and the identification with Dexter (the main character) seem to play a central role. The general lack of research about the influence of the format of TV programs as success determinant can be reduced by the results of this research.

Samenvatting

Het tegenwoordig grote aanbod aan drama series op televisie wijst op het succes van dit format. Het succes van een televisie programma kan aan de hand van verschillende factoren worden onderzocht. Het huidige onderzoek richt zich met name op de serie Dexter. Deze draait om een forensisch onderzoeker bij de politie, die 's nachts verandert in een seriemoordenaar. Hij vermoordt andere moordenaars die hun straf ontlopen zijn. De onderzochte factoren zijn het format van de serie, 'moral judgment' over de hoofdpersoon, identificatie, parasociale interactie en transportation. Centrale doelstelling van dit onderzoek is het om aan de hand van deze factoren het succes van de serie te onderzoeken. Een steekproef van 134 Dexter kijkers heeft deelgenomen door een online enquête in te vullen. Het wordt aangetoond dat alle genoemde factoren bijdrage leveren aan het succes van de serie. Met name het format en identificatie blijken een belangrijke rol te spelen. Het tegenwoordig gebrek aan onderzoek over de invloed van de factor format kan gereduceerd worden door de resultaten van dit onderzoek.

Introduction

Nowadays the great range of television formats such as animation, comedy, romance, reality, drama et cetera has something to offer for almost every taste and every viewer's interest. Popular examples of drama series are *Prison Break, House, Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* which are American productions, broadcasted successfully in many countries. The content of the various drama series can differ enormously. However, one common ground is that they are generally all fictional, compared to for instance the format of Reality TV. Taking a closer look at the content of the drama series *Dexter* it shows that this is fictional as well. The series debuted in 2006 in America and since then has become a great success in many countries all over the world. Altogether there have been six seasons with 12 episodes each and two more seasons á 12 episodes are already in production (Showtime Networks Inc., 2012). Dexter Morgan, the main character, works as a blood spatter analyst for the Miami Homicide Police Department. In his free time he is a serial killer who murders people he considers to be 'guilty' (murderers who escaped justice). In view of the brutal way in which *Dexter* kills people, the question arises what makes the series so attractive to the viewers and why they do not convict what Dexter does, but even hope that he will not get discovered. On the background of moral norms which tell us *not* to kill people intentionally (Timmons, 2002), it is a justifiable question why viewers even like Dexter as a person and most important, which factors can explain the success of the series.

Factors and Theories

The success of a series can depend on numerous factors. In this paragraph, certain factors and theories are discussed which could probably help to explain how and why a certain television format, in this case *Dexter*, can be so successful. According to the great range of drama series on television, this format seems to be very lucrative. Until now there is little research about the role of television formats in general. By means of the social identity theory Trepte (2005) tried to explain why people chose a particular television program. However, specific research about the influence of the format on the success of a series is still needed. The current study aims to investigate the role of the format in explaining the success of the series *Dexter*. Due to the lack of research, the factor *format* is made up by special characteristics of the series which distinguishes it from others from a similar genre.

As mentioned before, people's common moral consciousness is very paradoxical here. A relevant theory explaining this phenomenon is the theory of justice. According to research

from Lerner and Miller (1978) people want to live in a just world where everyone gets what he/she deserves. Criminals do not fit into that world. Further research from Lerner (1980) showed that people's desire for justice increases through the experience of injustice. An inner conflict arises through supporting a justified punishment of guilty persons (the desire for a just world) and the fact that by killing people Dexter becomes guilty as well. According to their strong desire for a just world, this could be a first explanation of people's interest in a series like *Dexter*. Various studies about retributive justice in the media revealed that it can be seen as an entertaining factor. The assumption of people's fundamental need to believe in a just world in which individuals get what they deserve is called the justice motive theory (Lerner, 1980). Rubin and Peplau (1973) conducted research about children's development of justice motives through fairy tales. Their findings indicated that children learn from an early age that goodness has to win and badness has to lose. By solving crimes by day and committing them at night, Dexter seems to be 'goodness' and 'badness' at the same time. This makes the series even more interesting. In addition, various researches showed that justice themes grab attention because of justice being a basic need in people's life (e.g. Mikula, Scherer, & Altenstaedt, 1998; Montada, 1993; Zillmann, 2003). According to the integrated model of enjoyment for crime drama (Raney & Bryant, 2002) enjoyment is created by the overlap of two factors. One factor is the viewer's judgment about the *character*, the other one is his judgment about *justice*. At the point where these two judgments overlap enjoyment is created.

Another relevant theory is the disposition theory of drama (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). It states that the viewer's enjoyment increases when a liked media character experiences something positive just as when a disliked one experiences something negative. This is connected to the viewer's moral attitude. The viewer likes or dislikes a media character after deciding about his/her moral. Following this assumption Zillmann and Bryant (1975) found out that people enjoy seeing a bad media character getting punished without feeling guilty, because it is morally appropriate. If this theory is correct, the question arises if viewers of *Dexter* justify his behavior by considering it as morally acceptable. The factor *moral judgment* can be used to investigate this.

Searching for other factors which make *Dexter* so attractive to its viewers, identification with media characters can be investigated. A commonly used definition of identification is that it is a process where the viewer reacts to the experiences of the media character as if the events where happening to himself. The viewer indirectly takes the place of the media character (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). A similar definition is given

by Cohen (2001) who states that the term identification means that the viewer experiences the story and the events of the series from the inside. He feels like becoming absorbed in the mediated world and he understands the character and his feelings. Identification mostly takes place with a single character (Setir & Green, 2010). In the case of *Dexter*, this process gets supported by the narrative perspective. The story is told by Dexter himself so that the viewer does not have to endeavor much to imagine Dexter's thoughts, feelings and motives. This makes it much easier to enter into his world and to identify with him. Von Feilitzen and Linné (1975) distinguish between two sorts of identification. They suggest that the viewer either identifies with a media character because he wants to be like him or that identification takes place because of certain obvious characteristics. The latter is also confirmed by research pointing out that people tend to identify with characters of the same age (Haarwood, 1999), culture (Greenberg & Atkin, 1982; Zillmann et al., 1995) and gender (Trepte, 2004). Furthermore, Livingstone (1998) found that identification with media characters takes place on the basis of similar perspectives, values and interests. With regard to *Dexter* it is questionable if this could be the case. Dexter Morgan is portrayed as a sociopath, not very emotional, who describes himself as "a (very neat) monster" (*Dexter*, Season 1). On the basis of this, it is interesting to find out if and why people *identify* with Dexter.

Another factor which possibly explains the success of the series is termed parasocial interaction. Horton and Wohl stated in 1956 that the earlier mentioned factor identification partly contributes to the creation of parasocial interaction. According to them parasocial interaction is a central attribute of mass media communication. They described it as the viewer's illusionary experience of interacting with the media character. The viewer reacts to the media character as he would react to a friend in real life (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Here, imagination plays an important role. Later research describes parasocial interaction as a face-to-face but one-sided interaction in interpersonal communication between persona, for example Dexter Morgan, and the user (Schramm, 2008). 'One-sided' means that the interaction only comes from the viewer instead of both parties. Such a situation arises through the viewer's reaction on the media character who challenges him by simulating a sort of interaction (Cohen, 2006). According to Schramm and Hartmann (2008) parasocial interaction can be explained in terms of two phenomena. The first one is termed *paracommunication,* which describes the subjective feeling of the viewer to be in a relationship with the persona although knowing that this is just an illusion. Thus this phenomenon is about communication. The second one is called *parasocial processing* and according to it, parasocial interaction is a form of interaction rather than communication

because interaction happens without purpose. It is seen as a sub-form of communication. Research showed that enjoyment is a possible outcome of a parasocial experience (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Assuming that the factor *parasocial interaction* contributes to the success of the series, it will be investigated in the current research.

As mentioned before, identification with a media character includes that viewers become absorbed in the mediated world. Another theory which describes this phenomenon is the transportation theory. According to Gerrig (1993) transportation means that the viewer feels like becoming absorbed from his actual location into the narrative world. He becomes fully engaged in the series and his focus totally lies on the events happening in the story (Green & Brock, 2000). The viewer feels like being part of the other world. This process of transportation is described as a general cognitive state (Green & Brock, 2000) which tries to take viewers away from their reality and to entertain them. Sestir and Green (2010) stated that the more a viewer becomes absorbed in a mediated world, the more he responds to the characters and the events in that world, cognitively as well as emotionally. *Transportation* can be expected to play a role in explaining the success of *Dexter*.

Research Question and Hypotheses

On the basis of the literature it is obvious that different variables can influence the appreciation of a certain media program and eventually explain its success. This study concentrates on the factors format, moral judgment, identification, parasocial interaction, and transportation. Until now, there is little research regarding the series *Dexter* and especially regarding the factors format and moral judgment. With the results of a survey research, this study aims to answer the question: *Which factors can explain the success of Dexter?* On the basis of the research question and the earlier mentioned factors and theories, five hypotheses were formulated:

The format consists of characteristics of the series which differentiates it from others. It seems to play an important role in explaining the success of a series but based on the lack of research, the hypothesis cannot yet be scientifically supported. It is expected that:
H1: *The more the respondents like the format of the series, the higher they will rate the series.*

Due to the fact that people want to live in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978) it could be expected that people score high on moral judgment in general. In the case of this research, it is expected that people's moral judgment regarding Dexter is different. Viewers try to protect

him from being caught. By morally supporting Dexter, their understanding of moral judgment differs from the general one. Based on this, the second hypothesis was formulated.

H2: *The higher the respondents score on moral judgment regarding the person Dexter, the higher they score on identification.*

Investigating the influence of gender identity on media choices, Trepte (2004) found out that people tend to identify more with media characters of the same gender. In accordance with these findings, the third hypothesis was formulated.

H3: *Men score higher on identification than women.*

According to Horton and Wohl (1956) parasocial interaction is a central attribute of mass media communication where the viewer experiences a sort of interaction with the media character. This makes him feel more comfortable. Based on this, the fourth hypothesis was formulated.

H4: *The higher the respondents score on parasocial interaction, the higher they rate the series.*

The last hypothesis is based on research from Green and Brock (2000). According to them, transportation makes the viewer feel like becoming fully engaged in the series. People who get absorbed into the world of Dexter are expected to give a higher rating of the series.

H5: *The higher the respondents score on transportation, the higher they rate the series.*

Method

Respondents and Procedure

All in all, 134 respondents participated in this research. They were contacted via social media, especially via facebook, studivz (a German social network platform for students) and a forum for Dexter fans. The data was collected through an online survey. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 48 ($M = 25.01$; $SD = 3.83$). 56.7% of them were male and 43.3% were female. They had different nationalities, with 26% of them being Dutch, 69% being German and 5% of the participants being American, Australian, Belgian, British, Danish, Hungarian, or Indian. Except for eight respondents with a lower educational level, all participants reached at least a general qualification to university entrance or to higher practical education (Dutch equivalent: HBO). On the basis of an online survey, the five factors (format, moral judgment, identification, parasocial interaction, and transportation) were investigated. Each factor consisted of various items (in the form of statements) which participants had to answer on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. All items of the survey fully referred to the series *Dexter*. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

Independent Variables

Format

The survey contained ten questions about the format of the series *Dexter*. Until now, there is little research about format as an explaining factor. Therefore, the statements were devised on the basis of different characteristics of the series. Examples of the created items were "I like the soundtrack of the series" or "The storyline of Dexter is interesting". Participants were asked to rate the items on a 5-point Likert Scale. Because of a low Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .53$) an explorative factor analysis was conducted. The 'Varimax with Kaiser Normalization method' was used. The rotation converged on 6 iterations. By using the extraction method 'Principal axis factoring', three underlying factors with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 were found. They all loaded on the general factor format so that a regression analysis could be conducted with five of the originally ten items with format as the independent factor and rating as the dependent factor. The items number 2, 3, 4, 7 and 9 were used. These five items built the factor format with an acceptable reliability considering their explaining character ($\alpha = .65$).

Moral judgment

The second independent factor used in the survey was moral judgment. The participants had to indicate on a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), in what regard the seven items applied to them. A higher score meant that the respondents morally support Dexter. The items directly asked how participants rate Dexter's behavior. An example of an item was "I hope that Dexter will get a just punishment for what he is doing" (which is a negative item). After deleting two items (3 and 6), an acceptable reliability was reached ($\alpha =$ .69). A median was calculated so that two groups could be made up. One group was labeled by scoring below the median, the other one was labeled by scoring above the median. The people in the second group were expected to score higher on identification with Dexter. Due to lack of research in this field, some of the items were devised on the basis of general moral understandings. Three items were taken from a parasocial interaction scale from Hartmann and Schramm (2008) (items 3,4 and 6), whereas two of their items were deleted afterwards. On the basis of the two groups ($< Mdn$ and $> Mdn$), an independent sample t-test was conducted with identification as the dependent factor.

Identification

The factor identification contained ten items which investigated how much the respondents identify with Dexter. Identification was used as an independent factor in the general linear regression analysis with rating as the dependent variable. A more detailed description of this factor can be found in the section of the dependent variables.

Gender

While collecting some demographic information about the respondents, they were asked to give an indication of their gender. This information was used to investigate the third hypotheses. An independent sample t-test was conducted.

Parasocial interaction

The participants were asked to rate five statements about how Dexter affects them. The five chosen items were designed by Hartmann and Schramm (2008) who did research about parasocial interaction with media characters. Items such as "Sometimes I gesticulate towards Dexter" were used to find out if respondents who score highly on parasocial interaction also give higher ratings of the series. A 5-point Likert Scale was again used as a response scale.

The items showed an acceptable Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .75$). A regression analysis was conducted with parasocial interaction as independent factor and rating as the dependent one.

Transportation

The last independent factor was transportation. It contained eight items from Sestir and Green (2010) who did research on the effects of identification and transportation on one's temporary self concept. Examples of such items were "I could picture myself in the scene of the events shown in the series" or "The series affects me emotionally" which the participants had to rate on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Due to the poor reliability ($\alpha = .52$), two items (2 and 7) were deleted ($\alpha = .65$). By means of a linear regression analysis, this independent factor was used to investigate if people scoring highly on transportation also give a higher rating of the series.

Dependent variables

Rating

At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate the series on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent). Rating was tested as dependent variable on all five factors in a general linear regression analysis and separately as dependent variable on the factors format, parasocial interaction and transportation.

Identification

The ten items of the factor identification, used in the survey, were similar to those Cohen (2001) used in his research about "defining identification". They were adapted to Dexter's character so that participants could either identify with him or not, on a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Examples of such statements were: "I think I have a good understanding of Dexter" and "While viewing the program, I wanted Dexter to succeed in achieving his goals". The items showed a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$). Identification was used as a dependent factor to investigate if men score higher on identification than women. Furthermore, the second hypothesis was tested with identification as the dependent factor on moral judgment. The more people morally support Dexter, the more they were expected to identify with him.

Results

The hypotheses were tested with different analyses. Table 1 displays maximum reachable scores, mean scores, and standard deviation scores of the used variables. As shown in the table, especially the mean score of format was very high ($M = 20.95$; $SD = 2.46$). Furthermore, the mean scores of moral judgment ($M = 18.91$; $SD = 3.13$), identification ($M = 34.71$; $SD = 6.95$), and transportation ($M = 18.95$; $SD = 3.95$) were also relatively high. Parasocial interaction showed relatively low scores ($M = 10.87$; $SD = 3.89$). The mean score of the rating was again very high ($M = 8.96$; $SD = 0.95$).

Table 1: *Mean scores of the factors*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Maximum Reachable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Format	134	25.00	20.95	2.46
Moral Judgment	134	25.00	18.91	3.13
Identification	134	50.00	34.71	6.95
Parasocial Interaction	134	25.00	10.87	3.89
Transportation	134	30.00	18.95	3.95
Rating	134	10.00	8.69	.95
Valid N (listwise)	134			

A linear regression analysis was conducted with all five factors (format, moral judgment, identification, parasocial interaction, and transportation) as independent variables and *rating* as the dependent variable. Results showed that there was a linear relationship between at least one factor and the rating of the series, $F(1,132) = 20.66$; $p < .0005$. The five factors together explained 44.7% of the variance in the data, $R^2 = .45$. Table 2 shows that in the general linear regression analysis with all factors, only format, identification, and transportation were significant predictors of the rating of the series, $p < .0005$. Moral judgment and parasocial interaction could not significantly predict the rating, $p > .05$.

Table 2: *P-values of the factors in a general linear regression analysis*

Coefficients

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.36	.60		5.60	.000
Format	.13	.03	.33	4.52	.000
Moral Judgment	.02	.02	.08	1.10	.274
Identification	.04	.01	.29	3.37	.001
Parasocial Interaction	.01	.02	.04	.52	.603
Transportation	.04	.02	.15	1.76	.081

a. Dependent Variable: rating

To investigate the five hypotheses, different tests were carried out. After conducting a factor analysis with all items of the factor format, a regression analysis was conducted with five of the originally ten items. By means of this analysis, it was shown that format is a significant predictor of the respondents' rating of the series, $F(1,132) = 50.14$; $p < .0005$. The factor format explained 27.5% of the variance in the data, $R^2 = .28$.

After calculating the median of the factor moral judgment, an independent sample t-test was conducted to investigate the second hypothesis, $Mdn = 19$. A significant difference between the first group ($< Mdn$), and the second group ($> Mdn$) was found. The latter scored higher on identification, $t(132) = 4.81$; $p < .0005$. Furthermore, a linear regression analysis was carried out to test the two variables of the second hypothesis the other way round, with moral judgment as the dependent variable on identification. It was shown that identification is a significant predictor of moral judgment, $F(1,132) = 23.81$; $p < .0005$. Mean scores on moral judgment between men ($M = 18.85$; $SD = 3.14$) and women ($M = 18.98$; $SD = 3.14$) were almost equal.

To investigate the third hypothesis, an independent sample t-test was carried out. There was no significant difference between men and women identifying with Dexter, $t(132) = .82$; $p = .208$.

The factor parasocial interaction was a significant predictor of the respondents' rating of the series, $F(1,132) = 14.26$, $p < .0005$. The factor explained 9.8% of the variance in the data, $R^2 = .10$.

Also the factor transportation was found to be a significant predictor of the respondents' rating of the series, $F(1,132) = 30.43$; $p < .0005$. The factor explained 18.7% of the variance in the data, $R^2 = .19$.

Conclusion and Discussion

The objective of this research was to investigate certain factors, explaining the success of the series *Dexter*. Based on the results of the analysis the hypotheses can be evaluated. Furthermore, some general findings can be pointed out and recommendations as well as practical implications for further research can be given.

The first hypothesis "*The more the respondents like the format of the series, the higher they will rate the series*" is supported by the data. Drawing the attention to the high mean scores, the format seems to be a significant factor in explaining the success of the series. This assumption gets supported by the fact that format explains a great percentage of the variance in the data. The format of the series contains special characteristics which differentiates the series from others. Many items with regard to the special characteristics of *Dexter* were rated highly by the respondents. The fact that Dexter tells the story from his own perspective for example was rated with an average of 4.5 (of 5 points). 41.8% of the respondents showed the highest possible score on this item. The storyline and the curiosity about how it will continue were rated highly as well. The results of the current study emphasize the importance of the factor format in explaining the success of a series. With an acceptable reliability, the devised items can be used for further research.

The second hypothesis "*The higher the respondents score on moral judgment regarding the person Dexter, the higher they score on identification*" is also supported by the data. According to the earlier mentioned justice-motive theory (Lerner, 1980), retributive justice can be seen as an entertaining factor. Thus, moral judgment can be seen as one factor that contributes to the success of the series. As expected, the scores on the factor moral judgment show that many people seem to adapt their moral understanding to Dexter and his point of view. Based on research which says that people prefer to live in a just world (Lerner & Miller, 1978) it can be assumed that people would judge differently about general matters than they would judge about Dexter. The results of an analysis with moral judgment dependent on identification support the assumption that there is a great relation between viewers' moral judgment and how much they identify with Dexter.

With 29.8%, identification is the factor which explains most of the variance in the data. Its importance is also emphasized by the high mean score. Although Dexter is portrayed as a serial killer without emotions, he has got qualities the viewers can identify themselves with. The fact that viewers identify highly with Dexter can partly be connected to the format of the series. For example by means of the narrative perspective, people can easily understand and

reconstruct Dexter's trains of thought. Therefore it becomes easier for them to identify with him.

The third hypothesis *"Men score higher on identification than women"* could not be supported by the data. In contrast to research from Trepte (2004) who found that people tend to identify with media characters of their own gender, results did not detect any evidence supporting the hypothesis. An explanation for this unexpected result could be that those women who participated in this research may not be representative for all women. The fact that they watch *Dexter* shows their interest in the series, which then again indicates their possible interest in topics like crime, justice, brutality and tension. These are stereotypically more male than female interests. Another possible explanation supposes that male/female stereotype characteristics are not the center of attention in the series. Maybe it is not the typical stereotype 'male' qualities of Dexter people identify with but much more the desire to live in a just world. This desire is more or less fulfilled by Dexter who exclusively murders 'guilty' people who escaped justice. It seems that this understanding of 'justice' is very similar with almost equal scores on moral judgment between men and women. Other factors such as understanding Dexter's thoughts and motives seem to play a more important role in identifying with him than being male or female. This gets supported by research from Livingstone (1998) who found that identification takes place on the basis of similar values, perspectives, and interests to those of the media character.

In accordance with research from Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm, (2006) who stated that parasocial experiences create enjoyment, parasocial interaction was found to contribute to higher ratings of the series. The fourth hypothesis which stated that *"The higher the respondents score on parasocial interaction, the higher they rate the series"* could be supported. In general however, the scores on this factor were relatively low. In contrast to for example identification, parasocial interaction did not take place very often. Compared to the other factors, this one did not seem to play a very important role in explaining the success of the series.

Finally, evidence was found for the fifth hypothesis *"The higher the respondents score on transportation, the higher they rate the series"* as well. The results suggest support for research from Sestir and Green (2010) who found high correlations between transportation and enjoyment. The scores on transportation showed that the viewers often feel like being absorbed into the world of Dexter. Therefore, this factor can also partially explain the success of the series.

In the general linear regression analysis with the five factors as independent variables and rating as the dependent one, moral judgment and parasocial interaction were no significant predictors of rating, whereas the latter was tested as significant in the individual regression analysis. This could be based on a great semantic overlap with items of other factors. Cohen (2001) stated that identification and parasocial interaction can be similar in some ways. Considering the similar meanings of some items of these two factors, this could be an explanation.

It has to be mentioned that the distribution of ratings of the series was relatively small. The participants had the possibility to rate on a scale from 1 to 10. The mean score was very high whereas only one participant rated the series with a 6, as the lowest given rating. These high ratings can be explained by the viewer's likelihood to watch the series. If they did not like it, the chance of watching it would be much lower.

Regarding the research question "*Which factors can explain the success of Dexter?*" it can be concluded that almost all five factors seem to contribute to the success of the series. Especially the factors format and identification seem to play a significant role whereas the other three factors contribute to the success of the series to a lesser extent.

Practical Implications

Due to the of the lack of research with regard to format and moral judgment as potential success determinants of a TV show, the results of the current study shed more light on the influence of these two factors. It is evident that the format of the series contributes greatly to its success. With an acceptable reliability, the format scale (composing of items 2, 3, 4, 7, and 9) appears to be useful for further research about format in general. To support the success of a series, it should be advisable to choose a format containing of characteristics that distinguish the series from others from a similar genre. It could be further investigated which characteristics of a series contribute to its success.

Regarding the series *Dexter*, the factor moral judgment is also of a great importance. Viewers seem to concern themselves with this topic and it seems to attract attention. Investigating topics regarding people's moral judgment, the generated scale (containing the items 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7) can also be used for further research. It could be interesting to examine whether there is a relation between the format and a for the viewer interesting factor such as moral judgment.

Limitations and Recommendations

To this day, only little research has been conducted about the series *Dexter*. Further research is needed to support current findings about possible factors which explain the success of the series.

In general, there is little research about the factors format and moral judgment in the success of TV-series, whereas especially the format seems to play a very important role concerning this topic. Because of the comparatively low reliability values of certain factors, it should be recommended to partly conceive other questions or to use other scales or factors where reliability values are higher. Furthermore, it could be useful to apply a 7-point Likert Scale instead of a 5-point Likert Scale. In the case of this research, a 5-point Likert Scale was chosen because it is easier and clearer to the respondents. It is important to design the survey as easy as possible, but by using a 7-point Likert Scale there should be a greater variance in the data which results in a greater distribution. The value of reliability as well as the representativeness of the research could be raised by a greater amount of participants.

Almost all participants were German or Dutch students with an average age of 25 years. On the one hand this homogeneity of the group can be seen as a strong point but the results would be more representative by using a survey with greater differences (regarding e.g. age, level of education etc.) between the participants. In this case, a greater amount of participants would be necessary as well. Another problem could occur by having primarily German and Dutch participants. The questionnaire was set up in English so that as many participants as possible could be reached. It cannot be excluded that a possible language barrier could have lead to misunderstandings of the statements. To prevent this, it would be useful to set up questionnaires in the native languages of all participants so that they are able to understand everything without any language barriers. Otherwise, a question about the understanding and possible language barriers could be included at the end of the questionnaire. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Demographic information

1. Gender

   ○ male   ○ female

2. Age

3. What is the highest level of education you have reached?

4. Nationality

   ○ Dutch   ○ German   ○ Other, namely

5. How many seasons of Dexter did you watch until now?

   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ Only particular episodes

6. The following statements are about the format of the series (strongly disagree – strongly agree)

(Format items)

	1	2	3	4	5
I watch Dexter because I like that it's fictional and not real.	○	○	○	○	○
In my opinion every episode is different.	○	○	○	○	○
When one episode ends, I am curious about how it will continue.	○	○	○	○	○
The storyline of Dexter is interesting.	○	○	○	○	○
I like the soundtrack of the series.	○	○	○	○	○
The duration of an episode doesn't matter to me.	○	○	○	○	○
I like the different characters in the series.	○	○	○	○	○
The reviews of the upcoming episodes are interesting.	○	○	○	○	○
I like that Dexter tells the story from his own perspective.	○	○	○	○	○
The previews of the upcoming episodes are interesting.	○	○	○	○	○

7. Please select how much the statements apply to you (strongly disagree – strongly agree)

(Moral judgment items)

	1	2	3	4	5
I hope that Dexter will get a 'just punishment' for what he is doing.	○	○	○	○	○
I don't want Dexter to be caught.	○	○	○	○	○
I don't think about how to judge Dexter's behavior.	○	○	○	○	○
It isn't important to me if something bad happens to Dexter.	○	○	○	○	○
I find Dexter's behavior morally unacceptable.	○	○	○	○	○
I recognize qualities of Dexter which I find good or bad.	○	○	○	○	○
Dexter does things for a good cause.	○	○	○	○	○

8. Please choose the answers which best describe your opinion (strongly disagree – strongly agree)

(Identification items)

	1	2	3	4	5
While viewing Dexter I felt as if I was part of the action.	○	○	○	○	○
While viewing Dexter I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.	○	○	○	○	○
I was able to understand the events in the program in a manner similar to that in which Dexter understood them.	○	○	○	○	○
I think I have a good understanding of Dexter.	○	○	○	○	○
I tend to understand the reasons why Dexter does what he does.	○	○	○	○	○
While viewing the series I could feel the emotions Dexter portrayed.	○	○	○	○	○
During viewing I felt I could really 'get inside' Dexter's head.	○	○	○	○	○
At key moments in the series I felt I knew exactly what Dexter was going through.	○	○	○	○	○

While viewing the series I wanted Dexter to succeed in achieving his goals. 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇

When Dexter succeeds I feel joy, but when he fails I am sad. 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇

9. The following statements are about how Dexter affect s you. Please choose the answer that describes best what you think/feel. (strongly agree – strongly disagree)

(Parasocial interaction items)

	1	2	3	4	5
While watching I reacted physically to Dexter.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
Sometimes I gesticulate towards Dexter.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
Sometimes it happens to me that I talk to Dexter when he is quiet.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
I often want to state my opinion to Dexter.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
I don't want to react to Dexter.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇

10. In this last statements-part of the questionnaire, please answer how much these statements apply to you. (strongly agree – strongly disagree)

(Transportation items)

	1	2	3	4	5
While I was watching the series, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
While viewing I thought about the events occurring in the room I was in.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
I could picture myself in the scene of the events shown in the series.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
I was mentally involved in the series while watching it.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
After an episode ended, I found it easy to put it out of my mind.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇
The series affects me emotionally.	〇	〇	〇	〇	〇

I found my mind wandering while watching the series.   ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

I have a vivid mental image of Dexter.   ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

11. How would you rate the series on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
very bad									excellent
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○