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FULL PAPER

Hero or villain? The role of audience beliefs about suspense for their suspense experience

Held oder Schurke? Die Bedeutung von Publikumsvorstellungen über Spannung für das Spannungserleben

Thorsten Naab & Freya Sukalla

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Abstract: The aim of our paper is to examine the role of recipients' general media beliefs about suspense during a specific experience of suspense, thereby contributing to a more complete explanation of suspense. The audience can be expected to have formed their own beliefs about suspense based on their own viewing or reading experiences and genre knowledge. While these cognitions about suspense have been theorized to influence the specific viewing or reading experience, their empirical investigation has largely been neglected. Two studies were conducted to address this gap. Study 1 explores audience members' media beliefs about suspense using in-depth interviews. Study 2 develops a scale of media beliefs about suspense based on the results of study 1 and investigates their influence on audience members' suspense experience. Our results provide valuable evidence that audience members' media beliefs about suspense are a reasonable influence on their suspense experience.

Keywords: Suspense, narrative, suspense beliefs, survey, experiment, guided interviews

Zusammenfassung: Das Ziel unseres Beitrags ist es, die Rolle der allgemeinen medialen Überzeugungen von Rezipienten über Spannung während eines bestimmten Spannungserlebnisses zu untersuchen und so zu einer umfassenderen Erklärung von Spannung beizutragen. Es ist zu erwarten, dass sich das Publikum auf der Grundlage seiner eigenen Seh- oder Leseerfahrungen und seines Genrewissens seine eigenen Vorstellungen von Spannung gebildet hat. Bestehende theoretische Auseinandersetzungen deuten darauf hin, dass die Vorstellungen des Publikums über Spannung dessen spezifische Seh- oder Leseerfahrung beeinflussen; empirisch wurde dieser Zusammenhang aber weitgehend vernachlässigt. Zwei Studien wurden durchgeführt, um diese Lücke zu schließen. Studie 1 untersucht anhand von Tiefeninterviews die Medienüberzeugungen der Rezipienten über Spannung. Studie 2 entwickelt auf der Grundlage der Ergebnisse aus Studie 1 eine Skala subjektiver Überzeugungen über mediale Spannung und untersucht den Einfluss der Spannungswahrnehmung auf die Spannungserfahrung der Zuschauer. Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die subjektiven Vorstellungen der Zuschauer über Spannung deren Spannungserfahrung beeinflusst.

Schlagwörter: Spannung, Narration, Publikumsvorstellungen, Befragungsexperiment, Leitfadeninterviews

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1. Introduction

The role of the audience's cognitions as an important factor in the experience of suspense has been firmly established (Ohler & Nieding, 1996). Specifically, cognitive processes of prediction and anticipation, such as the audience pondering possible ways the hero may overcome a certain obstacle using both story information and their knowledge, have been shown to play a crucial role in driving suspense (e.g., Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Gerrig & Bernardo, 1994; Lehne et al., 2015). Beyond these narrative-specific cognitions, the audience can also be expected to have formed their own beliefs about suspense in general based on their viewing or reading experiences and genre knowledge. While these cognitions about suspense have been theorized to influence the specific viewing or reading experience (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Ohler & Nieding, 1996), their empirical investigation has largely been neglected. Therefore, our paper aims to address this gap by (1) suggesting a scale of media beliefs about suspense, and (2) examining the role of those beliefs during a specific experience of suspense. To this end, we conducted a qualitative interview study to identify relevant media beliefs about suspense, which we then used to develop a corresponding scale in study two. The second study also allowed us to investigate the influence of media beliefs about suspense on participants' perceived suspense for three different genres. Consequently, our paper will complement current explanations of suspense, and promote the systematic investigation of media beliefs in general.

2. The experience of suspense

Literature suggests suspense in its broadest sense to be an emotion arising from a partial and anxious uncertainty about the progression or outcome of a storyline, especially one involving a positive character (Prince, 1988; Brewer & Liechtenstein, 1982; Zillmann, 1980, 1996). The audience experiences suspense due to the uncertainty about the general predictability of a story's outcome. Specifically, recipients develop mental models of the narrative in an interplay of narrative cues offered within the story and their pre-existing generic schemata about the world outside the narrative (Bordwell, 1985; Graesser et al., 2002; Johnson-Laird, 1983; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Narrative cues are situational states, (main) character traits or narrator characteristics that shape a story's setting, while generic schemata refer to the audience's real-world experience. Mental models combine them both to emergent sets of schemata that cognitively represent an argumentative context of a specific narrative. They describe and explain those parts of a story already presented; they also predict events that might occur in a story's future (Rapaport & Shapiro, 1995; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004). People develop several alternative mental models of a narrative that represent several possible outcomes of the storyline and that differ with regard to the probability of their occurrence. Suspense then results from the general uncertainty about the occurrence of a preferred mental model of the narrative or its small probability to take place (e.g., that the hero survives the threat against all the odds) and is in-

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tensified by stronger affective dispositions towards the characters (e.g., Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kepplinger, 2007; Zillmann, 1996).

In other words, the more accurate and exhaustive a recipient's mental models are, the less uncertainty is experienced with regard to a narrative's outcome, ultimately resulting in less suspense. Here, the audience's expertise concerning the reception of suspenseful narratives can be argued to play an important role in the experience of suspense: Experienced viewers and readers are expected to construct more precise models than inexperienced ones (Ohler & Nieding, 1996). We argue now that it is the complexity of beliefs about suspense that distinguishes the more experienced media users from the less experienced. Therefore, we assume that audience members' differences in media beliefs about suspense are an additional factor in the explanation of differences in their suspense experiences.

3. Media beliefs about suspense

Comparable to scholars in communication science, laymen try to understand and process the mechanisms of mass media and media effects in general, as well as the mechanisms of suspense in this specific case. Their notions about suspense reflect the interplay of fundamental beliefs about the world and conclusions from observations made in their everyday life (Eichner et al., 2014). Media beliefs about suspense are clusters of schemata that cognitively map a specific argumentative context of suspense. People use media beliefs about suspense to describe, explain, and predict suspense-related mechanisms of mass media by the causal attribution of meaning. With regard to the literature on theory of mind, people supposedly apply different cognitive strategies of argument: In situations that offer only scarce information about the narrative and its reception context people refer to rather axiomatic beliefs (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994; Nichols & Stich, 2000; Slors, 2012). They almost exclusively resort to available preexisting schemata to describe, explain, and predict, for example, the mechanism of music sustaining the suspense experience during a crime series. In contrast, when people find themselves in situations with rich information about a narrative and its reception context, they apply cognitive simulation (Goldman, 2006; Shanton & Goldman, 2010). They take their cognitive reasoning apparatus offline and test the functioning of assumed suspense mechanisms by simulating them based on the available information about the narrative and reception context. For example, parents adopt their children's perspective on media content in order to determine its harmfulness. Both cognitive strategies are not exclusive but applied according to the available information about the narrative and the reception context (Carruthers, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Nichols, Stich, Leslie, & Klein, 1996; Wilkinson & Ball, 2013).

Considering the cognitive implementation of media beliefs within situations of media reception, we assume that media beliefs are linked to four different reference levels regarding the narrative: When referring to the level of the situation model, media beliefs are composed of the recipient's judgment about the narrative's specific situational setting such as setting, characters, and general storyline (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). These beliefs are the audience's cognitive foundation of situation models of the narrative (Zwaan, Langston, & Graesser, 1995;

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Zwaan, Magliano, & Graesser, 1995). On the narrative experience level of reference, media beliefs concern the issues of situational involvement and conceptions about identification with the narrative's characters. Media beliefs on this reference level reflect the audience's relationship to the narrative as a whole. Media beliefs on the level of the narrative context cognitively represent arguments about the narrative's modes of production and presentation. For example, these beliefs may consider the recipient's perceived relationship with a specific actor or author. Finally, media beliefs about suspense can refer to the level of media effects that a suspenseful narrative might induce in self or others. We suppose that recipients apply their media beliefs about suspense similarly to their genre knowledge in situations of everyday media experience. However, it is important to point out that although some of recipients' media beliefs may refer to specific genres or reflect possible genre differences, media beliefs about suspense are not restricted to a specific genre (e.g., crime). Instead, media beliefs about suspense describe mechanisms about suspense in general that might be found in different genres (e.g., crime, action, drama).

Two contradicting explanations of how media beliefs about suspense contribute to the audience's suspense experience seem plausible. First, having a profound set of suspense beliefs might decrease audience members' suspense. Considering that media beliefs enable recipients to construct a greater variety of as well as more accurate and valid mental models of suspense-based narratives, they increase the audience members' prognostic capacity regarding a narrative's outcome (Nabi & Clark, 2008). As suspense is considerably based on uncertainty, possessing a profound set of media beliefs about suspense might lead to a rather distanced media use and thus, a reduced suspense experience (Ohler & Nieding, 1996). Supporting evidence is provided by related studies examining the detrimental influence of spoilers on suspense (e.g., Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2014). In addition to this rather passive baseline-like effect of media beliefs on the audience's suspense experience, it can be argued that recipients actively, i.e., consciously, apply media beliefs about suspense to cognitively regulate the emotional state of their suspense experience during media exposure. Research in the field of mood management points out that recipients actively strive for emotional gratifications (e.g., Taylor & Friedman, 2015; Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch, Appel, & Storch 2010), which means that they possess at least some notion about the media's power to influence emotions. While in this case, the characteristics of narratives aim to increase the suspense experience, audience members may try to sabotage the underlying mechanisms cognitively to reduce an unpleasant level of suspense to a more pleasurable one.

On the other hand, applying media beliefs about suspense might also increase audience members' suspense experience. As mentioned before, profound media beliefs lead to a larger number of more sophisticated mental models about a narrative that, for example, support the expectation that the main characters survive a threat. However, the narrative itself can also lead the audience to the certain belief of a main character's doom, even if the narrative has been viewed before (Brewer, 1996) or external cues (e.g., a character's appearance in a future episode of a series) indicate a character's survival (Carrol, 1996). It is then the relative

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uncertainty (Comisky & Bryant, 1982) that creates suspense, and media beliefs about suspense help the audience to cling to the rather small probability of a favored outcome. Correspondingly, Gerrig, and Bernardo (1994) have shown that a story that allows for the modeling of a higher number of potential outcomes, which are then removed in the following plot, leads to higher levels of suspense than a story implying only a few alternatives. Support for this line of argument is also provided by research in the context of the 'paradox of suspense' that has demonstrated that media users do experience suspense even when the outcome is known (e.g., Leavitt & Christenfeld, 2011).

4. Further influences on the audience's experience of suspense

An extensive body of research has identified numerous factors that influence recipients' suspense experiences. Some of these factors might weaken or strengthen the explanatory power of media beliefs. Therefore, we will consider them as covariates in our study.

4.1 Previous media experience

It was stated above that audience members form their media beliefs based on conclusions from everyday observations (Eichner et al. 2014). They act as naïve scientists (Heider, 1958) and transfer their practical experience with media into a set of rules that represent the central conclusions of their observations of the media environment. Considering mood management theory (Zillman, 1988, 2003) and research related to media gratifications (Bartsch, 2012), we can understand previous media experiences as audience members' repeated validity tests and refinements of their media beliefs. Therefore, we suppose that audience members with more media experience might hold different media beliefs about suspense or apply those media beliefs differently compared to audience members with less media experience.

4.2 Media users' dispositions

Several personality traits have been linked to the experience of suspense, the most relevant among them being *Sensation Seeking* (Zuckerman, 2006) and *Narrative Engageability* (Sukalla, Bilandzic, Hastall, Busselle, & Schlögl, 2012). Sensation Seeking captures people's tendency to seek out "varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences" (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). High sensation seekers, compared to low sensation seekers have been found to prefer arousing, suspenseful content (e.g., Hoffner & Levine, 2005). Moreover, high sensation seekers have been shown to pay more attention to this type of content and are more influenced by it than by less suspenseful content (e.g., Stephenson, 2003). Media users also differ in their disposition to deeply immerse themselves in narratives, i.e., their transportability or narrative engageability (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010; Sukalla et al., 2012). Individuals high in narrative engageability are more likely to feel present in the narrative

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world, emotionally engage with the plot and characters, accept unrealistic settings or storylines, and, most importantly, are more likely to experience suspense during viewing than individuals low in narrative engageability (Sukalla et al., 2012).

5. Research question

In sum, it seems plausible that media beliefs influence perceived suspense. However, based on the current research literature the direction of this influence is not clear. Instead, plausible arguments arise for both assumptions that possessing and applying media beliefs about suspense might increase or decrease audience members' suspense experience during reception. Based on these considerations, this paper poses the following research question.

RQ: How do media beliefs about suspense influence audience members' suspense experience beyond audience members' media experience, sensation seeking tendencies, and narrative engageability?

Two studies were conducted to answer this question. Study 1 explored audience members' media beliefs about suspense using in-depth interviews. Study 2 developed a scale of media beliefs about suspense based on the results of study 1 and investigated their influence on audience members' suspense experience.

6. Study 1: Exploring media beliefs about suspense

6.1 Method and design

This paper suggests media beliefs to be subjective structures of meaning that are individually developed by each recipient based on fundamental beliefs and everyday observations. For this reason, we accessed media beliefs with 16 guided interviews. All interview partners were permanent residents of Southern Germany. We recruited participants from different social backgrounds by varying age (ranging from 25 to 87 years), gender (eight female respondents), level of formal education (nine respondents completed at least grade 12 in Germany's formal education system), and level of employment (seven respondents being unemployed due to inoccupation (two persons) or retirement (five persons)). We chose participants' current media use as each interview's entry point and asked accordingly about personal media use in the past days. In the course of the resulting conversation, we requested participants' general ideas about media use and media effects on themselves and others in open narrative The topic of suspense was not explicitly and directly raised by interviewers to prevent post-hoc rationalizing of experiences into non-existing beliefs prior to the interviews, and to minimize social desirability and hypothesis-guessing effects regarding the research interest. That said, all study participants discussed the effects of experiencing suspense on their initiative shortly after the interview started. Sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed. Considering Zillmann's (1980) early definition of suspense, 16 coders registered all passages of the transcript that contained arguments about the cause or consequence of narratives, or parts of narratives that focus on (1) relatively certain (2) negative outcomes for (3) liked but vulnerable protagonists. After-

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ward, coders categorized the arguments included in these passages according to the aforementioned levels of reference (situation model level, narrative experience level, narrative context level, and media effects level). Finally, coders summarized these arguments according to thematic priority (e.g., arguments about the effect of music). To test intercoder reliability for all three analytical steps, one interview was coded and analyzed by all coders (Cohen's K = .79 for the identification of media beliefs; Cohen's K = .66 for the identification of arguments; Cohen's K = .63 for summarizing the arguments).

6.2 Results

Six consistent media beliefs about suspense emerged from the interviews. First, participants describe the importance of *realism and authenticity* for suspense experiences. They argue that suspense is experienced significantly higher in cases audience members believe a narrative's storyline could take place in their own lives. More precisely, it is assumed that suspense creators specifically use everyday subjects and situations to create an immersive environment, in which an unlikely, but dangerous event happens. This media belief refers to the situation model level of a narrative. Second, participants suggested that *identification with characters and characters' narrative depth* increases suspense during media reception. They attribute this effect on the level of narrative experience primarily to audience members' knowledge about a character, their sympathy towards actor/actress and role, but also to the prominence of a character's actor/actress. Third, interview partners indicate that *interruptions of a storyline* (e.g., by commercial breaks, flashbacks, different narrative plots) increase suspense on the narrative context level. Most of our study's participants describe this belief intertwined with, fourth, the *use of suspense supporting audio-visual effects* (e.g., specific music, lighting). Fifth, participants are convinced that suspenseful storylines follow *producers' rating orientations*. They assume suspense creators' striving for increasingly intense suspense effects causes desensitization of audience members. Our interviewees argue that this results in a vicious circle, in whichever stronger narrative stimuli are needed to evoke suspense.

Finally, it is stated that audience members' taste influences their media genre choice especially in terms of *gender preferences*. Participants point out that male audience members prefer crime and action series, while it is assumed that female audience members are more likely to watch drama series.

Overall, these six perspectives on suspense should be regarded as overlapping and complementing arguments rather than as separate, distinct cognitions. With regard to our theoretical considerations about the different reference levels of narratives, it is evident that neither does the focus of the extracted media beliefs rest on a single level of reference nor are the assumed levels of reference empirically distinct. Instead, each of the described media beliefs refers to more than one level of reference, although its argumentative core can be located on a specific level. Due to their high consistency over all interlocutors and their high theoretical plausibility, the extracted media beliefs are well suited as a starting point for a quantitative operationalization. However, we have excluded the beliefs on gender

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preferences from further analysis, as gender-related media beliefs are often closely interwoven with media-related gender beliefs in the statements of the study participants. A corresponding confusion in the quantitative study can thus be avoided. Considering the remaining five media beliefs, their main arguments were operationalized into short statements for later use as Likert-type items in Study 2. A complete list of the derived statements can be found in Table 1.

7. Study 2: Predicting narrative suspense by using media beliefs

7.1 Method

Subjects. Data were gathered from a student convenience sample in May 2014. The 16 coders mentioned in study 1 recruited 644 participants through personal address in their wider circle of acquaintances (no close friends). After excluding questionnaires with missing values, the final sample for analysis included 452 participants. 60.6 percent of the respondents were female. The average age was 22.3 years (SD = 3.39, ranging from 17 to 56 years).

Design. An online one-factorial repeated-measurement experiment was conducted. Participants were asked to watch three, on average 2.5-minute long video clips taken from TV series episodes of three different suspense-related genres (action, crime, and drama) in a random order. They answered questionnaire items concerning their perceived suspense and perceived emotions after each clip as well as questions about media beliefs and control variables at the end of the study. About half of the participants (n = 199) were additionally prompted to indicate their level of experienced suspense at three times during exposure. While this measurement is not of interest to this study and also did not significantly affect the level of suspense reported after exposure overall ($F(1, 450) = 2.71$, $p = .10$)[1], it will be included as a control variable in all our analyses. Participants took an average of 21 minutes (SD = 10 minutes) to complete the questionnaire.

Stimulus Material. Our stimulus material consisted of three 2 to 4 minutes long video sequences presenting suspense-related narratives from the genres crime, action, and drama. We selected these genres because participants of study 1 referred to either one of them when they illustrated their beliefs with an example. In a first step, 30 scenes were chosen from the TV series *The Mentalist*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *SOKO Leipzig*. 12 coders assigned these scenes to the genres crime, action, or drama (Cohen's K_{total} = .51). Those scenes that obtained the highest coding consistency were selected as stimulus material (action: *The Mentalist*, season 2, episode 7, 24:55 min to 28:19 min, Cohen's K = .83; drama: *Grey's Anatomy*, season 5 episode 24, final four minutes; Cohen's K = .74; crime: *SOKO Leipzig*, season 9, episode 14, 1:31 min to 3:36 min; Cohen's K = .94).

Dependent Measure. To estimate participants' perceived suspense experience, respondents rated the six items of the suspense scale by Appel et al. (2002) on

1 There were also no significant effects for the individual clip comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment with the exception of the Crime clip: Crime clip: $F(1, 450) = 6.21$, $p = .01$, after exposure EM = 4.56 (SE = .09) < during exposure EM = 4.89 (SE = .10); Action clip: $F(1, 450) = 0.30$, $p = .59$; Drama clip: $F(1, 450) = 0.77$, $p = .38$.

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7-point scales. Items were summarized to mean indices for each genre (*crime*: alpha = .86, *M* = 4.70 (*SD* = 1.40); *action*: alpha = .84, *M* = 4.39 (*SD* = 1.40); *drama*: alpha = .82, *M* = 5.08 *(SD* = 1.33)).

Independent Measures. Respondents' media beliefs were measured with the items derived in study 1. For each of the 15 statements participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all (1)* to *completely* (7) (cp. Table 1 for each item, its corresponding media belief as classified in study 1, mean and standard deviation). To develop and validate the scale structure of the media belief items, we used a random split-half sample approach. An exploratory factor analysis was first conducted with one half of the dataset (N_1 = 243; M_{age} = 22.4 (*SD* = 3.06), 58.8% female) in order to assess the underlying structure of the media beliefs identified in study 1. The principle component analysis (PCA) produced four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, explaining 49.43 percent of the variance. Inspection of the screeplot, however, suggested a three- or two-factor structure. An examination of factor loadings showed only two items clearly loading on factors three and four. Therefore, we decided to rerun the analysis requesting two factors with oblique rotation (delta = 0). Items with insufficient loadings were sequentially eliminated, resulting in a final solution of two factors that explain 56.17 percent of the variance. The sum of squared loadings after rotation suggested that both factors are about equally important. The two resulting factors were easily interpreted according to the different reference levels of narratives they refer to. Factor one (Cronbach's α = .65; *M* = 6.24; *SD* = 0.80) contains three items referring to elements of the program. This media belief argues on the levels of narrative experience and narrative context that suspense is linked to high character involvement, supporting musical setting, and intermittent storylines. The three items of the second factor (Cronbach's α = .52; *M* = 4.23; *SD* = 1.23) address producers' rating orientation on the narrative context level of narratives. Factor loadings, communalities, and other relevant statistics are reported in Table 2. To validate the 6-item media belief scale, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in AMOS with the second split-half sample of the dataset (N_2 = 209; M_{age} = 22.4 (*SD* = 3.74), 62.8% female). Indices suggest a good model fit ($\chi 2$ = 9.72, *df* = 8, *p* = .286; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .03 (90% CI [.00; .09]); SRMR = .04) confirming the previously suggested factor structure (cp. Table 2; Figure 1). However, the path coefficients are, while significant, quite low, ranging from .40 to .60 (cp. Figure 1). Even though factors of both analyses show comparatively low reliabilities (cp. Table 3), the proposed factorial solution is acceptable as all items are theoretically consistent with their respective factors. Furthermore, the alpha coefficient is, among other influences, sensitive to the number of included items, requiring higher inter-item correlation with fewer items (Iacobucci & Duhachek, 2003, pp.480–481). Based on these results the following media belief indices are used for analysis: *elements of the program* (Cronbach's α = .53; *M* = 6.24; *SD* = 0.75) and *rating orientation* (Cronbach's α = .47; *M* = 4.50; *SD* = 1.16).

Covariates. Besides controlling for gender and measuring group, we additionally included the following individual characteristics that have been shown to predict or are related to viewers' experience of suspense as covariates. With regard to audiences' previous *media experience* with suspense-related narratives,

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participants' familiarity with the specific clip or episode of the show (answer options: *yes*, *no*, *not sure*; dichotomized by combining *no* and *not sure*) and their general use of action, crime, or drama respectively (eight-point scale: *never* (0) to *very often* (8) were included. 1.4% of the participants were familiar with the crime genre clip (*SOKO Leipzig*), 10.1% recognized the action sequence from *The Mentalist*, and 33.5% were familiar with the chosen drama sequence from *Grey's Anatomy*. In contrast, participants' familiarity with the respective TV genres is rather low (adventure & action: $M = 1.97$ ($SD = 2.17$); crime: $M = 3.23$ ($SD = 2.48$); drama: $M = 3.33$ ($SD = 2.64$)).

Sensation seeking was measured with Beauducel, Strobel, & Brocke's (2003) translation of the sensation seeking scale from Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck (1978) that includes 40 items demanding a forced choice between two statements from participants. A few changes were made concerning the specific activities some of the original items in Zuckerman et al. (1978) refer to, as they appeared to be out of fashion or are not that common in Germany (e.g., the item with regard to long-distance sailing was replaced by an item with regard to swimming far from the beach). Overall scale means were used for analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$, $M = .55$ ($SD = .14$)).

Considering the measurement of *narrative engageability*, a 12 item, 7-point scale was applied (Sukalla et al., 2012). Both, the scale itself and its respective four sub-dimensions were consistent (narrative engageability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.76$ ($SD = 1.11$); presence susceptibility: Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$, $M = 4.20$ ($SD = 1.53$); emotional engageability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$, $M = 5.31$ ($SD = 1.23$); curiosity/suspense susceptibility: *alpha* = .74, $M = 4.96$ ($SD = 1.30$); unrealism tolerance: *alpha* = .81, $M = 4.57$ ($SD = 1.49$)).

7.2 Results

We ran regression analyses for all three stimulus clips to test whether media beliefs about suspense significantly contribute to the explanation of variance in perceived suspense beyond the usual predictors (cp. Table 4). It turns out that media beliefs do not predict suspense in the "traditional" crime excerpt, but do add to the prediction of suspense for the action and drama excerpts. Specifically, the beliefs about specific elements of a program relevant to suspense positively predict the experience of suspense (action: $b = .20$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$; drama: $b = .19$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$). However, adding media beliefs about suspense to the model only leads to a significant change in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F = 4.32$, $p < .05$) for perceived suspense of the drama excerpt, with beliefs about the elements of the program positively (see above) and about producers' rating orientation negatively predicting suspense ($b = -.10$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$). Holding beliefs about the rating orientation of television producers is detrimental to the experience of suspense while watching drama.

8. Discussion

The main aim of our paper was to elucidate the role of audience members' cognitions about suspense for their suspense experience during the reception of suspenseful narratives. To this end, a mixed method procedure was employed to ex-

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plore media beliefs' influence on recipients' suspense experience. In sum, the paper shows that audience members hold specific media beliefs about suspense and that those beliefs can contribute to recipients' suspense experiences during media reception. The discussion addresses the relevance and limitations of the results concerning four main issues, namely the assumptions underlying our research design, the identification of media beliefs in Study 1, the construction of media belief indices in Study 2, the role of media beliefs for audience members' suspense experience and, finally, the theoretical and empirical value of the derived scales.

8.1 Assumptions underlying our research design

Before further considering the results of our studies, it should be emphasized that our research design rests on the assumption that recipients have the motivation and ability to describe their suspense experiences accurately. Although we probably could not completely eliminate related problems, our research design tries to minimize them. Study 1 focuses on recipients' current media use and requests general ideas about media use to prevent memory problems. Furthermore, we applied an indirect approach to identify media beliefs about suspense that minimizes participants' post-hoc rationalization and possible tendencies to express platitudes. Finally, our research design addresses the problem of social desirability by embracing it. We can safely assume that some interview partners conceal their thoughts due to impression management or social desirability concerns. Participants might conceal their thoughts by lying or by non-disclosure. While we assume that our interview partners do both, we refer only to those genres in Study 2 that were discussed by all participants in Study 1. This means that our study might be limited to the genres crime, action, and drama. While the transferability to other genres needs further research, we are confident that our results pertain to the most relevant genres in this context.

8.2 Identification of media beliefs about suspense

The findings of Study 1 show that recipients hold a distinct and elaborate set of media beliefs about suspense. Specifically, they believe that (1) realism and authenticity, (2) identification with characters and characters' narrative depth, (3) interruptions of a storyline, and (4) the use of suspense supporting audio-visual effects increase the audience's suspense. They assume (5) a rating orientation by suspense creators that is characterized by the use of increasingly intense suspense-arousing techniques and might result in audience members' desensitization. In addition, they assert (6) different genre preferences of female and male audiences.

The suggested six media beliefs are consistent with the understanding of the respective processes found in the extensive research on narrative comprehension and suspense. Therefore, our results are not very surprising but highly plausible. However, while the existing research literature focuses on cognitions in the context of the construction of narratives' situation models, Study 1 points out, that audience members also possess media beliefs that relate to points of reference

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beyond a specific storyline. Furthermore, the specific nature of the resulting media beliefs seems consistent with our theory of mind based argument about the cognitive development of media beliefs in general: Considering the high conformity of the suggested media beliefs between the interview partners as well as their rather small deviations from scientific understanding, participants supposedly reproduced knowledge about suspense gained during formal education instead of developing media beliefs from processes of subjective environmental observation. It seems arguable that the "theoretical" core of audience members media beliefs about suspense are predominantly developed based on axiomatic reasoning based on existing knowledge. Likewise, participants' belief about gender differences in audiences' genre tastes refers to fundamental beliefs about gender stereotypes.

Additionally, it should be pointed out again, that the extracted media beliefs are not separate and distinct but overlapping and complementing cognitions. While maintaining a core argument of reasoning that refers to a specific level of reference of narratives, each media belief includes aspects that are tangent to a narratives' other levels of reference. This result seems plausible with regard to the suggested cognitive processes underlying the formation and application of media beliefs in general.

8.3 Media belief indices

Considering our media belief indices, we conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, using random split-half samples, in order to validate the item structure initially suggested by the results of Study 1. We excluded participants' belief about gender preferences from this analysis due to its possible confusion with participants beliefs about media-related gender effects. This procedure led to an adjusted item structure of two media belief sets ('elements of the program', and 'producer's rating orientation'). Except for producers' rating orientation, none of the other media beliefs assessed in Study 1 were validated in Study 2. Instead, statements from the beliefs interruptions of a storyline, character identification and depth, and the use of suspense supporting audio-visual techniques loaded together on one factor (elements of the program), while the items concerning realism and authenticity failed to load on any factor. It is striking that these sets of media beliefs all refer to the levels of narrative experience and context and describe suspense-enhancing characteristics of narratives. This might explain their consolidation in one factor. The reason for this deviation between both studies might be that interlocutors in Study 1 reconstitute formal knowledge about suspense in general while participants in Study 2 apply these formal knowledge based beliefs regarding their reception of a suspenseful narrative and their according personal experience of suspense. This might be a methodologically based reason as we requested media beliefs in Study 2 after participants' stimulus exposure. Furthermore, it has to be pointed out that the interview partners in Study 1 had more time to consider their answers and therefore express more complex beliefs about suspense than participants in Study 2 who only rated their agreement with existing statements. Finally, given our theoretical assumptions about the strategies of cognitive reasoning on media beliefs, it is arguable that applying media beliefs about suspense during media reception is a process rather based on

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cognitive simulation than on axiomatic reasoning. Considering the specific situation of media reception, audience members supposedly reconfigure their belief structure with regard to the content at hand. Although this argument holds some theoretical plausibility at this point, our study leaves the underlying processes that might drive audience members' belief reconfiguration unacknowledged.

Besides the differences in the resulting media belief structure between Study 1 and Study 2, the analytical approach of Study 2 and its respective results need to be discussed as well. It has already been mentioned that the resulting indices of both factor analyses show low reliabilities. With regard to the exploratory factor analysis, this seems rather negligible as the analysis is not intended to represent a statistical test of the dimensionality of a media belief scale (Shevlin, Miles, Davies, & Walker, 2000). Instead, the high and consistent factor loadings reveal that audience members combine different perspectives on suspense into consistent arguments. Furthermore, the fact that the explanatory factor analysis "confounds random error with systematic error" (Shevlin, Miles, Davies, & Walker, 2000, p. 237) can explain the rather mediocre communalities of the included variables. With regard to the test of dimensionality, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis that did confirm the structure resulting from the exploratory factor analysis.

In terms of media beliefs' reference points to a narrative mentioned in the theoretical outset of this paper, our findings appear surprising only at first glance. While the research literature suggests, that audience members consider especially those beliefs that refer to the situation model of the respective narrative, resulting media beliefs in Study 2 refer more to the narrative context level and the level of narrative experience. In view of our theoretical considerations, we suppose that suspense on the situation model level of reference can be considered as a kind of baseline suspense experience that is mainly dependent on content characteristics. When audience members' cognitions influence their suspense experience on the situation model level of reference, the underlying psychological mechanisms of comprehension processes are fundamental. Therefore, these mechanisms are equally used by all participants (though with potentially different outcomes regarding the individual suspense experience), whereas beliefs on the level of narrative experience or the level of narrative context are based on individual reasoning.

It has to be concluded that the resulting media beliefs scale about suspense described in this paper is a valuable though content- and genre-bound measurement of media beliefs about suspense. With regard to generalization, the proposed measurement of media beliefs is only the first step in developing a scale of media beliefs about suspense. Further and more intensive construct validation (John & Benet-Martinez, 2000) is needed. Although the media belief structure suggested by Study 1 is validated with exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, the used split-half design only imperfectly replaces a second study with an independent population. Besides the inclusion of different stimuli, further validation is needed with regard to existing scales measuring related concepts (e.g., the degree of enjoyment).

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8.4 Media beliefs about suspense as predictors of suspense experiences

Study 2 indicates that media beliefs about suspense are mediocre predictors of audience members' suspense experience. Their explanatory power depends highly on the examined genre. While media beliefs add to the prediction of action and drama induced suspense, it turns out that they do not predict suspense in the "traditional" crime excerpt. It is likely that from most audience members' perspective the crime genre itself is a rather stereotypical form of suspenseful narratives. Regarding the regression analysis predicting audience members' suspense experience during the action genre exposure, only the belief about "elements of the program" is significant. This finding seems surprising only at first glance: Similar to the crime genre it can be argued that audience members possess a stereotypical idea about the action genre that coincides with core aspects of believing in "producer's rating orientation", namely the usage of extreme action visualizations and special effects. While audience members' idea about the action genre itself includes these assumptions, it is plausible that believing in producers' rating orientation, which includes these elements, should have limited explanatory power. Following this argument, the findings regarding drama, effects for producers' rating orientation and elements of the program, are similarly evident.

Beside the aforementioned, another aspect of Study 2 seems noteworthy: Considering the direction of media beliefs' effects on suspense, our findings indicate an increase of action and drama-based suspense with regard to "elements of the program" as well as a decrease of drama based suspense due to "producers' rating orientation." As mentioned in our theoretical outset, possessing media beliefs might decrease experienced suspense as audience members might utilize their beliefs to become aware of a narrative's unrealness (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). We suggest this process with regard to "producers' rating orientation" as this belief's argumentative core focusses on the craftsmanship of narratives. In contrast to this, the media belief about "elements of the program" describes cues within the process of storytelling that indicate phenomena of relative uncertainty (Comisky & Bryant, 1982), such as favored characters or a specific musical setting. Certainly, our argument needs to be qualified with regard to the aforementioned genre effect. Again, it can be argued that, independent of an effects' specific direction, media beliefs are only relevant in those cases, in which their core arguments are not part of the respective genre's stereotype.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the generalizability of our study is limited due to the student convenience sample used. While it can be argued that the short-term effect of suspense can be considered as processes of general human social behavior that form the general portrait of human nature (Lang, 1996), the corresponding individual rationalization to media beliefs is not. Our participants' media beliefs might differ from those of the general population because students "tend among other things, to have incompletely formulated senses of self, rather uncrystallized sociopolitical attitudes, unusually strong cognitive skills, strong needs for peer approval, tendencies to be compliant to authority, quite unstable group relationships, little material self-interests in public affairs, and unusual egocentricity" (Sears, 1986, p. 527). However, considering this limitation, our study

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does not claim to predict the real world but the validity of the underlying theoretical approach (Meltzer, Naab, & Daschmann, 2012). That said, further research is needed to increase the generalizability of our theoretical assumptions and empirical findings.

9. Conclusion

This paper's starting point was the notion that audience member's media beliefs about suspense influence their suspense experience. We developed and validated an initial design of a media beliefs about suspense scale. Our study's results provide valuable evidence that audience members' media beliefs about suspense are a reasonable influence on their suspense experience. Although our results suggest that audience members' genre stereotypes might moderate the effect of media beliefs, both occurring and non-occurring effects can be explained consistently across the examined genres. Nevertheless, future research needs to consider different genres and content to distill a pattern that is independent from genre. With regard to the theoretical framework, our paper indicates that audience members' media beliefs about suspense play a relevant role beyond the cognitions employed in the construction of situation models. Therefore, especially media beliefs about suspense on the levels of narrative experience and narrative context should be considered as influencing factors on suspense in future research. Furthermore, the examination of media beliefs about other phenomena of reception processes such as enjoyment, transportation or para-social interaction might contribute to valuable theory advancement.

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Appendix

Tables

Table 1. Items Used for Scale Development of Media Beliefs about Suspense

	M	SD
Interruptions of a Storyline		
1. TV-shows are interrupted by commercial breaks at the most suspenseful scenes of the narrative in order to keep audience members watching the ads.	5.85	1.39
2. TV-stations often replay parts of an episode after a commercial break in order to restore suspense.	5.20	1.51
3. TV shows often have an open end to win the same audience for the next episode	6.21	1.15
Rating Orientation and Desensitization		
4. TV-series need to exert evermore extreme visualizations of crime and action to keep their audience.	3.85	1.89
5. The representations in suspenseful TV shows are often at the edge of society's decency and morality.	4.28	1.67
6. TV producers surpass each other in using special effects in order to gain a greater share of the audience.	4.46	1.60
7. Particularly successful TV-shows become boring soon because other stations copy them.	4.38	1.66
Realism and Authenticity		
8. TV shows are more suspensful if their story could happen exactly the same way in real life.	5.21	1.54
9. Producers of suspenseful narratives often refer to motives and issues from everyday life to keep their broadcast more realistic.	5.16	1.28
10. Suspenseful TV shows allow their audience to experience situations beyond their everyday life.	5.36	1.34
Identification with Characters and Characters' Narrative Depth		
11. The more familiar an actor is, the more anxiety one perceives in suspenseful situations.	3.42	1.94
12. The more pleasant a character is, the more anxiety one perceives in suspenseful situations.	5.62	1.57
13. The better one knows the characters of a TV series, the more one will be captivated by exciting situations in a single broadcasting.	6.18	1.13
Use of Suspense Supporting Audio-Visual Effects		
14. Producers of suspenseful TV series often utilize special lighting effects to increase the suspense of their broadcast.	5.27	1.45
15. The musical setting of a scene reveals whether a suspenseful situation occurs.	6.34	0.85

Note. Based on the entire sample of Study 2 (N = 452).

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Table 2. Results of the principal component analysis with varimax rotation

	Factor		h^2
	1	2	
Elements of the Program			
1. TV shows often have an open end to win the same audience for the next episode.	.798		.64
2. The better one knows the characters of a TV series, the more one will be captivated by exciting situations in an episode.	.773	-.153	.60
3. The musical setting of a scene reveals whether a suspenseful situation occurs.	.724	.183	.58
Producer's Rating Orientation			
4. TV-series need to exert evermore extreme visualizations of crime and action to keep their audience.	.108	.743	.53
5. TV producers surpass each other in using special effects in order to gain a greater share of the audience.		.718	.58
6. Particularly successful TV-shows become boring soon because other stations copy them.	-.129	.668	.45
Sum of squared loadings after rotation	1.92	1.45	
Percentage of variance (before rotation)	31.98	24.19	

Note. Results of the exploratory factor analysis based on one half of the sample of Study 2 (n = 243).

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha, means and standard deviations for the media beliefs about suspense scales for both EFA and CFA samples

	Cronbach's α		M (SD)	
	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA
Elements of the Program	.65	.53	6.24 (0.80)	6.24 (0.75)
Producers' Rating Orientation	.52	.47	4.23 (1.23)	4.50 (1.16)

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Table 4. Regression models of media beliefs about suspense as predictors of perceived experience of suspense

	B (SE)		
	Crime	Action	Drama
Constant	4.62*** (.73)	2.19** (.73)	3.50*** (.64)
Measurement Group	0.34* (.14)	0.07 (.13)	-0.09 (.12)
Sex	-0.58*** (.15)	0.02 (.15)	-0.51*** (.13)
Action Genre Use	0.10** (.03)	0.01 (.03)	-0.02 (.03)
Crime Genre Use	-0.03 (.03)	0.13*** (.03)	-0.01 (.03)
Drama Genre Use	-0.05 (.03)	-0.10** (.03)	0.06* (.03)
Clip Familiarity	-0.69 (.62)	0.16 (.23)	-0.15 (.16)
Sensation Seeking	-0.60 (0.47)	0.45 (.47)	0.15 (.41)
Presence Susceptibility	-0.09 (.06)	0.06 (.06)	0.01 (.05)
Emotional Engageability	0.07 (.08)	0.03 (.08)	0.35*** (.07)
Curiosity/Suspense Susceptibility	0.21** (.08)	0.20* (.08)	0.06 (.07)
Unrealism Tolerance	-0.11* (.05)	-0.12* (.05)	-0.15** (.05)
Media Beliefs			
Elements of the Program	0.02 (.10)	0.20* (.10)	0.19* (.09)
Producers' Rating Orientation	0.02 (.06)	-0.09 (.06)	-0.10* (.05)
Korr. R^2	.09	.10	.23
F	4.06***[1]	4.64***[2]	10.62***[3]
ΔR^2	.001	.012	.016
ΔF	0.11	2.69	4.32*

Note. [1] df = 13, 395, [2] df = 13, 399, [3] df = 13,397.* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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Figures

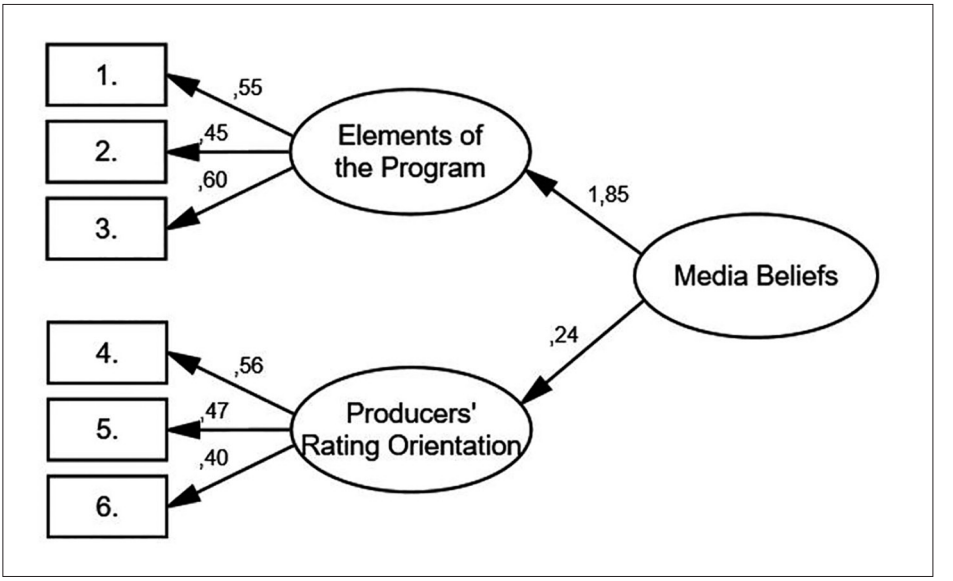

Figure 1. CFA Media Beliefs (Model Fit: $\chi 2 = 49.72$, *df* = 8, *p* = .286; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .03 (90% *CI* [.00; .09]); SRMR = .04; Item numbers refer to numbers in Table 2).

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