Part 4:
Reception

Judith E. Rosenbaum

Spoilers and the Narrative Experience: Lessons From Over a Decade of Empirical Research

Nobody likes a spoiler. Or do they? Spoilers, "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Spoiler Alert" 1069), are often seen in a negative light. However, considering the ubiquity of promotional materials as well as people's familiarity with genre conventions—one only needs to watch a few romantic comedies to know how they turn out—one can argue most people are never truly spoiler-free (Hassoun; Livingstone). In fact, many media users actively seek out spoilers and in some cases use them to decide whether a show is worth watching (Gray and Mittell; Perks and McElrath). Nevertheless, the notion that spoilers are "bad" prevails (e.g., Mecklenburg).

These conflicting ideas about spoilers point to a need for research into how spoilers impact people's narrative experiences, i.e., what people think and feel about a story. Although spoilers are likely as old as stories themselves, empirical research into how spoilers affect enjoyment and related variables is only about fourteen years old. Since 2011, media psychology research has used experiments and surveys to examine the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Lay beliefs about the negative effects of spoilers notwithstanding, so far findings seem to indicate that spoilers have little to do with people's narrative experience, affecting their enjoyment only some of the time and under certain circumstances.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will unpack these findings by providing an overview of this first decade and a half of spoiler research.[1] I will start by conceptualizing enjoyment and then discussing foundational research into the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Next, I will dive into research that addressed a variety of factors that could influence that relationship, such as the nature of the spoiler and people's involvement with a narrative. Finally, I will present some of the challenges faced by current investigations and discuss opportunities for future research

1 While no overview is ever complete, every attempt was made to include articles that approached spoilers from a media-psychological perspective (i.e., using quantitative methods and media-psychological theories). Articles were located through database searches as well as backward and forward cited-reference searches.

Enjoyment, Spoilers, and the Narrative Experience

What makes people like any kind of narrative, especially those where their favorite characters may face distress, fear, and loss? Excitation transfer theory (Zillmann et al.) explains that watching scary or suspenseful content creates negative physical arousal. This unpleasant arousal is significantly reduced with the resolution of the narrative suspense. This reduction is perceived as pleasant, a feeling that people then (mis)attribute to their enjoyment of the ending of the narrative. Shows that present more threat and greater suspense thus lead to greater enjoyment through higher levels of negative arousal.

Media users' relationships with the characters in a narrative matter too: affective disposition theory (ADT) argues that media users enjoy narratives because of the emotional connections they forge with characters in the story. Enjoyment comes from liked characters facing happy or positive endings, and disliked characters seeing a negative outcome (Raney, "Psychology"; "Role of Morality").

Another driver of the nature of the narrative experience is the ease with which media users are able to construct *mental models*. To make sense of a narrative, media users construct models that capture their understanding of the story. These models incorporate people's knowledge of the story, their understanding of the story's genre, and real-world knowledge that informs how they make sense of the narrative (Busselle and Bilandzic). Constructing a mental model means placing oneself in the story to the point that the world of the story becomes more 'real' than the actual world, and the reader is fully engaged with the story. Full engagement with the story, and thus with the construction of a model of this story, leads to higher enjoyment of the narrative.

Enjoyment is situated at the center of the debate about spoilers. The main concern with spoilers is, after all, whether they might ruin one's enjoyment of a movie, show, or book. Oliver and Bartsch argue that enjoyment is made up of two dimensions: appreciation and enjoyment. Appreciation refers to a eudaemonic experience, i.e., one focused on growth and personal reflection. Media experiences that are seen as moving and thought-provoking and that leave a lasting impression (e.g., Schindler's List [US 1993, Director: Steven Spielberg] or Hotel Rwanda [US/UK/ZA/IT 2004, Director: Terry George) are forms of appreciation. Conversely, enjoyment refers to the hedonistic experience that is more commonly associated with entertainment: a narrative experience that is best described as suspenseful and fun (e.g., a romantic comedy or a horror movie).

Transportation, or the ability to lose oneself in a story, is seen as a central element of a positive narrative experience as well. Transportation allows media users to leave "one's reality behind" (Green et al. 315) and focus solely on the act of constructing mental models that capture the narrative (Busselle and Bilandzic). Transportation is made up of a cognitive ("I was mentally involved in the narrative"), affective ("the narrative affected me emotionally"), and imagery-based ("I could picture the events in the story") dimension (Green and Brock, 704).

Examining the Basics: Do Spoilers Spoil?

With the exception of a few sporadic studies that examined spoilers (e.g., Gray and Mittell), empirical research into whether spoilers impact people's enjoyment did not start until about a decade and a half ago. In 2011, Leavitt and Christenfeld published the first empirical study on the subject ("Story Spoilers"). They conducted an experiment among college students who read either a spoiled or an unspoiled version of a classic literary story. Using a ten-point scale that asked participants how much they enjoyed the story, Leavitt and Christenfeld were able to determine that there was no difference in enjoyment between the spoiled and the unspoiled version of the same story. This finding was deemed groundbreaking; it countered Zillmann et al.'s excitation transfer theory by positing that enjoyment does not hinge on the resolution of suspense, as people who knew how the story turned out reported similar levels of suspense as those who did not.

However, these counter-intuitive findings were put to question when the first study to replicate this experiment, a project run by Benjamin Johnson and myself, produced contradictory results (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Spoiler Alert"[2]). Our experiment also relied on literary short stories but made a few, significant changes. First, we replaced Leavitt and Christenfeld's single-item measure of enjoyment with the twelve-item, two-dimensional measure of enjoyment developed by Oliver and Bartsch. Single-item measures often do not produce reliable and valid measures of people's experiences (e.g., Diamantopoulos et al.), and merely asking about "enjoyment" does not capture the breadth of possible narrative experiences. Second, we included transportation as a part of the narrative experience that might be influenced by spoilers,

2 This paper was first presented at the 2013 IAMCR conference in Dublin, Ireland, using data collected in 2012.

arguing that transportation, or one's ability to lose oneself in a story, is part of enjoyment, too. And finally, we examined whether people would select a spoiled over an unspoiled story.

The findings from this second study showed that, first of all, unspoiled stories were—in line with excitation transfer theory as well as affective disposition theory—enjoyed more than spoiled stories. Unspoiled stories were seen as more moving and thought-provoking as well as more fun and suspenseful. In addition, people exposed to unspoiled stories displayed more cognitive transportation than those reading spoiled stories. Interestingly, and counter to the lay belief that all spoilers are bad, we did not find any difference in story preference when the preview for a story was spoiled versus when it was unspoiled.

Explaining differential effects of spoilers

After these two initial publications, it was obvious that spoilers are not unequivocally good or bad; more research was needed to determine under what conditions spoilers might affect enjoyment. Follow-up studies thus examined several factors that were assumed to play a role in the relationship between enjoyment and spoilers: processing fluency, personality traits, and construal level.

Processing fluency, or the ease with which someone can make sense of a story (Reber et al.), was the first factor scholars considered as playing a role in how spoilers might impact enjoyment. Spoilers, by providing information about the narrative, should increase processing fluency, and because of that, enhance enjoyment. Results from studies that examined this, however, produced contradictory results.

In a follow-up to their first study, Leavitt and Christenfeld ("Fluency") showed that spoiled stories were both easier to follow and more enjoyable. Interestingly, they also found that the complexity of the stories played a role here; if stories were easy to understand, a more complicated spoiler did not enhance enjoyment by increasing fluency, but a simple spoiler did. A few years later, Levine et al. examined how the placement of spoilers in short stories influenced enjoyment and transportation and included processing fluency as a factor in this study (which will be discussed in more detail below). Assessing fluency in terms of reading time, they found that reading time was not impacted by spoilers, and that people who took longer to read, purportedly showing less fluency, reported higher enjoyment.

Studies that examined the relationship between processing fluency and spoilers using TV and movie clips produced equally contradictory findings. In a follow-up study using TV and movie clips, Benjamin Johnson and I did not find processing fluency to interact with spoilers to impact enjoyment or transportation (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell," study 1). Yet, in a study wherein we focused on fans' experiences with and appreciation for season 5 of Game of Thrones (US 2011–2019, Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss), we found that processing fluency of the show's episodes was positively influenced by exposure to book-consistent spoilers, and negatively by spoilers that were discrepant with the original book (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell," study 3). Conversely, an experiment carried out a few years later—where we used clips from horror movies to examine the impact of major and minor spoilers—found that major spoilers (i.e., those that revealed major events in the storyline) produced more fluency than minor spoilers, but that this did not lead to more enjoyment or transportation (Johnson et al.). At the same time, a recent study I was involved with that examined the impact of spoilers on unexpected endings found that, under some circumstances, spoilers can enhance processing fluency (Ellithorpe et al.). It thus appears that while processing fluency plays a role in how spoilers impact narrative experience, this influence is highly circumstantial.

Individual differences play a role in how people make sense of a story (e.g., Hall and Bracken; Krcmar and Kean), so it follows that they may impact the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment, too. Spoiler research has considered several of these differences. One is people's *Need for Cognition* (NfC). NfC centers on how much people enjoy thinking (Cacioppo and Petty), and how actively they engage with and search for information (Verplanken et al.). Johnson and I were the first to examine the role NfC played in the impact of spoilers on enjoyment. In this follow-up to our original spoiler study, we used an experiment that again relied on literary short stories and found that people with a low NfC, i.e., those who do not enjoy thinking deeply, preferred spoiled stories (possibly because they believed it would help them make better sense of the narrative) but did not enjoy them more. In other words, NfC plays a role in the story *selection stage*, rather than the *experience* of the story (Rosenbaum and Johnson). This finding underlined that people are not very good at *affective forecasting*, i.e., people may think a spoiler will impact their enjoyment a certain way, but their predictions often turn out to be incorrect (Yan and Tsang). Interestingly, Levine et al. found that NfC was positively related to enjoyment when a story was unspoiled; individuals with a higher NfC reported higher enjoyment of unspoiled stories. This could be attributed

to the notion that people high on NfC pay more attention to details, and thus will not benefit from the information gleaned from a spoiler.

Need for Affect (NfA) refers to people's desire to experience or avoid emotional situations (Appel and Richter; Maio and Esses). People with high levels of NfA tend to experience emotions as something positive (Bartsch et al.) and therefore seek out more emotionally stimulating content "to maintain their optimal arousal level" (Rosenbaum and Johnson, 277). Using spoiled short stories, the experiment described in the previous paragraph found that people who reported higher levels of NfA reported greater enjoyment for unspoiled stories, a finding that reflects excitation transfer theory (Rosenbaum and Johnson).

Another factor to consider is *construal level*, or how abstractly people think about something (Yan and Tsang). Using short movies as well as fabricated newsgroup messages about movies, Yan and Tsang determined that people with a higher construal level, i.e., who are more likely to think abstractly and focus on the narrative outcome, predict less enjoyment and a lower desire to watch a film that is spoiled than people with a lower construal level, who are more likely to focus on a narrative's secondary features—which can include all kinds of features that do not involve the story's outcome, such as the quality of the acting, the cinematography, or the costumes.

The nature of the narrative and the nature of the spoiler

As spoiler research grew, scholars started to investigate how spoilers work for different genres and different media, and how different kinds of spoilers might impact one's narrative experience. Research to date has investigated the role played by medium and genre, the type of spoiler, spoiler placement, the scope of the spoiler, and the complexity of the narrative.

Common sense suggests that the nature of the narrative medium as well as the genre of the narrative would play a considerable role in how much a spoiler impacts enjoyment. Reading a book means one has the ending to the story in one's hands and can easily flip to the end, whereas this is much less convenient when streaming a multi-episode television series, and impossible in a movie seen in the theater. At the same time, some genres, like romantic comedies, can withstand spoilage better than others, such as whodunits, for example. Yet to date, very little research has examined how the medium in which the narrative appears as well as its genre impact the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment. Results from one experiment that Benjamin Johnson and I carried out, while not entirely straightforward,

suggested that people who were familiar with a television show experienced a positive impact on enjoyment when this show was spoiled. For movies, the interaction was the opposite: if participants were familiar with a movie, a spoiler would reduce enjoyment (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell," study 1). We proposed that this could be attributed to the mental models people have of television shows; since TV shows are serial, people have the expectation for spoilers built into their mental models for these shows. Films, on the other hand, are usually a one-time event, and so mental models may not account for the possibility of a spoiler encounter. Conversely, two similar experiments by Daniel and Katz that used short stories and episodes from a television show found that spoilers affected the enjoyment of the television episodes, but not short stories.

Furthermore, only one small study (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell," study 1) has compared the impact of a spoiler on different genres, suggesting that the enjoyment of a superhero movie was positively affected by spoilers, while a comedy was enjoyed less when it was spoiled. One possible explanation we suggested was that the superhero movie used (Captain America: The Winter Soldier [US 2014, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo]) was complex; a spoiler could increase fluency, enhancing enjoyment. The fact that the comedy clip (The Hangover Part III [US 2013, Director: Todd Phillips]) was enjoyed less could be attributed to the fact that the enjoyment of comedy comes from its punchlines, which in this study was ruined by the spoiler (Topolinski).

Most research to date looks at spoilers that give away the ending, so-called *outcome spoilers*. However, enjoyment does not solely hinge on knowing the outcome of a narrative. After all, large numbers of movies and television shows are based on real events that people know about, and yet knowing their outcome does not seem to hurt people's desire to see them or their supposed enjoyment. This could be attributed to people's curiosity about the *process* behind the resolution (Yan and Tsang). An experiment using a short film found that an outcome spoiler reduced people's *expected* enjoyment, while having very little impact on their *actual* enjoyment. Conversely, people who received a process spoiler, one that told them about various events in the narrative but not the ending, did not predict any negative impact on their enjoyment, yet this spoiler did harm their enjoyment of the movie. This can be explained through the construal level addressed above; people tend to use a high construal level when predicting their enjoyment, i.e., they focus on the outcome, yet while consuming the narrative, they focus on the process of the story, using a much lower construal level.

Another question that scholars have tackled is whether the framing of a spoiler, i.e., identifying it as such, matters. It is fairly common that people only know that something is a spoiler before engaging with a narrative because the information is labeled as such. This raises the question whether identifying a spoiler influences its impact on enjoyment. Johnson and I ("Don't Tell," study 2) found that framing a movie preview as a spoiler made people experience *reactance* (the perception that they lost the freedom to choose), which for people with high levels of NfA led to a lower desire to watch the film and lower anticipated enjoyment. Building on this, Daniel and Katz established that framing a preview as spoiled had no impact on short stories, but that this did lead to a lower enjoyment rating for a television episode.

Several studies have also examined the role played by the timing of spoiler exposure. In an era when most people watch movies and series at a time convenient to them (so-called *time-shifted viewing*), sometimes long after a series has ended, being spoiled while watching a show is a much greater risk to enjoyment than being spoiled beforehand (Perks and McElrath-Hart). Yet research found that when people saw a spoiler while reading a short story but before reaching its denouement, this did not impact enjoyment, while spoilers presented prior to reading the story did (Levine et al.). This could, speculatively, be attributed to the construal level of the respondents: people who were spoiled before reading a story were primed to consider the ending as highly relevant, creating a high construal level. People who were already invested in the story were more focused on the story's process than its outcome, so then an outcome-based spoiler would not affect their enjoyment as much. Contrarily, in our examination of the impact of spoilers on horror fans' experiences of horror movies, we found that when people were exposed to a spoiler before watching the second scene in a sequence of three scenes from a movie, they reported lower levels of processing fluency, which influenced enjoyment and transportation. This discrepancy could, tentatively, be attributed to the nature of horror, whose enjoyment hinges in part on the thrill of seeing morally unacceptable violence (Johnson et al.).

The amount of information revealed in a spoiler, or *spoiler intensity*, has been shown to matter, too. When the quality of a film is not immediately clear from reviews or other information, and people are exposed to a spoiler that reveals additional information about the film, they are more likely to want to see the movie. This especially applied to movies with a limited theater release, average user reviews, and a smaller advertising budget. Spoilers thus help to reduce uncertainty about movie quality (Ryoo et al.). In addition, for viewers of horror movies with a higher NfA, a minor spoiler that revealed an upcom-

ing scare or twist in the next scene had a positive effect on enjoyment and transportation. For people with a lower NfA, minor spoilers had a negative impact on their enjoyment (Johnson et al.).

Research has also examined whether the perceived complexity of a narrative influences people's desire for a spoiler. A narrative can be perceived as cognitively or affectively challenging, i.e., as making high intellectual or emotional demands of its consumers. This raises the question whether the perception of challenge influences people's decision to expose themselves to a spoiler, and how this might impact their subsequent enjoyment. With Kryston et al., we used findings from two separate experiments and found that participants were likely to select a spoiler if it would allow them to make better sense of a story or ensure that the content would not overburden their emotional capabilities. On the other hand, people with a high NfA avoided spoilers if they thought going into the narrative unspoiled would increase their affective arousal.

Engagement with the content

Not everyone is engaged with media content in the same way or for the same reasons. This implies that spoilers could have a varying impact on people's enjoyment, depending on how they engage with the content that is spoiled. As a result, spoiler research has examined various aspects of user involvement with media narratives, including mood management, fandom, self-protection, and concern for self and characters.

People generally use media to make positive moods last as long as possible and to quickly resolve bad moods (Zillmann, "Mood Management"). Engagement with a narrative is commonly seen as a positive experience: the more deeply people are absorbed creating a mental model for a story, the higher their enjoyment of that story. As a result, scholars have hypothesized that the desire to maintain the positive mood that comes from enjoyment might lead people to avoid spoilers. Maxwell's study showed that this idea held up: in this study, spoiler avoidance was linked to higher levels of narrative engagement as well as higher levels of hedonistic enjoyment, lasting impression, and suspense. In other words, people perceive spoilers as undermining the positive moods associated with their enjoyment and narrative engagement.

Spoilers, by their nature, assume that a reader or viewer is unfamiliar with the narrative as it unfolds. But how does this play out for fans? Fans are more familiar with backstories, possible narrative developments (so-called fan theories), and the world in which the narrative takes place than regular media

consumers. As such, they might be more likely to be exposed to spoilers or have accurate theories about upcoming plot twists. At the same time, it is possible that fans, due to their elevated engagement with the story and its characters, want to avoid spoilers even more than non-fans.

Whether fans really do have a different relationship with spoilers was questioned by Johnson et al.'s study on horror movies, which found that spoilers did not hurt enjoyment for horror fans any more or less than they did for non-fans. However, investigations of fans' motivations and social norms for sharing spoilers reveal that while spoilers are overall seen as undesirable, some fans will share spoilers to enhance people's curiosity about upcoming shows, or out of a need to discuss the series (Meimaridis and Oliviera). Völcker connected the differences in fans' attitudes and behaviors towards spoilers to how fans view themselves. In his study, Star Wars fans who identified as "hardcore" saw spoiler seeking and consumption as an essential and unavoidable part of their identity as fans. Spoilers helped them better understand the narrative and regulate their own emotional responses to story developments. Fans who identified as less hardcore and more "generalist" (157) were more likely to avoid spoilers. The importance of fan attitudes to their beliefs about spoilers was echoed by Castellano et al. Furthermore, Ellithorpe and Brookes found that people who were exposed to fan theories with correct predictions about the season finale of How I Met Your Mother (HIMYM, US 2005–2014, Creator: Carter Bays and Craig Thomas) reported increased enjoyment of the final episode.

The discussion about how spoilers impact fan enjoyment is further complicated by the rise of book-to-screen adaptations (Athreiya), which introduces questions about the impact of book-consistent/discrepant spoilers on enjoyment of the on-screen narrative (Johnson and Rosenbaum, 2018, "Don't Tell," study 3; see discussion above). In addition, as shown by Castellano et al., fans' decisions about when and where to share spoilers about book-to-screen adaptation hinge on their perceptions about the originality of the on-screen narrative. Unfortunately, media-psychological research into fans and spoilers is limited. Most of the research that addresses fan identities and spoilage takes a humanistic approach, and thus falls outside the scope of this paper.

Finally, most research into spoilers assumes that spoilers somehow hurt enjoyment. Ellithorpe and Brookes, however, asked whether it was possible that spoilers serve a positive function for some. Using a two-wave survey study wherein long-time viewers of the series HIMYM completed questions about their familiarity with various fan theories prior to watching the series finale, their exposure to spoilers, and their narrative experience before and

after watching the finale, Ellithorpe and Brookes found that exposure to spoilers and fan theories that came true helped people make sense of the events in the show more easily. This in turn enhanced enjoyment and reduced the distress that many long-time viewers experience when a show comes to an end. In other words, in some cases, spoilers can serve a highly positive role for long-time viewers of a show.

Extending this line of thinking, Brookes et al. investigated whether *empathic distress*, or the concern that people might feel for the characters in a narrative, as well as the worries people might have about their own responses to narrative developments, might be a reason for selecting spoilers. Using a stand-alone episode from the series Electric Dreams (US 2017–2018, Creator: Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner), we found that people who were concerned about how the show might make them feel were more likely to select a spoiler preview before finishing the episode. Interestingly, whether participants selected a spoiler did not predict their ultimate enjoyment or experienced suspense, showing that while spoilers can serve a positive function for some media consumers, they are not highly relevant to enjoyment.

Looking Back and Moving Forward: Challenges and Opportunities

After more than a decade of empirical research into spoilers, our understanding of how spoilers impact people's narrative experience has increased significantly. However, research also shows that the relationship between spoilers and enjoyment is highly complicated and circumstantial, and that any effect that spoilers have on the narrative experience is small.

Most importantly, the lay conception that spoilers always ruin enjoyment and are to be avoided at all costs is not always correct. While spoilers can hurt enjoyment, in many cases they do not, and when they do, it is under very specific circumstances. In some instances, spoilers can in fact enhance people's narrative experience, especially for those who enjoy experiencing emotions and those who consider stories from a low-construal, more process-oriented perspective. Furthermore, spoilers can increase people's ability to make sense of a narrative by facilitating their construction of the mental model of the story. Media consumers have also been shown to actively select spoilers, especially when they are highly concerned about their own emotional responses to a narrative, or when a story is perceived as challenging. Especially noteworthy is the finding that, overall, people are not very good at predicting how much spoilers will actually impact their enjoyment.

Challenges

Like any collection of empirical studies, the research into spoilers is characterized by several shortcomings. First, few studies rely on actual media content that the participants, most often young adults of college age, consume. Earlier work relied on literary short stories, and while more recent work has moved into using clips from movies and television shows (e.g., Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell"; Johnson et al.) as well as trailers (e.g., Kryston et al.), viewing a brief clip is not going to engender the kind of engagement one might feel with a full episode or movie. Although a few studies have begun to mimic the actual viewing experience by having participants watch entire episodes of TV shows, these are also characterized by high levels of attrition, i.e., large numbers of participants do not watch the entire episode and thus have to be removed from the study before analysis (Brookes, et al.; Ellithorpe et al.). This makes it more difficult to produce reliable findings. In addition, the findings from these studies, because of their focus on a single piece of media content, are more difficult to generalize.

A second challenge is in the populations studied to date. Most studies rely on student samples, usually young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who are enrolled at a four-year institution. While this age group does consume a great deal of media, their media consumption is not necessarily representative of how people in different age categories consume media. Younger media users are more likely to binge watch (e.g., Rubenking and Bracken; Sabin) and watch shows through streaming services rather than live television (Rainie), thus time-shifting their viewing (Loechner). Moreover, they are more active on social media (Auxier and Anderson), where the chance of running into spoilers is ever present (Cotman; Romaguera). As a result, it is possible that this age group is more used to accidental spoilage and better able to incorporate spoilers into their narrative experience than people in other age groups. Yet little is known about the influence of age on how media consumers interpret a spoiler, or how a spoiler might impact the narrative experience of older media consumers.

A third issue is the use of self-reports. All studies to date ask participants to report their feelings about the narrative after watching or reading the story using survey measures. While self-reports are generally seen as reliable (Haeffel and Howard), arousal (the physical sensation that resolves into enjoyment) also includes a biological component (Vorderer et al.; Zillmann, "Sequential Dependencies"). Relying solely on people's self-reports for assessing their enjoyment thus ignores their physiological response. In addition, by measuring

people's enjoyment *after* they viewed or read a narrative fails to assess how people's enjoyment might vary throughout the show or movie, and how this might be impacted by a spoiler. In studies where shows are stopped to expose viewers to a spoiler (e.g., Brookes et al.), this might occur too early or too late for some viewers, whose arousal (and thus desire for a spoiler) peaked at a different time.

A final challenge centers on defining what a spoiler is. In most of the empirical research to date, spoilers are defined as "the premature release of salient information about a narrative" (Johnson and Rosenbaum, "Don't Tell" 583). However, as research became more complex, researchers introduced distinctions between various kinds of spoilers, from process and outcome spoilers to major and minor spoilers. While research almost always assesses whether the participants perceive the spoiled review as spoiled, the spoiler is usually designed by the research team, not the participants, failing to address varying perceptions of what constitutes a spoiler.

Moving Forward

So how should the challenges above be addressed? A start would be to rely on a more mixed-methods approach. To date, all media-psychological studies into spoilers have employed quantitative measures in the form of surveys and experiments. While these allow for easy replication and generalization, they cannot provide the kind of robust insight into the wide variety of people's opinions of and purposes for spoilers that qualitative research can (Taylor et al.). Incorporating this approach into spoiler research might shed light on some of the contradictory results produced by the quantitative approaches used in the field to date.

In addition, future research should replicate actual viewing experiences and use more naturalistic approaches. That is, studies should use full episodes and movies and replicate the settings in which people consume content to better mirror how viewers engage with spoilers in real life. A few ongoing projects are implementing this in their study design, but no data has yet been reported. A challenge here includes finding content that is engaging yet unknown to most respondents, and preparing for high rates of attrition.

Furthermore, spoiler research should consider using physiological measures, such as heart rate monitors and skin conductors, to assess enjoyment (e.g., Zillmann et al.). Understanding how physiological responses to media entertainment are impacted by spoilers may provide better insight into how spoilers truly impact enjoyment, considering the bad reputation that spoilers

have had for decades. Research into spoiler selection especially could benefit from using physiological measures to determine people's arousal levels.

Finally, media psychology-based spoiler research should consider the work carried out in the humanities and vice versa. Both fields could benefit from a dialogue with the other, in terms of theoretical as well as methodological approaches. The fact that this happens only rarely can likely be attributed to the fact that scholars in either field often consider their work to be so inexorably connected to their particular research paradigm (i.e., post-positivist v. hermeneutic/constructivist) that any collaboration with research reliant on another paradigm is perceived as impossible. Yet, work that has combined a critical with a more post-positivist approach, such as the research into the global reception of Lord of the Rings trilogy (NZ/US 2001–2003, Director: Peter Jackson) by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs ("Watching"), has shown that such a collaboration is not only possibly but also fruitful (Barker and Mathijs, "Researching").

Media psychologists who research spoilers should consider two specific aspects of how the humanities examine spoilers: their tendency to focus on analyzing media texts and their understanding that media reception and interpretation occur collaboratively. These could both be useful ways to expand media psychologists' understanding of how individuals engage with media content. For instance, work by scholars such as Hassoun, who uses the genre structure of comics to show why spoilers are not all bad, and Gray and Mittell, who take an in-depth look at fan communities, provide excellent insight into how people and texts collaborate to inform the meaning of spoilers. Yet, their findings are rarely used to inform media-psychological work into spoilers: a true loss for the field.

At the same time, humanities-based work into spoilers should consider media-psychological perspectives. Research into fandom and spoilers is an especially fertile ground for collaboration between humanities-based and media-psychological perspectives. Fan studies that consider spoilers often examine fans as members of their fan communities, foregoing a consideration of the characteristics that shape the fans as individuals. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, for instance, discuss how fan communities work together to unearth spoilers about the popular reality show Survivor (US 2000– , Creator: Charlie Parsons and Mark Burnett). While these kinds of studies provide helpful insights into the mechanics of the group, they do not consider how these group dynamics are constituted by fans' individual motives, perceptions, and narrative experiences. Using media-psychological measures to understand how individual fans experience texts, and how these experiences

are shaped by personality traits and states, would greatly augment insight into the dynamics of these fan communities.

Conclusion

When Benjamin and I collected our first data on spoilers back in 2012 ("Spoiler Alert"), we never imaged that over a decade later people would still be talking about spoilers and what they mean for media entertainment. Understanding how spoilers work has proven to be far more complex than anyone had ever imagined. Spoilers, as closely tied as they are to the media users' personality traits, emotional states, and narrative engagement, capture the complexity of the media entertainment experience. As we implement the ideas suggested above and collaborate more closely with humanistic approaches to media entertainment, our understanding of the relationship between spoilers, enjoyment, and transportation should continue to grow. And until then, just know that a spoiler is often not as bad as one might think.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all my amazing co-authors: Allison, Morgan, Sarah, Kevin, Ezgi, Sara, and Angel, and especially heartfelt thanks to Benjamin, for the email that started it all back in 2011, and our continued work together.

Filmography

Captain America: The Winter Soldier. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2014.

Electric Dreams. Creator: Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner. US 2017–2018.

Game of Thrones. Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. US 2011–2019.

The Hangover Part III. Director: Todd Phillips. US 2013.

Hotel Rwanda. Director: Terry George. US/UK/ZA/IT 2004.

How I Met Your Mother. Creator: Carter Bays and Craig Thomas. US 2005–2014.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2001.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2003.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. Director: Peter Jackson. NZ/US 2002.

Schindler's List. Director: Steven Spielberg. US 1993.

Survivor. Creator: Charlie Parsons and Mark Burnett. US 2000– .

Works Cited

Appel, Markus, and Tobias Richter. "Transportation and Need for Affect in Narrative Persuasion: A Mediated Moderation Model." *Media Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2010, pp. 101–35. DOI:10.1080/15213261003799847.

Athreiya, Vishak. "Book Adaptations on the Rise as Studios Consider them a Safer Bet." *3Vision*, 23 Sept. 2022, www.3vision.tv/news-insights/book-adaptations-on-the-rise-as-studios-consider-them-a-safer-bet.

Auxier, Brooke, and Monica Anderson. "Social Media Use in 2021." *Pew Research Center*, 7 Apr. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021.

Barker, Martin, and Ernest Mathijs. "Researching World Audiences: The Experiences of a Complex Methodology." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 664–89.

---. *Watching Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*. Peter Lang, 2008.

Bartsch, Anne, Markus Appel, and Dennis Storch. "Predicting Emotions and Meta-Emotions at the Movies: The Role of the Need for Affect in Audiences' Experience of Horror and Drama." *Communication Research,* vol. 37*,* no. 2, 2010, pp. 167–90. DOI:10.1177/0093650209356441.

Brookes, Sarah, et al. "Spoilers as Self-protection: Investigating the Influence of Empathic Distress and Concern for the Self on Spoiler Selection." *International Journal of Communication,* vol. 18, 2024, pp.1745–64.

Busselle, Rick, and Helena Bilandzic. "Measuring Narrative Engagement." *Media Psychology*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009, pp. 321–47. DOI:10.1080/15213260903287259.

Cacioppo, John. T., and Richard E. Petty. "The Need for Cognition." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol. 42, no.1, 1982, pp. 116–31. DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.42.1.116.

Castellano, Mayka, et al. "Game of Spoilers: Adapted Works and Fan Consumption Disputes in Brazil." *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media,* no. 9, 2017, pp. 74–86.

Cotman, Victoria. "How Social Media Gave Rise to the World of Spoiler Culture." *Urban List*, 21 May 2019, www.theurbanlist.com/a-list/spoiler-culture-entertainment.

Daniel, Thomas. A., and Jeffrey S. Katz. "Spoilers Affect the Enjoyment of Television Episodes but not Short Stories." *Psychological Reports*, vol. 122*,* no. 5, 2019, pp. 1794–807. DOI:10.1177/0033294118793971.

Diamantopoulos, Adamantios, et al. "Guidelines for Choosing Between Multi-item and Single-item Scales for Construct Measurement: A Predictive Validity Perspective." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 40, 2012, pp. 434–49. DOI:10.1007/s11747-011-0300-3.

Ellithorpe, Morgan E., and Sarah E. Brookes. "I Didn't See that Ccoming: Spoilers, Fan Theories, and their Influence on Enjoyment and Parasocial Breakup Distress During a Series Finale." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2018, pp. 250–63. DOI:10.1037/ppm0000134.

Ellithorpe, Morgan E., et al. "That's Not Supposed to Happen! Spoilers' Impact on Experience of Narratives with (Un)Expected Endings." *Psychology of Popular Media,* vol. 13, no. 3, 2024, pp. 281–90. DOI:10.1037/ppm0000482

Gray, Jonathan, and Jason Mittell. "Speculation on Spoilers: Lost Fandom, Narrative Consumption, and Rethinking Textuality" *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–28.

Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol. 79, no. 5, pp. 701–21. DOI: 10.1037//0022-3514.79.5.701

Green, Melanie. C., et al. "Understanding Media Enjoyment: The Role of Transportation Into Narrative Worlds." *Communication Theory,* vol. 14, no. 4, 2004, pp. 311–27. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2004.tb00317.x.

Haeffel, Gerald. J., and George S. Howard. "Self-Report: Psychology's Four-Letter Word." *The American Journal of Psychology,* vol. 123, no. 2, 2010, pp. 181–88. DOI:10.5406/amerjpsyc.123.2.0181.

Hall, Alice. E., and Cheryl C. Bracken. "'I Really Liked that Movie': Testing the Relationships Between Trait Empathy, Transportation, Perceived Realism, and Movie Enjoyment." *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications,* vol. 23, no. 2, 2011, pp. 90–99. DOI:10.1027/1864-1105/a000036.

Hassoun, Dan. "Sequential Outliers: The Role of Spoilers in Comic Book Reading." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics,* vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 346–58. DOI:10.1080/21504857.2013.784202.

Hoffner, Cynthia. A., and Kenneth J. Levine. "Enjoyment of Mediated Fright and Violence: A Meta-Analysis." *Media Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2005, pp. 207–37. DOI:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0702_5.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.

Johnson, Benjamin K., and Judith E. Rosenbaum. "Don't Tell Me How It Ends: Spoilers, Enjoyment, and Involvement in Television and Film." *Media Psychology,* vol. 21, no. 4, 2018, pp. 582–612. DOI:10.1080/15213269.2017.1338964.

---. "Spoiler Alert. Consequences of Narrative Spoilers for Dimensions of Enjoyment, Appreciation, and Transportation." *Communication Research,* vol. 42, no. 8, 2015, pp. 1068–88. DOI:10.1177/0093650214564051.

Johnson, Benjamin. K., et al. "Spoilers Go Bump in the Night: Impacts of Minor and Major Reveals on Horror Film Enjoyment." *Journal of Media Psychology,* vol. 32, no. 1, 2020, pp. 14–25. DOI:10.1027/1864-1105/a000252.

Krcmar, Marina, and Linda G. Kean. "Uses and Gratifications of Media Violence: Personality Correlates of Viewing and Liking Violent Genres." *Media Psychology,* vol. 7, no. 4, 2005, pp. 399–420. DOI:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0704_5.

Kryston, Kevin, et al. "Seeking Spoilage: The Impact of Content Challenge, Self-Control, and Traits on Spoiler Selection." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media,* vol. 66, no. 3, 2022, pp. 440–63. DOI:10.1080/08838151.2022.2110593.

Leavitt, Jonathan D., and Nicholas J. S. Christenfeld. "The Fluency of Spoilers: Why Giving away Endings Improves Stories." *Scientific Study of Literature,* vol. 3, no.1, 2013, pp. 93–104. DOI:10.1075/ssol.3.1.09lea.

---. "Story Spoilers Don't Spoil Stories." *Psychological Science,* vol. 22*,* no. 9, 2011, pp. 1152–54. DOI:10.1177/0956797611417007.

Levine, William H. et al. "The Effect of Spoilers on the Enjoyment of Short Stories." *Discourse Processes,* vol. 53, no. 7, 2016, pp. 513–31. DOI:10.1080/0163853X.2016.1141350.

Livingstone, Sonia. *The Rise and Fall of Audience Research: An Old Story with a New Ending.* Oxford UP, 1994.

Loechner, Jack. "Time Shifted TV Viewing Is the Default." *Media Post*, 16 April 2015, www.mediapost.com/publications/article/247581/time-shifted-tv-is-the-default.html.

Maio, Gregory. R., and Victoria M. Esses. "The Need for Affect: Individual Differences in the Motivation to Approach or Avoid Emotions." *Journal of Personality,* vol. 69, no. 4, 2001, pp. 583–614. DOI:10.1111/1467-6494.694156.

Maxwell, Lindsey Conlin. "Spoilers Ahead, Proceed with Caution: How Engagement, Enjoyment, and FoMO Predict Avoidance of Spoilers." *Psychology of Popular Media,* vol. 11, no. 2, 2022, pp. 163–72. DOI:10.1037/ppm0000362.

Mecklenburg, Anne-Charlotte. "The Sensational Temporality of Spoilers in *The Woman in White* and Avengers: Endgame." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2021, pp. 55–67. DOI:10.1080/08905495.2021.1867816.

Meimairidis, Melina, and Thaiane Oliviera. "The Pleasure of Spoiling: The Spectrum of Toxicity Behind Spoilers in Brazil." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 272–90.

Oliver, Mary Beth, and Anne Bartsch. "Appreciation as Audience Response: Exploring Entertainment Gratifications Beyond Hedonism." *Human Communication Research,* vol. 36, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53–81. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01368.x.

Perks, Lisa. G., and Noelle McElrath-Hart. "Television Spoilers Recast as Narrative Teasers." *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–7. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01368.x.

Raney, Arthur. "The Psychology of Disposition-Based Theories of Media Enjoyment." *Psychology of Entertainment*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006, pp. 137–51.

---. "The Role of Morality in Emotional Reactions to and Enjoyment of Media entertainment." *Journal of Media Psychology,* vol. 23, no.1, 2011, pp. 18–23. DOI:10.1027/1864-1105/a000027.

Rainie, Lee. "Cable and Satellite TV Use Has Dropped Dramatically in the US Since 2015." *Pew Research Center*, 17 Mar. 2021, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/17/cable-and-satellite-tv-use-has-dropped-dramatically-in-the-u-s-since-2015.

Rains, Stephen. A. "The Nature of Psychological Reactance Revisited: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Human Communication Research*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 47–73. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2012.01443.x.

Reinhart, Amber M., et al. "The Persuasive Effect of Message Framing in Organ Donation: The Mediating Role of Psychological Reactance." *Communication Monographs*, vol. 74, no. 2, 2007, pp. 229–55. DOI:10.1080/03637750701397098.

Reber, Rolf, et al. "Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience?" *Personality and Social Psychology Review,* vol. 8, no. 4, 2004, pp. 364–82. DOI:10.1207/s15327957pspr0804_3.

Rosenbaum, Judith E., and Benjamin K. Johnson. "Who's Afraid of Spoilers: Need for Cognition, Need for Affect, and Narrative Selection and Enjoyment." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* vol. 5, no. 3, 2016, pp. 273–89. DOI:10.1037/ppm0000076.

Romaguera, Gabriel. "Spoilers as (Un)Wanted Information: How Reader's Engagement with Paratextual Material Affects Wellbeing." *Open Information Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2022, pp. 95–105. DOI:10.1515/opis-2022-0130.

Rubenking, Bridget, and Cheryl Campanella Bracken. "Binge-Watching: A Suspenseful, Emotional, Habit" *Communication Research Reports,* vol. 35, no. 5, 2018, pp. 381–91. DOI:10.1080/08824096.2018.1525346.

Ryoo, Ju Hyun, et al. "Do Spoilers Really Spoil? Using Topic Modeling to Measure the Effect of Spoiler Reviews on Box Office Revenue." *Journal of Marketing,* vol. 85, no. 2*,* 2020, pp. 70–88. DOI:10.1177/00222429209377.

Sabin, Sam. "Most Young Adults Have an Appetite for Binge-Watching Shows." *Morning Consult*, 6 Nov. 2018*,* morningconsult.com/2018/11/06/most-young-adults-have-an-appetite-for-binge-watching-shows.

Taylor, Steven J., et al. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. A Guidebook and Resource*. Wiley, 2016.

Topolinksi, Sascha. "A Processing Fluency-Account of Funniness: Running Gags and Spoiling Punchlines." *Cognition and Emotion,* vol. 28, no. 5, 2014, pp. 811–20. DOI:10.1080/02699931.2013.863180.

Verplanken, Bas, et al. "Need for Cognition and External Information Search Effort." *Journal of Research in Personality,* vol. 26, no. 2, 1992, pp. 128–36. DOI:10.1016/0092-6566(92)90049-A.

Völcker, Matthias. "'Spoiler!? I'm Completely Painless, I Read Everything': Fans and Spoilers—Results of a Mixed Methods Study." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, pp. 145–69.

Vorderer, Peter, et al. "Enjoyment: At the Heart of Media Entertainment." *Communication Theory,* vol. 14*,* no. 4, 2004, pp. 388–408. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2004.tb00321.x.

Yan, Dengfeng, and Alex S. L. Tsang. "The Misforecasted Spoiler Effect: Underlying Mechanism and Boundary Conditions." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 26, no.1, 2016, pp. 81–90. DOI:10.1016/j.jcps.2015.05.003.

Zillmann, Dolf. "The Logic of Suspense and Mystery." *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991, pp. 281–303.

---. "Mood Management in the Context of Selective Exposure Theory." *Annals of the International Communication Association*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2000, pp. 103–23. DOI:10.1080/23808985.2000.11678971.

---. "Sequential Dependencies in Emotional Experience and Behavior." *Emotion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Robert D. Kavanaugh et al., Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996, pp. 243–72.

Zillmann, Dolf, et al. "The Effect of Suspense and Its Resolution on the Appreciation of Dramatic Presentations." *Journal of Research in Personality,* vol. 9*,* no. 4, 1975, pp. 307–23. DOI:10.1016/0092-6566(75)90005-7.