



Consuming Television Crime Drama: A Uses and Gratifications Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article employs uses and gratifications theory to conduct an audience analysis on crime drama viewership. To the best of our knowledge, this theory has not yet specifically been applied to this genre, thus providing a basis for the research study. Three independent variables (age, sex, frequency of crime drama viewing) were tested against four dependent variables (curiosity/information, identification, social interaction, and entertainment), as well as all variables together (full gratification) in order to determine if they were statistically significant predictors of each specific type of gratification. Results indicated that frequency of viewing crime dramas was a statistically significant predictor for only full gratification and curiosity/information. The study's limitations and future research directions are discussed.

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Research on crime dramas and crime reality shows has been steadily growing for over three decades. Such programming has been studied in a variety of contexts; the most popular approaches include the relationship of crime dramas and reality shows to fear of crime, consistent inaccuracies that such programs portray, and the effects that such programs have upon viewers. This paper takes a unique approach to the study of crime drama viewership by employing a Uses and Gratifications theoretical approach to conduct an audience analysis of crime drama programming. This approach is meaningful given scholarly debate on how this kind of programming does (or does not) affect viewers (e.g. Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Doob & Macdonald, 1978; Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Rather than analyzing potential effects of this media, the study explores why individuals watch crime dramas so that we can better understand the relationship between television programming and the audience members who watch it.

Millions of viewers across North America view crime dramas and crime reality shows weekly (Fishman, & Cavender, 1998). Crime dramas such as *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue*, as well as crime reality shows such as *America's Most Wanted* and *Cops* have been markedly successful (Cavender, & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Doyle, 1998; and Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004). More recently, Nielsen ratings have suggested that *NCIS*, *NCIS: Los Angeles*, *The Mentalist* and *Criminal Minds* are the most popular crime dramas amongst viewers, and these programs ranked #5, #6, #7, and #8, respectively, in the Nielsen ratings at May, 2011 (<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/top10s/television.html>). Nielsen ratings are, according to Fishman (1998), the most “complete” measure of television viewing, and given that crime dramas constitute four of the top 10 ranked programs, this genre of programming is significantly popular in North America.

Early research conducted on crime and the media was characterized by Gerbner and colleagues' research on cultivation theory. According to Gerbner and Gross (1976) “television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviours. Its function in a word, ‘enculturation.’” (p. 175). In other words, according to Gerbner, individuals who watch more television (four or more hours daily) are more likely to perceive the world to be a “mean” and “scary” place (Sparks, 1992). Despite the initial acceptance of cultivation theory, one of the major criticisms of this theory is that it presupposes a homogenous audience that is passive and impacted in uniform ways during the television viewing process. Ericsson (1991) notes that “research indicates that people learn about crime and legal control from a wide variety of other sources, [and] that the mass media are but one source among many” (p. 219-220).

Gerbner's theory that those who watch four or more hours of television daily are more fearful of crime has been debated. For example, Doob and Macdonald's (1978) research on Toronto residents found that when neighbourhood incidence of crime was controlled for, there was no relationship between television viewing and fear of being a victim of crime. Another study by Heath and Petraitis (1987) found that the total amount of television viewing was related to fear of crime in distant urban settings (e.g., New York) but not within one's own city or neighbourhood. Further, Wober (1978) attempted to support Gerbner's theory in a study conducted in Britain and was unsuccessful. Wober suggested that, “it should be accepted, therefore, that there is no evidence for a paranoid effect of television on British viewers, although the proposition has twice, and adequately, been put to the test” (p. 320). Similarly, Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, and Bannister (2004) found no relationship between television viewing and fear of crime in their study and therefore propose that any relationships that have

been found in the past are weak and arbitrary. Eschholz, Chiricos, and Gertz (2003), when considering a full sample of viewers, found that television viewing was unrelated to fear of crime.

Given the lack of empirical support to Gerbner's theory (Sparks, 1992), scholars have considered alternative explanations for the relationship between television viewing and fear of crime. There is a growing body of literature which, in contrast to Gerbner's theory, suggests that audience traits are important in the relationship between television viewing and fear. Some recent studies have shown that perceived racial composition of one's neighbourhood mediates the television viewing and fear of crime relationship. Dowler (2003) found that perceived neighbourhood problems were related to fear of crime in his sample. Also, Eschholz, Chiricos, and Gertz (2003) concluded that people's perceived racial composition of neighbourhood is critical in the structuring of the television viewing and fear relationship; television effects were found for several different shows in areas where black populations were believed to be over 25 percent. Further, Moeller, (1989) found that whites living in mostly black neighbourhoods were more fearful crime (only sex and community size were better predictors). In sum, the relationship between television viewing and fear of crime (becoming a crime victim) is much more complex than once believed. It is therefore increasingly important to analyze the audience and why crime dramas are so appealing, rather than assuming that the media affects the audience in a homogenous manner. Doyle (2006) calls for scholars to think less about the effects of media, and more about the audience watching such programming.

Uses and Gratifications (U & G) theory parts ways with the "hypodermic needle" approach, as developed by Gerbner and colleagues. This approach assumed a homogenous audience in which the audience was passive during the viewing process. In contrast, U & G theory posits that the audience uses media outlets in order to satisfy certain needs and desires (Rubin, 1993). In other words, individuals actively seek out certain forms of media in a goal-directed and rational way that will provide them with the gratifications for which they are longing. According to Blumler and Katz (1974) the gratifications that individuals experience from media use are both psychological and social in nature. U&G theory creates a conceptual shift in focus from what the media does to people, to what people do with the media (Rubin, 1993).

One of the central premises of U & G is that in order to explain the effects of media use, the motivation and behaviour of the individual must be understood (Rubin, 1993). In McQuail's work (1984, 1987), four major categories to individual media use have been offered. They include: information (such as finding out about relevant events); personal identity (including finding reinforcement for personal values and finding models of behaviour); integration and social interaction (such as identifying with others and gaining a sense of belonging); and entertainment (wanting to "escape" or be diverted from problems, or to simply relax or fill time). McQuail's categories are helpful in categorizing the motivations of the audience while viewing crime dramas.

There have been several studies that have examined the audience of violent media in the context of a U&G framework. For example, Greene & Krcmar (2005) found that sensation seeking, verbal aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and instrumental androgyny were associated with exposure to violent films and, to a lesser degree, violent television. Similarly, Slater (2003) showed that sensation seeking was an important predictor for attraction to violent television and

internet viewing. Further, Krcmar and Greene (1999) determined that high sensation seekers were more attracted to real life crime shows. On a similar note, Conway and Rubin (1991) concluded that sensation seeking was related to the constructs of passing time and escapism as motivations for television viewing. Within a U&G framework, these aspects (passing time and escapism) would be classified under McQuail's (1987) entertainment category.

U & G continues to have an observable appeal largely because of its applicability to new research areas in communication. This can be seen through the recent studies on internet blog use (see Chung & Kim, 2007; Li, 2007). The U & G approach is considered one of the most appropriate theories by which to gain insight into an audience's psychology and behaviour (Li, 2007). To the best of our knowledge, U&G theory has not explicitly been examined in the realm of viewing crime drama and crime reality shows, thus providing a meaningful rationale for this study.

The existing literature on crime drama viewership, together with the identified gap whereby crime dramas have yet to be viewed within an audience-centred framework, leads us to test the following hypotheses against four different outcomes:

Null Hypothesis: Age, sex of respondent, and frequency of crime drama viewing are not predictors of information, identification, social interaction, and entertainment (i.e., all measure full gratification)

Research Hypothesis: Age, sex of respondent, and frequency of crime drama viewing are predictors of information, identification, social interaction, and entertainment (i.e., all measure full gratification).

Method

Participant Recruitment: A convenience sample of participants was recruited through networking tools in Facebook, a popular social networking site. According to Brooks and Churchill (2007) "social media technologies offer new sources and methods for recruiting study participants including e-mail distribution, and social networking sites such as Facebook" (p.2). Upon ethical clearance, the researchers created a group in Facebook relevant to the study, and a letter of invitation was sent to two of the authors' friends list, inviting potential participants to join the group. Once joining the group, a link was provided to all members allowing them to access the anonymous, online survey.

Participants: The survey yielded 130 responses. Of these, 88 were full responses and would represent the total sample size. The remaining 42 responses were discarded because either participants failed to give informed consent (2), participants were under the age of 18 (7) and therefore the survey terminated, participants answered that they never watched crime drama or crime reality shows (22) and the survey was discarded, or the survey was only partially completed (11). In addition, respondents were asked to complete four open-ended questions to provide qualitative evidence that would shed light on the quantitative analyses.

Materials: All potential participants were directed to the online survey which consisted of basic demographic questions, as well as both qualitative and quantitative questions that were designed to fit the U & G framework.

Variables: This study was concerned with the impact of three independent variables (age, sex, and frequency of crime drama viewing) on four specific outcomes or dependent variables (DV). All dependent variables were measured on a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. First, the questions, “I watch crime dramas to satisfy my curiosity and general interest in crime” and “I watch crime dramas to get information about crime, victims, police and forensics” questions were used to create DV 1, information. Secondly, “I watch crime dramas because I identify with the role and responsibility of the police” “I watch crime dramas because I identify with victims of crime” questions were used to create DV 2, identification. Third, “I watch crime dramas because it allows me the opportunity to talk to other people about the shows” and “I watch crime dramas because no one is around and it makes me feel less lonely” were question used to create DV 3, social interaction. Fourth, “I watch crime dramas because it allows me the opportunity to escape from my problems”, “I watch crime dramas because they help me to relax” and “I watch crime dramas because I am just filling time and have nothing else to do” were used to create DV 4, entertainment. In addition, all measures/questions for these four dependent variables were summated together to create a “full gratification” dependent variable.

Prior to creating standardized scales for the dependent variables, reliability analyses were conducted for each set of dependent variables, namely, information/curiosity (DV1), identification (DV2), social interaction (DV3), entertainment (DV4), as well as for all dependent variables together (full gratification). The Cronbach’s alpha for dependent variables measuring full gratification, information/curiosity, identification were all above the recommended alpha value of .60, and were .702, .627, and .632 respectively. These values clearly were suggestive of good internal consistency amongst the indicators/measures. The only two dependent variables in which internal consistency was compromised were for the dependent variables, social interaction (.451) and entertainment (.492). While the values did not meet the Cronbach’s alpha cut-off of being $\geq .60$, scales were still built for each measure and incorporated in the analyses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics for Predictor and Dependent Variables

Three predictor variables are included in the study: age, sex and frequency of viewing. A large majority of the sample (75%) was between the ages of 18-24. The majority of respondents were female representing 70.5% percent while males represented 29.5% of the survey participants.

In the studied sample, frequency of watching crime dramas appears stable as 89.8% of participants identified that they watch crime dramas between one and seven hours per week. Furthermore, 9.1% of the sample watched these programs 8-14 hours per week, and only 1.1% of the sample watched more than 14 hours on a weekly basis. For the purpose of quantitative analysis, all of the ordinal level variables were made interval-ratio like in order to conduct a reliability analysis and create a standardized scale

Dependent Variables

The first dependent variable focused on curiosity and information (DV1) as motivating consumption of crime drama shows. Almost half of the respondents (48.9%) indicated that they

watch crime drama shows because of curiosity. On the other hand, disagreement was the most frequent answer regarding the information motivation (38.6%). The second dependent variable (DV 2) on identification also consisted of two questions. The most frequent response to the question on identifying with the police was disagree (44.3%). Similarly, the most common answer to the question on identifying with victims was also disagreement (43.2%). The third dependent variable (DV 3) relates to social interaction. While 30.7% agreed that crime dramas allow people the opportunity to talk to others, a higher number of respondents disagreed that crime dramas made people feel less lonely (45.5% of participants).

Unlike the previous three dependent variables, entertainment (DV4) was measured using three questions. Slightly less than half (45.5%) of survey respondents disagreed with the first question, which related to allowing people to escape from their problems. Responses to the second question about watching crime dramas in order to relax showed an equal result between agree and disagree (both 31.8%). The statement about watching crime dramas in order to fill time found that almost half of respondents agreed (n= 48.9%).

Regression Analyses: Full Gratification Scale

The coefficient of determination (R^2) explains 6.6% of the variance. Therefore, age of respondent, sex of respondent, and frequency of crime drama viewing simultaneously explains only 6.6% of the variance in the dependent variable, full gratification. As a result, 93.4% is explained by other variables not considered in the model. The unstandardized b's for age, sex of respondent and "how often do you watch crime dramas" indicate the following: for every one year increase in age of respondent, gratification increases by .005; for sex of respondent, females, compared to their male counterparts, to be less likely gratified; and for every one hour increase in watching crime dramas, there is a decrease in gratification by .381. The standardized beta indicates that frequency of watching crime dramas is the best predictor in the model (-.257), followed by age (.009) and sex respectively (-.009). The t-value also indicates that the best predictor is also statistically significant¹ (t-value: -2.428, $p < .05$). The t-values for predictors, age and sex are not statistically significant (t-value: -.087, $p > .05$; t-value: -.084, $p > .05$). Overall, the full gratification scale regression model suggests that frequency of television viewing is not only the best predictor of full gratification, but is also statistically significant.

¹ A 95% confidence level (.05 alpha level) was used in this research to establish statistical significance.

Table 1 Age, Sex, and Frequency of Crime Drama Viewing as Predictors of Curiosity/Information Seeking, Identification, Interaction and Entertainment

Model	<i>Curiosity and Information Sought</i>		<i>Identification</i>		<i>Interaction</i>		<i>Entertainment</i>	
	t	Sig.	t	Sig.	t	Sig.	t	Sig.
(Constant)	13.404	.000	14.634	.000	16.997	.000	18.271	.000
What is your age?	.522	.603	.791	.431	-1.067	.289	-.278	.782
What is your sex?	-1.633	.106	1.362	.177	-.769	.444	.490	.625
How Often do You Watch Crime Dramas?	-2.390	.019*	-1.717	.090	-1.357	.178	-1.065	.290

* $p < .05$

The regression analyses for all four outcome/dependent variables separately (i.e., not scaled) are presented in Table 1. The R-square values indicated that age, sex, and how often one watches crime dramas explains only 9% of the variance in the dependent variable curiosity/information, followed by the dependent variables, entertainment (6.1%), identification (4.5%), and social interaction (1.7%). The selected predictor variables did not do much explaining of the variance for dependent variables, like identification and social interaction.

Across all four dependent variables, age and sex of respondent were not statistically significant. Frequency of television viewing is the only predictor variable that was statistically significant for the dependent variable curiosity/information (t-value: -2.390, $p < .05$); it remained not significant for the dependent variables, identification, interaction, and entertainment.

Discussion

This study's contribution to the literature on crime drama viewership lies in employing uses and gratifications theory to conduct an audience analysis. The study specifically tested three independent variables (age, sex, and frequency of television viewing) against four dependent variables (curiosity/information, identification, social interaction, and entertainment), as well as all four together which was labelled full gratification.

The descriptive statistics reveal that curiosity and full gratification were the most influential aspects of gratification. First, almost half the sample agreed that they watched crime dramas in order to satisfy their sense of curiosity. This suggests that viewers have specific motivations for watching these crime dramas and that these motivations are more instrumental in nature according to the U & G theory. About half of the respondents disagreed that they watch these programs in order to identify with either the police or the victims. The significance of this finding lies in how they diverge from the reported audience "effects" of crime shows. For instance, Dowler and Zawilski (2007) report that frequent viewers of police dramas believe that the wealthy receive preferential treatment from the police.

In reference to DV 3 (social interaction), the highest number of respondents agreed that they watch crime dramas in order to talk to others about the programs. Furthermore, the

qualitative responses indicated that many people believe that talking to others both after and during the crime dramas is one of the most significant elements to them personally. It is important to note that U & G theory is criticized for being individualistic and psychogistic in nature, which ignores the socio-cultural context (Blumler, McQuail, & Brown, 1972). However, research has shown that this criticism may not be valid. For example, Blumler, McQuail, & Brown (1972) examined the social context of viewing *Coronation Street* and found that 62 percent of respondents stated that they did not care if they watched the show alone or in the presence of someone else, thus suggesting that social context does not matter. Despite this finding, it would seem according to the results of this study that the socio-cultural context of crime drama viewing is important in for some people and should be a focus of future research.

When analyzing DV 4 (entertainment), it was found that a large number of respondents (almost half) disagreed that they watched these programs in order to escape from their problems. Participants still indicated that they often watched crime dramas in order to relax and fill time, and suggested that they have particular programs that they watch regularly. Thus, these results indicate that for some audience members, crime drama viewing is more ritualized and habitual in nature. As active viewers, individuals' motivations and reasons for watching these types of shows are more "utilitarian," in contrast to intentional and selective motives. While many media researchers support this finding (e.g. Blumler, 1979; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Rubin, 1984), additional research should be conducted to distinguish between the instrumental and ritualized viewing patters of individuals viewing crime dramas.

Regression analyses revealed that with respect to full gratification, it was found that as age increases, full gratification also increases. However, the relationship was not statistically significant. Also, females were less likely than their male counterparts to be fully gratified by watching crime dramas. Again, the results were not statistically significant. On the other hand, frequency of television viewing was found to be a statistically significant predictor of full gratification. Interestingly, it was determined that for every one hour increase in television viewing there was a decrease in gratification. Thus, as television viewing increases viewers seem to be less satisfied. Future research should examine the concept of full gratification further in order to test all four components of the U & G theory as a whole against other independent variables.

The relationships between age, sex and DV 1 (information and curiosity) were not statistically significant. However, as was the case for full gratification, the frequency of viewing crime dramas was a statistically significant predictor of watching crime dramas in order to satisfy curiosity and seek information. It was indicated that for every hour increase in watching crime dramas, there was a decrease in curiosity and information. Therefore, it can be concluded that viewers experience a greater sense of gratification of their curiosity when they spend a minimal amount of time viewing crime dramas. The qualitative responses to this question also indicate that satisfying curiosity and gaining particular information are key motivations for viewing crime dramas. Viewers seek to gain information about crime-related details such as the steps involved in solving cases, the technology that the forensic team uses, the role of the court, and the role of the police. As mentioned above, this provides support that people are instrumental (Rubin, 1984), and have particular motivations when seeking out these programs. Future research could examine the extent to which motivations influence crime drama viewing behaviour.

Results for the remaining three dependent variables (identification, social interaction, and entertainment) indicated that none of the three independent variables (age, sex, and frequency of viewing crime dramas) were statistically significant predictors. However, there were some interesting results that should be considered nonetheless. In terms of sex, males were more likely to be fully gratified, watch crime dramas to satisfy curiosity and information, and to identify with either the police or crime victims than females. However, females were more likely to watch crime dramas in order to talk to others and feel less lonely, as well as to escape problems, relax and to fill time. Future research could address these specific gender differences by surveying more participants and have a more equal representation of gender in order to determine if these differences are statistically significant.

Although not statistically significant in the remaining three variables, there was a negative relationship between the frequency of viewing crime dramas and the dependent variables in all three cases. When considered with full gratification and DV 1, it can be said that a minimal amount of crime drama viewing is sufficient in being gratified in all four areas of the U & G theory. Future research should include a larger sample size in order to determine if these findings remain consistent. Due to the close proximity in the age of the study participants, it is impossible to make any inferences in this regard.

The qualitative responses for the survey were not mandatory and respondents had the option of answering open-ended questions. From these qualitative responses, it appears that entertainment is an important area to examine in the future. Respondents indicated that they mainly watch these crime dramas because of the mystery and suspense. However, many also suggested they watch them in order to relax, fill time, and that they watch the same programs on a week-to-week basis. Therefore, research should consider the ritualized and habitual behaviour of crime drama viewers. Moreover, research should specifically examine what exactly it is about these programs that viewers find most appealing and entertaining.

It is of particular note that the coefficient of determination concluded that the three predictor variables (age, sex, and frequency of viewing crime dramas) accounted for very little of the variance in all four of the dependent variables, as well as the full gratification scale. In all cases except the identification variable, the predictors were found to not be statistically significant. Therefore, it may be concluded that the three chosen predictors are not the best measures to have used. Research in the future should include several other demographic variables when conducting a study of this nature. Aspects such as race, religious affiliation, political affiliation, income, and a greater disparity in age should be incorporated into future analyses. The inclusion of these variables could result in a higher percentage of variance in the dependent variables under analysis.

The need to explore gender differences in TV crime drama consumption becomes important in light of the gender discrepancy in the study's participants, as females represented two-thirds of the sample. There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, past research on crime drama viewership has found that females are more likely than males to view this particular genre of programming (see Heath, & Petraitis, 1987). In addition, the recruitment technique that was used for the study could have resulted in more females taking part in the study. Also, the largest disparity between men and women users is found within people in their late teens and early twenties, which constituted the large majority of this sample. It is possible

that this could be a result of more females using Facebook, or that females have been to be more likely to watch crime dramas (see Heath & Petraitis, 1987).

There are other limitations to this study. As is the case for many studies that use the U & G framework, this particular study utilized a self-report survey. This can be problematic because it may be difficult for respondents to fully acknowledge, understand, and report the exact reason(s) they view crime dramas. Also, respondents may answer in a way that they believe other people would report themselves; according to McQuail (1984) this is an inescapable bias of U & G. Another limitation is that the recruitment method (via Facebook) resulted in a relatively homogenous population, particularly by age. As a result, it was difficult to consider responses in the context of age. The study also analyzed a relatively low sample size (n=88). Future research with a larger sample size could help in creating more reliable and valid results.

Participants in this study were recruited through the researchers' friend lists, though there is another possible means through which participants can be recruited via Facebook. Due to the amount of information that many Facebook users display on their homepage, researchers can actively seek participants that would be beneficial to their studies. One can search Facebook profiles, for example, relative to age, race, religion, and occupation. In a study conducted by Brooks and Churchill (2006), Facebook was used to recruit participants that were concierges at hotels. The authors note that the social network site was instrumental in providing them with numerous potential participants via its search function. The main issue of concern here is whether providing this information implies informed consent. This dilemma requires consideration by research ethics boards in the near future. However, it is certainly a viable option at present and may have been beneficial to this study in that it would have resulted in a broader dispersion of age and sex of respondents.

Future research should consider the differences between instrumental and ritualized viewing behaviour amongst respondents within the U & G framework. Also, although the results were not statistically significant, the gender differences between the dependent variables would be interesting to study in the future with a much larger sample. This could result in a more accurate finding as to whether the shown differences are in fact statistically significant. Finally, the future researchers could incorporate the full gratification scale into their study when examining the potential relationship between other variables that have not been considered in this particular study.

Another potential theoretical framework that could apply to this research is the third-person effect. Davison (1983) suggests that the third-person effect can be characterized by two hypotheses: (a) people tend to perceive greater media impact in others; and (b) this perception subsequently influences their behaviour (Peiser, & Peter, 2000). The design of a future study could be informed by the third-person effect. In this case questions to the audience could involve a rating of one's own personal fear and also their perception of another person's fear in the context of watching crime drama and reality shows. In addition, a question could be asked about the degree to which these programs provide information to the viewer, and the viewers' perceptions on the amount of information others gain from watching this genre. Similarly, a question could be asked examining the individual's perceived accuracy of the information presented in these programs and their perceptions as to other people's interpretation.

Conclusion

This study utilized uses and gratifications theory in order to conduct an audience analysis on crime drama viewership. To the best of our knowledge, this theory has not specifically been applied to this genre, thus providing a basis for the research study. Given this theoretical approach to the audience of crime dramas, these findings make a unique addition to existing literature on the topic. Three independent variables (age, sex, frequency of crime drama viewing) were tested against four dependent variables (curiosity/information, identification, social interaction, and entertainment), as well as all variables together (full gratification) in order to determine if they were statistically significant predictors of each specific type of gratification.

Results indicated that frequency of viewing crime dramas was a statistically significant predictor for only full gratification and DV1 (curiosity and information). All other relationships were found to be not statistically significant. However, due to some limitations of the study such as the lack of diversity of age and sex of the respondents, this study provides a basis for future research to build upon the findings. The present study was also limited in the number of participants (n=88). Further research could examine the potential differences between instrumental and ritualized viewing behaviours of individuals, as well as other demographic variables such as race, occupation, religious affiliation, political affiliation, and income that were not considered in this study. These variables will help account for some of the variance that remained unexplained in the dependent variables.

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