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Sophie Janicke-Bowles

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Self-Centeredness As A Response To Narratives With Few Self-Transcendent Elicitors

Sophie H. Janicke-Bowles, Ph.D.

School of Communication
Chapman University
1 University dr.
Orange, CA 92866
bowles@chapman.edu

Sophie H. Janicke-Bowles (Ph.D., Florida State University, 2013) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at Chapman University. Her research interests include the role that new and traditional media play in promoting and affecting character development, self-transcendent emotions, prosocial behavior, and well-being.

bowles@chapman.edu;
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4162-3717>

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Abstract

Recently scholars (Oliver et al., 2018) argued to broaden the concept of eudaimonic entertainment experiences and introduced two conceptualizations: 1. self-focused experiences, including mixed affect, contemplation and need satisfaction, and 2. other-focused experiences, including self-transcendent emotions and prosociality. The goal of the study was to investigate how the two dimensions of meaningful media experiences (self-focused vs. other-focused) are elicited from inspiring films that contain self-transcendent elicitors and explore the connection and differentiation between the two. Results of a Qualtrics experiment (N=328) revealed that films with a large amount of transcendent portrayals lead to greater experiences of mixed affect and less self-centeredness than films with a small amount of transcendent portrayals. No difference between films was found for inspiration, elevation, contemplation and need satisfaction. Implications for the understanding of the conceptualization of complex eudaimonic entertainment experiences are discussed.

Self-Centeredness As A Response To Narratives With Few Self-Transcendent Elicitors

Today, online videos often make us feel moved, touched and contemplative. Scholars refer to such media experiences as meaningful or eudaimonic ones, which are different from feeling mere delight and joy (i.e., hedonic experiences) when consuming media. Meaningful media experiences include many dimensions. Oliver et al. (2018) laid out two conceptualizations: One that involves more self-focused experiences of mixed affect (feeling happy and sad at the same time), contemplation and need satisfaction, and another one that involves more other-oriented experiences of self-transcendent emotions (i.e., elevation, gratitude), connectedness and prosociality. Thus far, little empirical research has tried to understand how these two dimensions of meaningful media experiences are related, how much they co-occur and how they are elicited.

The current study refers to recent research on inspiring media which has found that portrayals of transcendent character strengths (i.e., a media character modeling kindness) are specifically predictive of such other-oriented experiences (Dale et al., 2017a; Clayton et al., 2020). However, it is unclear as of yet, if such content would also elicit self-focused experiences. Therefore, the goal of the study was to investigate how the two dimensions of meaningful media experiences (self-focused vs. other-focused) are elicited from inspiring films that contain self-transcendent elicitors and explore the connection and differentiation between the two. The findings will contribute to the media psychological literature by allowing a better understanding of the complex eudaimonic entertainment experience.

Self-Transcendent Eudaimonic Entertainment Experiences

Overall, eudaimonic entertainment experiences, sometimes also referred to as inspiring media experiences (Raney, et al., 2018), are defined by a set of cognitive and emotional experiences that may impact well-being in the short and (potentially) long term by fostering a

sense of meaning, connectedness and understanding about life or humanity as a whole (Oliver & Bartsch, 201). Oliver et al. (2018) formally introduced the idea that eudaimonic entertainment experiences can be categorized into self-focused, insight finding experience on the one hand and outward-focused (self-transcendent), helping or interconnectedness experience on the other hand. The authors define self-transcendent media experiences as ones that go beyond personal benefits and entail the understanding of a greater interconnectedness between the audience and others or a higher nature. This rationale is based on the conceptualization of a specific set of positive emotion that are referred to as self-transcendent emotions and include awe, elevation, gratitude, and admiration (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Those emotions concern others more so than the self, draw us out of our ego-centric consciousness and make us feel more connected (Janicke & Oliver, 2017) and prosocial (Schnall et al., 2010).

Elicitors of Self-transcendent Experiences

Self-transcendent emotions can be elicited by portrayals of transcendent character strengths (i.e., gratitude, hope) which are personality traits that represent the virtue of transcendence: a disposition to strive for and connect with purpose and meaning greater than ourselves (see Raney et al., 2018). Dale et al. (2017a, Dale et al., 2017b) found that portrayals of transcendent character strengths, such as characters overcoming obstacles, saying “thank you” or showing kindness, are relatively common in what lay people and media professionals refer to as “inspiring media.” In turn, research has found that witnessing media characters portraying such transcendent character strengths can elicit said self-transcendent emotions as well as a state of inspiration (Dale, et al., 2017a; Clayton et al., 2019). For example, Dale et al. (2017a) found that immediately after the depiction of a transcendent elicitor (characters portraying hope or gratitude) in a short video, participant’s ratings of inspiration increased more than before the

elicitor was present. Even though inspiration—being a motivational state—has not been defined as a self-transcendent emotion per se, it has been associated with a transcendent outlook (Thrash & Elliot, 2003) and as such could be understood as another self-transcendent experience.

Moreover, research indicates a relationship between number of transcendent elicitors present in inspiring videos and stronger audience experiences such as liking, commenting or views of an online video (Dale et al., 2017; Dale et al., 2019). Theoretically, these stronger responses can be the result of increased emotional flow (Nabi, 2015) elicited by the transcendent portrayals which can increase the appreciation of the narrative and motivate future actions more so than narratives without (or only a few) such elicitors (see Clayton et al., 2019). Consequently, a dose-response relationship was assumed between the amount of transcendent portrayals and respective entertainment experiences. First, related to inspiration, it was predicted:

H1: Among eudaimonic films, those with many transcendent portrayals will be perceived as more inspiring than films with only few transcendent portrayals.

The portrayal of moral virtue and kindness has been shown to elicit the self-transcendent emotion of elevation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Dale et al., 2017a), which is the so far most studied self-transcendent emotion in the context of eudaimonic entertainment experiences. Elevation is defined as an experience of feeling moved and touched when encountering moral beauty, which is a prototypical transcendent portrayal. Since previous research did not differentiate between the potentially different types of eudaimonic media experiences, direct evidence that elevation is an entertainment response particularly associated with content that contains a lot of self-transcendent portrayals is lacking as of yet. Based on the transcendent elicitor of moral beauty in transcendent narratives, it was predicted:

H2: Among eudaimonic films, those with many transcendent portrayals will be perceived as more elevating than films with only few transcendent portrayals.

Self-Oriented Eudaimonic Entertainment Experiences

Common for all eudaimonic entertainment experiences are a sense of meaning, mixed affect, that is feeling happy and sad at the same time (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011), states of contemplation (Bartsch, 2012), and intrinsic need satisfaction. According to Oliver et al. (2018) these experiences may, for some people and for some narratives—for example narratives with transcendent portrayals—be expanded to include other-oriented experiences such as self-transcendent emotions (including mixed affect, see Clayton et al., 2019) as well. For example, witnessing a character showing perseverance through challenging times, which is a transcendent portrayal of hope, may increase a viewer's self-efficacy to push through their own hardships in life, reflecting more self-focused eudaimonic experiences. Additionally, a viewer may also experience a feeling of elevation and hope for the future and humanity, reflecting more transcendent experiences. However, the conventional eudaimonic experiences can be expected from any eudaimonic narrative (stories that deal with the human condition, life's purpose) regardless of the amount of transcendent portrayals present. Consequently, it was predicted:

H3: There will be no difference between conditions in viewers experience of a) mixed affect, b) contemplation and c) intrinsic need satisfaction.

It is expected that narratives with transcendent portrayals are more likely to elicit self-transcendent media experiences which focus on others more so than the self. Conversely, narratives with less transcendent portrayals should predict less outward oriented responses. This outward orientation thus far has been assessed with measures of connectedness (Janicke & Oliver, 2017) and altruism (Schnall et al., 2010). The current study expanded upon these typical

other-focused measures and explored the opposite, namely the concept of self-centeredness (i.e., narcissism, Raskin & Terry, 1988), which can come at the cost of others. If transcendent portrayals within eudaimonic films indeed lead to a greater orientation toward others, then such narratives should exclude experiences that come at the cost of others well-being, namely self-centeredness. Therefore, it was predicted:

H4: Among eudaimonic films, those with many transcendent portrayals will elicit lower self-centeredness as a response to remembering the film than films with only few transcendent portrayals.

Methods

Sample, Stimulus Materials, and Procedure

An online Qualtrics panel was employed with 328 valid responses (n=22 were excluded based on failed attention check responses) from participants in the U.S. with equal proportion of gender (50.3% male) and a wide age range ($M = 50.59$, $SD = 17.21$; $Min = 18$, $Max = 92$). Of the sample, 79.3% were White, 10.4% Black, 4.0% Asian, 3.4% Hispanic, 2.7% other and less than 1% American Indian or Alaska Native (.3%). Participants were randomly assigned to either the film condition with a large number ($N = 164$) or small number ($N = 164$) of transcendent portrayals.¹

Six eudaimonic films per condition were selected (see table 1) that varied in their presence of transcendent portrayals (i.e., portrayals of kindness, gratitude, nature) as put forth by a content analysis of “inspiring” films by Dale et al. (2017b) and had a trailer available to show participants. Dale et al. (2017b) coded 50 pre-selected inspiring films according to their presence

¹ A post-hoc power analysis using G*Power 3.1 was conducted with a calculated effect size of $d = .288$ based on the mean difference between groups of mixed affect, the variable with the largest effect size results in the current analysis, $\alpha = .05$ and $n = 164$ per group. The analysis yielded a power of .83.

of modeled transcendent character strengths (i.e., a character showing gratitude or kindness) and direct elicitors of self-transcendent emotions (i.e., beautiful nature for the elicitation of awe; perseverance for the elicitation of hope).

---Table 1 here---

After completion of demographic questions, participants were first asked if they had previously seen any of the six films and then asked to select one of the six films, they remembered the best, which were presented in random order with their respective movie poster image, the movie name and release year. They were asked how often they had watched the film before (zero to more than five times), were exposed to the trailer of their selected film and subsequently asked to elaborate on how the film made them feel the first time they had watched it and why it made them feel this way. Following this open-ended elaboration to spark their memory about the film, the dependent variables were measured.

Measures

All scales were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = “not at all/strongly disagree”, to 7 = “very much/strongly agree”, and referenced to how watching the film the first time made participants feel and think (excluding self-centeredness).

Affect

Elevation was assessed with six items by Oliver et al. (2012) including *touched*, *moved*, *emotional*, *meaningful*, *compassionate* and *tender* ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .879$).

Mixed affect was calculated following the procedure put forth by Ersner-Hershfield et al., (2008) which uses the minimum score of participants positive and negative affect responses.

Scoring 1 in negative and 5 in positive affect results in a low mixed affect score of 1. Positive

(*cheerful, happy and upbeat*, $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.51$, $\alpha = .870$)² and negative affect (*sad, gloomy, depressed, and melancholy*, $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .777$) were assessed also using previous scales by Oliver et al., (2012). If the participant reported a 1 in positive affect (or negative affect) and a 5 in negative affect (or positive affect), the mixed affect score was 1 ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.29$).

Inspiration was assessed with four items from the inspiration scale by Thrash and Elliot (2003). Example items are: “I felt inspired” and “Something in the movie inspired me” ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.55$, $\alpha = .952$).

Contemplative experiences

Reflective thoughts were measured with Bartsch’s (2012) contemplative experience scale (4 items). Items were adapted to exclude any wording referring to emotions to ensure a pure assessment of reflective thinking. An example item is: “Watching the movie made me think about myself” ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.43$, $\alpha = .913$).

Intrinsic Needs

Intrinsic needs were measured with Reinecke et al.’s (2014) 12-item Facebook intrinsic need satisfaction scale, which was adapted to the film viewing context. Example items for each need are: Autonomy (4 items): “After watching the movie, I felt like I am in control of my future” ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.33$, $\alpha = .835$); Competence (4 items): “After watching the movie, I felt like I can make a meaningful contribution to the world” ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .899$); Relatedness (4 items): “After watching the movie, I felt more connected toward other people” ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .901$). A CFA confirmed a moderate satisfactory fit for the 3 factors ($\chi^2 = 189.85$, $df = 51$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .093; CFI = .955; SRMR = .038).

² Due to a mistake in setting up the Qualtrics questionnaire, the original fourth item, joyful, was not assessed.

Self-centeredness

Seven items from the Narcissism Personality Inventory-40 item scale (Raskin & Terry, 1988) were chosen to measure participants current self-centeredness. An exploratory factor analysis supported a one-factor solution explaining 45% of variance. An example item is: “I can live my life in any way I want to” ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.31$, $\alpha = .844$).

Manipulation check

Eight transcendent character portrayals as previously outlined by Dale et al. (2019) were employed to identify whether the two conditions differ in their perceived portrayal of transcendence. The eight content categories included portrayals of hope, tragedy, moral beauty (kindness), non-moral beauty (admiration, appreciation of natural beauty), love, gratitude and zest ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = .873$) which participants had to rate in regard to how well each portrayal described the content of the film they selected (1 = “describes the content not well at all”, 7 = “describes the content very well”).

Results

Manipulation Check

To check if the manipulation of high versus low transcendent portrayals in eudaimonic films was successful, an ANOVA was conducted. In support of the manipulation of conditions, films with more transcendent elicitors ($M = 6.03$, $SD = .925$) were perceived by participants to contain such portrayals more so than films with a low amount of such elicitors ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.11$): $F(1,326) = 17.89$, $p < .001$; *partial* $\eta^2 = .052$, *partial* $\omega^2 = .05$.

Hypotheses Testing

All variables were subject to a MANCOVA, controlling for age and gender, which have been shown to effect eudaimonic entertainment experiences in previous studies (i.e., Raney et al., 2018), and the liking of and average exposure to the film.

The multivariate analysis was significant for all covariates and the film condition: $F(8, 315) = 2.36, p = .018, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .056, \text{partial } \omega^2 = .03$. The analysis revealed a non-significant difference between conditions for inspiration, leaving H1 unsupported. In contrast to H2, elevation was also not significantly different between film conditions, but trending in the expected direction. H3 predicted no significant difference between conditions in a) mixed affect, b) contemplation and c) need satisfaction. The analysis supported H3b and H3c ($p > .05$), however, mixed affect was significantly higher in the high transcendent ($\text{adj. } M = 3.05, SE = .09$) than low transcendent film condition ($\text{adj. } M = 2.69, SE = .09, p = .008$), leaving H3a unsupported.

A follow up equivalence test (Weber & Popova, 2012) with a medium effect size of $r = .20$, following a balanced approach with an effect size delta of $\Delta \approx .141$ was employed to test for the significance of the null findings for H3b and H3c. For neither contemplation nor the intrinsic needs (all three needs were averaged for this analysis $M = 4.84, SD = 1.32$) was the equivalence test significant (contemplation: $t(326) = 1.78, p = .392$; intrinsic needs: $t(326) = 1.00, p = .146$) indicating that the non-significant difference between groups for contemplation (H3b) and need satisfaction (H3c) cannot be absolutely confirmed.

H4 predicted a difference between conditions in self-centeredness as a consequence of remembering the film. In support of H4, films with a large amount of transcendent portrayals ($\text{adj. } M = 3.95, SE = .09$) elicited less self-focused experiences than films with a lower amount of transcendent portrayals ($\text{adj. } M = 4.29, SE = .09$). Table 2 summarizes the results.

---Table 2 here---

To better understand some of the insignificant findings, a follow up MANCOVA was conducted, analyzing the four most often named films separately for all dependent variables, including the covariates. The results of the analysis can be found as an additional document in OSF (anonymous link: https://osf.io/46jnc/?view_only=d2f7db87988d42f288fb8f65a2273d57).

Discussion

The current study explored the relationship between two proposed dimensions of meaningful media experiences (Oliver et al., 2018), namely self vs. other focused, from the framework of self-transcendence as portrayed in popular films.

First, the relative prevalence of transcendent portrayals between the conditions was not perceived as starkly (even though significantly) different between participants as per the high means in the manipulation check. This is not surprising given that even the low transcendent film group involved a significant number of elicitors. Consequently, comparing narratives with high versus moderate number of transcendent elicitors was not enough to differentiate the conditions in self-transcendent emotions (elevation) or feelings of inspiration. A better manipulation in future research would be comparing eudaimonic entertainment with and without (or hardly any) transcendent portrayals but depictions of tragedy and coping with death instead (i.e., Rieger et al., 2015), which are also themes previously associated with eudaimonic media.

Second, as predicted, contemplation and need satisfaction seem to co-occur for all types of eudaimonic narratives, regardless of transcendent portrayals, with slight variations depending on the storyline. As per the follow-up analysis, *Rocky* resulted in significantly higher contemplation than *Shawshank Redemption*, potentially explaining the non-significant equivalence test for contemplation (H3b). Similarly, *Rocky* was associated with the highest score

in autonomy and competence need satisfaction, and *Shawshank Redemption* had the lowest score in relatedness need satisfaction compared to all other groups, potentially explaining why the equivalence tests for H3c were not significant (see OSF for follow up results). Thus, the different storylines and varying sample sizes per film make it hard to detect a significant equivalence test. However, the general pattern of findings supports the conceptualization of eudaimonic entertainment as put forth before (Bartsch, 2012; Oliver et al., 2018).

Third, results of the study suggest that the number of self-transcendent elicitors in a narrative may be, however, directly related to mixed affect and reduced self-centeredness. That is, based on previous research (Clayton et al., 2019) it can be suggested that narratives with a large number of transcendent elicitors are more likely to impact emotional flow (Nabi, 2015) in participants, which becomes evident in greater mixed affect. On the contrary, narratives with a lower number of transcendent elicitors (such as *Rocky*) can still be perceived as inspiring and elevating but they elicit lesser emotional flow as evidenced in low mixed affect (as in *Rocky*). In fact, Clayton et al. (2019) found greater shifts in positive and negative emotions and cognitive resource allocation after the presentation of a self-transcendent elicitor compared to before the elicitor. Based on the follow-up analysis it can be assumed that there is a threshold of the number of transcendent portrayals that lead to increased emotional flow and mixed affect (i.e., *Shawshank Redemption* with 71 portrayals did not differ from the high transcendent films as *Rocky* with 60 portrayals did). Future research is needed to explore the suggested relationship between transcendent portrayals, emotional flow and mixed emotions.

Furthermore, the study suggests a greater self-focus for narratives with less self-transcendent portrayals. This finding not only supports the theoretical argument made by Oliver et al., (2018) according to which eudaimonic entertainment experiences can be differentiated

based on how much they incline audiences to focus on self-versus others, it also suggests that self-transcendent portrayals are directly correlated with that. Thus, the more characters model self-transcendent behaviors, that is, they portray interconnectedness via appreciation of beauty and excellence or hope, for example, the less likely the viewer thinks they are a special person or think they will never be satisfied until they get all they deserve (self-centeredness). Certainly, the storyline's focus on the heroes' journey as in the war movie *Saving Private Ryan* and boxing success story *Rocky*, may also play an important role in the audience's perception of increased self-importance. In contrast, *Shawshank Redemption* and *Forrest Gump* are heroes with a more interconnected understanding of the self (see also Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). Future research could explore the relationship between the number of transcendent elicitors and self-centeredness while controlling for the hero's journey in the narrative. Also, given the potential impact on memory recall of the films that have been released in very different years, an experimental design with actual film exposure would be important.

In sum, self-transcendent portrayals in eudaimonic narratives could be an important conceptualization for the differentiation between self and other focused entertainment responses.

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Table 1.

Selected Films Per Condition And Number Of Transcendent Character Portrayals

	Films	% participants who remembered this movie the best	Average amount of film exposure <i>M(SD)</i>	Number of total transcendent portrayals (Dale et al., 2017b)
High transcendent portrayal condition (<i>N</i> =164)	Shawshank Redemption (1994)	25.0	3.34 (1.29)	196
	Forrest Gump (1994)	52.4	2.07 (1.44)	183
	Rudy (1993)	6.7	2.45 (1.81)	182
	Facing the Giants (2006)	3.0	2.60 (1.82)	180
	The Help (2011)	9.1	2.27 (1.22)	161
	Milk (2008)	3.7	1.33 (.516)	158
Low transcendent portrayal condition (<i>N</i> =164)	Wild (2014)	1.2	1.50 (.707)	75
	Saving Private Ryan (1998)	27.6	2.22 (1.36)	71
	Rocky (1976)	46.0	3.11 (1.56)	64
	Little Miss Sunshine (2006)	7.4	2.50 (1.38)	62
	Inside Out (2015)	16.0	2.42 (1.45)	60
	Steve Jobs (2015)	1.8	2.33 (1.53)	42

Table 2.

Univariate Results from the MANCOVA And Mean Differences For The Outcome Variables Between Conditions

	High	Low	<i>F</i> (1,322)	<i>p</i>	<i>partial</i>	<i>partial</i>
	transcendent portrayal condition <i>Adj .M (SE)</i>	transcendent portrayal condition <i>Adj. M (SE)</i>	controlling for age, gender, liking and prior exposure		η^2	ω^2
Inspiration	5.45 (.120)	5.28 (.120)	.507	.477	.002	.00
Elevation	5.79 (.088)	5.52 (.088)	3.56	.060	.011	.01
Mixed affect	3.05 (.099)	2.70 (.099)	7.13	.008	.022	.02
Contemplation	5.39 (.111)	5.14 (.111)	2.02	.156	.006	.00
Autonomy needs	5.07 (.104)	4.96 (.104)	.168	.682	.001	.00
Competence needs	4.70 (.114)	4.63 (.114)	.022	.883	.000	.00
Relatedness needs	4.96 (.115)	4.77 (.115)	.789	.375	.002	.00
Self-centeredness	3.99 (.094)	4.26 (.094)	5.46	.020	.017	.01

Note. Based on the significant covariate results, younger participants experienced greater inspiration, self-centeredness, mixed affect, contemplation and need satisfaction. Males experienced more narcissism than females. All outcome variables, besides mixed affect, were positively predicted by liking of the film. Self-centeredness and mixed affect were positively predicted by previous exposure to the film.