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Exploring the Spirit in U.S. Audiences: The Role of the Virtue of Transcendence in Inspiring

Media Consumption

by

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Abstract

Little is yet known about audiences who routinely seek out media content that is inspirational in nature (Oliver et al., 2018). The current study expands the research on inspirational media by utilizing a nationally representative sample of U.S. audiences ($n = 2,016$) to explore relationships between inspiring media exposure, trait transcendence, and self-transcendent emotions. Results show that media content is a reliable source for everyday self-transcendent emotional experiences in U.S. audiences. These experiences are most frequently encountered by persons with high levels of trait spirituality and gratitude. The profile of U.S. audiences that seek out inspiring media is discussed.

Keywords: Inspiring Media, Spirituality, Gratitude, Self-transcendent emotions, U.S. Audience

Exploring the Spirit in U.S. Audiences: The Role of the Virtue of Transcendence in

Inspiring Media Consumption

Recently, mass communication researchers have begun to explore media content that is inspirational in nature, content that is often described as touching, moving, thought-provoking, eliciting goose bumps, and leaving audiences with a lump in their throat (Oliver et al., 2018). Generally, inspirational media content portrays humanity's better nature: altruism, kindness, compassion, perseverance, and love. Such content can be found across many platforms and formats, including music, TV shows, films, radio, news, and social media. Initial research suggests that some people are more likely to seek out inspiring content or to feel more inspiration upon exposure than others. In the most extensive audience study to date, Raney, Janicke, Oliver, Dale, Jones, and Cox (2018) found that females, younger audiences, minorities, and those with more education were generally more likely to report having felt inspired by a variety of different media sources, as were those with higher levels of trait empathy and need for affect.

Understanding inspirational media is important for communication scholars because of the potential positive effects associated with consumption. Inspiring content can elicit self-transcendent emotions (e.g., awe, gratitude, elevation), which have been found to benefit different aspects of well-being, including prosociality (Schnall, Roper & Fessler, 2010; Stellar et al., 2017), connectedness (Janicke & Oliver, 2017), spirituality (Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008), and life satisfaction (Diessner, Solom, Frost, Parson, & Davidson, 2008). The resulting self-transcendent media experiences ultimately draw us out of our self-focused consciousness to open ourselves to others (Oliver et al., 2018; Stellar et al., 2017). A greater understanding of those experiences can better equip educators, industry leaders, content creators, healthcare

providers, counselors, and other concerned individuals to promote and increase inspirational media consumption. As such, the study holds promise to better illuminate the potential for media to create positive individual and social change.

In pursuit of this understanding and building on past research, the current study explored the role of inspiring media within the lives of the American public. The project was guided by three primary goals. First, Raney and colleagues (2018) reported that most Americans have been inspired by media at some point in their lives, but it is yet unknown how frequently they seek it out. Thus, our first research goal was to explore the frequency of inspiring media exposure and possible changes in that frequency over time. As a part of this, we also wanted to explore how audiences were encountering and possibly sharing inspiring media. Second, Raney et al. (2018) provided an initial exploration of personality traits that might explain inspiring media exposure, based on those shown to be related to eudaimonic media in general (see Oliver & Raney, 2011). However, a systematic analysis of personality factors and their theoretical contribution to self-transcendent media experiences is still missing. Consequently, our second research goal focused on exploring transcendent traits—namely, spirituality and gratitude—as specific predictors of inspiring media experiences. Lastly, self-transcendent emotions can be elicited by both mediated and non-mediated activities (e.g., connecting with close friends or family, being in nature), but it is unclear which better predicts day-to-day self-transcendent experiences. Therefore, our third research goal explored the role that inspiring media (vs. non-mediated) experiences play in the everyday elicitation of self-transcendent emotions among a representative U.S. sample.

To reach these goals, two waves of panel data from a representative sample of the U.S. population were analyzed. Wave 1 (n = 3,006) was the basis for Raney et al. (2018); in Wave 2, 67.1% (n = 2,016) of those individuals were surveyed again to investigate new relationships

between variables and to measure change across time in others. The survey design, analysis, and interpretation were guided by theories and concepts from media and positive psychology; we review those now.

Prevalence of Inspiring Media Consumption

Most individuals report having had emotional reactions that they associate with inspiration when consuming media (Raney et al., 2018), but what is not clear is how often they have such experiences. Such information is crucial given the potential benefits of those experiences to psychological well-being (e.g. Diessner et al., 2008; Janicke & Oliver, 2017; Saroglou et al., 2008). Thus, to begin, we explored:

RQ1: How often does the current U.S. audience feel inspired by media content?

With video-on-demand and streaming service, online news, and social media, consumers have the opportunity to consume more content than ever before. With the sheer increase of information available, inspirational content has also become more common and readily available. Numerous news services have started to provide positive and inspiring stories for their consumers. For example, in July 2015, *USA Today* introduced a new section that invites consumers to submit "stories of real people performing positive acts," which are also published on Facebook (USA Today Humankind, 2015, para. 1). In June 2018, *Huffington Post* introduced a new series that focuses on "elevating stories about kindness" (Huffpost PR team, 2018). Inspirational content is among the highest performing Facebook posts in terms of user engagement (Peters, 2019). Moreover, online users are more likely to share positive content with others in several ways (e.g., Berger & Milkman, 2012; Raney et al., 2018; Ji et al., 2019); recent experimental research provided more evidence of this fact with inspiring (vs humorous) videos (Clayton et al., in press). Thus, audiences today may be likely to encounter inspiring media,

engage with it in some way, and to pass it along to others. Evidence of such a trend would lend

further support to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), which contends that

positive emotional experiences broaden our perspectives and build our personal resources,

leading to an upward spiral of human flourishing. To explore the extent to which inspiring media

might be contributing to this spiral and in light of the apparent increase in content availability,

we compared Wave 1 and Wave 2 responses with the expectation that:

>H1a: U.S. audiences will actively seek inspiring media more over time; and,

>H1b: U.S. audiences will be increasingly more likely to share inspiring media content

>with others over time.

Transcendence and Inspiring Media Consumption

Perhaps it goes without stating, but inspiring media leads to inspiration among audience

members. According to Thrash and Elliot (2003), inspiration (1) is evoked, rather than initiated

intentionally [in the current case, evoked by media content], (2) is transcendent in that it is

elicited by or includes the experiences of something larger then oneself [more on this below],

and (3) implies motivation and, thus, energizes behavior [e.g., sharing the content with others].

Thus, a key component and defining characteristic of (mediated) inspiration is transcendence.

According to the virtues in action (VIA) framework, transcendence is one of six

universally observed human virtues that can impact well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Transcendence is the virtue to strive for purpose and meaning greater than oneself and to connect

with humanity's higher nature. The VIA framework further states that each virtue is manifest

through various "character strengths," or traits that govern a person's thoughts, actions, and

emotions (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Transcendence is thought to be manifest through

five-character strengths: gratitude, spirituality, hope, an appreciation for beauty, and humor

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, a person in awe of the beauty of nature or encouraging a friend to persevere through hard times is manifesting the traits of appreciation and hope, respectively. As a result, s/he is enacting, expressing, and further developing the virtue of transcendence. The emotions and motivation evoked when consuming inspiring media can also then promote the virtue of transcendence and its associated traits.

But we know that traits also matter in the selection of media, both on a conscious and unconscious level (selective exposure; e.g., Bryant & Davies, 2006; see also Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010). Given the nature of inspiration, it stands to reason that audience members with stronger tendencies toward transcendence-related traits might seek out such experiences more often and be more motivated to share them with others. Therefore, we hypothesized:

H2: U.S. audience members reporting higher levels of transcendence-related traits will

(a) come across inspiring media more often and (b) share it with others more often.

The cost constraints of the current panel design, unfortunately, did not permit an in-depth examination of all five transcendence-related traits in the current study. Two of the five were examined: gratitude and spirituality. Gratitude was selected because it has been found to be one of the most often occurring portrayals within inspiring media (e.g., Dale et al., 2017a; Dale et al., 2017b). Spirituality was chosen because it is the variable (arguably) most strongly related to self-transcendent experiences in the existing literature (e.g., Saroglou et al., 2008; Van Cappellen et al., 2013).

Gratitude. Gratitude is an emotional state of thankfulness toward a personal benefactor or an appreciation for the positive things in life in general (e.g., Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). According to the VIA framework, gratitude has been defined as the tendency to generally be aware of the good things that happen in life, to not take those things for granted, and to express

thanks often (Park et al., 2004). Research in the field of positive psychology has shown that state

gratitude is one of the strongest predictors of many well-being variables, including life

satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon,

2011), strengthening and building of social bonds (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson,

2001; McCullough & Tsang, 2004), and prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Ma,

Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017; McCullough et al., 2001).

The investigation of gratitude in the context of media is relatively new. One group of

scholars recently analyzed the presence of 20 transcendent-related depictions in inspiring content

across a multitude of media platforms including YouTube videos (Dale, et al., 2017b) and

movies and TV shows (Dale et al., 2017a). One consistent finding across these platforms was

that emotional elicitors and character portrayals of gratitude were exceedingly common.

Selective exposure theory argues that media users come to learn—via classical conditioning,

excitation transfer, mere exposure, and implicit memory (see Bryant & Davies, 2006)—

associations between particular content and outcomes. As a result, we expected that audiences

with a strong disposition toward gratitude may be more likely to experiences inspiration from

media:

H3: Trait gratitude will predict inspiring media experiences.

Spirituality. Spirituality is a multidimensional concept involving the experience of and

encounters with transcendence, the sacred, connectedness, and meaning or ultimate truth (e.g.,

Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Emmons, 2006). For some, spirituality

necessarily involves the divine; for others, it does not. It has been described as a way of being, a

way of experiencing and understanding life, a quality, a trait, a sense, and an activity, among

many others (see Janicke & Raney, 2016). As a result, the operationalization and measurement

of spirituality on surveys has been quite varied.

According to Emmons (2006), the scientific study of spirituality developed along "three levels of analysis: spirituality as general trait, spirituality as reflected in personal goals and intentions, and spirituality as reflected in specific emotions and emotional processes" (p. 63). Janicke and Raney (2016) argued that operationalizing spirituality as a trait lends itself well to media studies, especially those concerned with selective exposure processes. We took the same perspective in this project. Two specific aspects of trait spirituality were examined: universality (i.e., belief in the unity and purpose of life; Piedmont, 1999) and search for meaning in life (Park et al., 2004; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). These two aspects of trait spirituality were selected because they directly reflect the VIA framework, in which spirituality is defined as a belief system involving a higher purpose and meaning in life that shapes the conduct of life (Park et al., 2004). Admittedly, measuring additional aspects of trait spirituality would have been ideal. Nevertheless, we hypothesized:

> H4: Spirituality—operationalized as a trait involving (a) the search for meaning in life
> and (b) universality—will predict inspiring media experiences.

As noted above, spirituality can also be characterized as an activity, often associated with the pursuit of spirituality as a personal goal. Such activities can involve rites and rituals associated with a particular religious faith, or not. Regardless, they are a part of the "conduct of [one's spiritual] life," as noted by Park and colleagues (2004). Therefore, we measured both, forecasting that:

> H5: Attendance at (a) spiritual (but not religious) and (b) religious gatherings will predict
> inspiring media experiences.

Self-Transcendent Experiences and Inspiring Media Consumption

As noted above, inspiring media can elicit self-transcendent emotions (Oliver, et al., 2018). Self-transcendent emotions are a particular set of positive emotions including awe, gratitude, elevation, hope, and admiration (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt & Morris, 2009). They are generally elicited by (moral) virtue, goodness, or beauty as portrayed by other people and their actions, or nonhuman agents such as nature or art. Each self-transcendent emotion has its own specific set of elicitors, but together these emotions share an outward orientation, increased approach behavior, and potential for building social resources (Stellar et al., 2017). These emotional experiences subsequently increase the likelihood that one may experience further instances of self-transcendence in the future (per the broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2001).

Because research has demonstrated a relationship between inspiring media use and the experience of self-transcendence (Dale et al., 2017b; Thrash, Elliot, Maruskin, & Cassidy, 2010), spirituality (Raney et al., 2018; Van Cappellen et al., 2013), and gratitude (Stellar et al., 2017), it seems reasonable to assume that persons high in transcendence-related traits—such as spirituality and gratitude—may be more likely to seek out inspiring media and feel inspired by it (hence, H3 and H4). Past research has found that other personality variables—specifically, need for affect and empathy—are important to explain exposure to more broadly defined eudaimonic content (see Oliver & Raney, 2011), and Raney et al. (2018) found that these variables also explain exposure to inspiring content. However, given the centrality of transcendence in inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), we contend that transcendence-related traits may be better explanatory variables of experiencing inspiration from media than the more general ones. This prediction is in line with theoretical reasoning that differentiates other-focused, self-transcendent

media experiences from self-focused-but-nevertheless-meaningful, eudaimonic ones (Oliver et al., 2018). Consequently, we expected:

> H6: Traits related to the virtue of transcendence—gratitude and spirituality (measured as universality and search for meaning)—will explain more variance in inspiring media experiences than traits associated with more general eudaimonic media exposure (need for affect, empathic concern, perspective taking).

Furthermore, as noted, several experimental studies have demonstrated that inspiring media can elicit self-transcendent experiences (e.g., Dale et al., 2017b; Van Cappellen et al., 2013). However, many non-mediated stimuli can also elicit self-transcendent experiences, including being with friends, being in nature, praying, engaging in religious activities, meditating, or doing yoga (Haidt, 2003; Haidt & Keltner, 2004; Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago, & Newberg, 2017). Thus, the benefitting influence of these emotional experiences may be triggered by a variety of sources in one's daily life. We were curious about the extent to which such experiences were due to inspiring media. Thus, we asked:

> RQ2: What role do recent inspiring media experiences play in the routine experience of self-transcendence?

Method

Sample

Data were collected in two waves; the two surveys contained unique and repeated questions. Surveys were completed by participants of AmeriSpeak, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the national U.S. adult population, run by NORC at the University of Chicago.[1] Wave 1 data ($n = 3,006$) were collected in January and February 2016;

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[1] A technical overview of the AmeriSpeak panel can be found at https://amerispeak.norc.org/about-amerispeak/Pages/Panel-Design.aspx

they served as the basis for the analysis previously reported by Raney and colleagues (2018).

Wave 2 data were collected in February and March 2017, with 67.1% (n = 2,016) of the original

sample completing the second survey. Wave 1 data from all 2,016 Wave 2 participants were

matched by case ID and merged into a combined data set for the analyses.

Responses in both waves were weighted to represent the current U.S. population. First,

panel base weights were calculated for every household based on the probability of selection

from the NORC National Frame. Household-level weights were then assigned to each eligible

adult in every recruited household. Next, the sample demographics were balanced to match the

U.S. population parameters for gender, age, education, race, ethnicity, housing type, and

telephone usage. The telephone-usage parameter was derived from an analysis of the National

Health Interview Survey. All other weighting parameters were derived from the U.S. Census

Bureau's Current Population Survey. The sample weighting was accomplished using an iterative

proportional fitting process that simultaneously balanced the distributions of all variables.

Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the

final results. All analyses were calculated with the weights applied to the dataset. The margin of

error for the surveys was +/- 2.5% in Wave 1 and +/- 3.1% in Wave 2, at the 95% level of

confidence. The surveys were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at

(MASKED FOR REVIEW) and NORC/University of Chicago.

Measures

The survey instrument was collaboratively designed by researchers from three

universities and researchers from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI); the project was

funded by the John Templeton Foundation.[2]

Overall media exposure (Wave 1 only). Participants indicated on a scale (1 = never, 8 = several times a day) how often they spend time with eight media forms: watching TV (M = 6.80, SD = 1.67), watching movies (M = 5.18, SD = 1.65), reading the news (M = 5.84, SD = 2.16), watching online videos (M = 4.88, SD = 2.38), using social media (M = 5.60, SD = 2.82), listening to radio programs or podcasts (M = 5.14, SD = 2.52), listening to music (M = 6.82, SD = 1.60), and reading fiction or non-fiction books (M = 4.03, SD = 2.26).

Inspiring media experiences (Wave 2 only). Inspiring media experiences were assessed in two ways. First, participants indicated how often in the past month they had "felt moved, touched, or inspired while watching or listening to something in the media or on the internet." This general assessment was reported on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (at least once a day). Second, participants indicated how recently they had felt moved, touched or inspired (1 = never been inspired, 5 = inspired in the last week) by each of eight media forms: watching a TV show (M = 3.89, SD = 1.18), watching a movie (M = 3.70, SD = 1.15), listening to a radio program or podcast (M = 3.27, SD = 1.38), reading a book (M=3.14, SD = 1.30), reading a news story (M = 3.61, SD = 1.30), listening to a song or piece of music (M = 4.19, SD = 1.10), watching an online video (M = 3.43, SD = 1.40), and using social media, like Facebook (M = 3.29, SD = 1.59). An overall recency of inspiring media experience score was calculated for each participant by averaging responses to each of the eight medium-specific recency items (α = .801, M = 3.57, SD = .848).

Inspiring Media Exposure (Waves 1 and 2). Independent of media type, participants were asked how they came across the most recent inspiring content: specifically searching for it, recommended by a friend or family member, as an advertisement, or just by chance. Participants

could indicate which of those answers were true for them. Each answer was then recorded into a dummy variable expressing their indication for it (1) or not (0). They were also asked whether they shared the inspiring content with a friend or family member in any way (yes/no). Comparisons between the two waves are analyzed in H1.

Inspiring non-mediated activities (Wave 1 only). As noted above, many non-mediated stimuli are associated with the experience of inspiration and self-transcendent emotions. Participants indicated how often they participate in several such activities[3]: spending time with friends ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.63$), meditating ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 2.48$), gardening, hiking, or enjoying the outdoors ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.93$), doing yoga ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.48$), or praying outside of religious services ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.74$).

Self-transcendent experiences (Waves 1 and 2). Self-transcendent experiences were assessed with seven items that tapped into the appraisals of various self-transcendent emotions— including elevation, compassion, awe, meaning, and gratitude—as previously assessed (Oliver et al., 2012). Respondents in both waves reported how often they experienced each self-transcendent emotion in the last month, using a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (at least once a day). Sample items include "How often in the last month did you feel particularly connected to the world around you? … felt like you were part of something much larger than yourself? … felt a sense of compassion for people you don't even know." The reported frequency of self-transcendent emotional experiences did not differ between the two waves: $t(2006) = 1.18$, $p = .236$; Wave 1: $\alpha = .822$, $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.11$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .856$, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.01$.

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[3] 1= Never, 2 = Seldom; 3 = Few times a year; 4 = Once or twice a month; 5 = Once a week; 6 = More than once a week, 7 = Once a day, 8 = Several times a day

Personality traits. To expand our understanding of self-transcendent media experiences, we explored personality variables related to gratitude and spirituality. Short-forms scales were used because of time and cost constraints of the panel design. Item selection for the short-form scales was based on the performance of individual items as reported in past research, as well as conceptual fit between an item and the purposes of the current study. Each item used a Likert-type scale measuring how well the item describes the participants; the scale ranged from 1 (not at all well) to 5 (exactly).

Gratitude (Wave 2 only) was measured with two items from the trait gratitude questionnaire by McCullough et al. (2002). Higher values indicated stronger trait gratitude ($r = .634$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.97$, $SD = .882$).

Spirituality was operationalized with four measures: two in line with "spirituality as trait"; two in line with "spirituality as personal goal" (Emmons, 2006). Search for meaning in life (Wave 2 only) was assessed as a trait with two items from the search for meaning in life questionnaire by Steger et al. (2006). The higher the value, the stronger the tendency to search for meaning in life ($r = .592$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.03$). Universality (Wave 1 only) was measured as a trait with two items from previous research (Piedmont, 1999), with higher values indicating a greater belief in the unity of life ($r = .561$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.45$, $SD = .974$). The two personal goal-oriented items were attendance at spiritual (not religious) gatherings ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.54$; Wave 1 only) and attendance at religious gatherings (excluding weddings and funerals) ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.67$; Wave 1 only). Both items were assessed on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never attending) to 6 (attending more than once a week). Attendance at spiritual (not religious) and religious gatherings correlated significantly with each other ($r = .679$, $p < .001$).

In addition, several traits (all Wave 1 only) previously associated with eudaimonic media (Oliver & Raney, 2011) were analyzed, including 2-item short-form versions of need for affect (Appel, Gnambs, & Maio, 2012; $r = .468$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.57$, $SD = .879$), empathic concern (Davis, 1980; $r = .258$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.11$, $SD = .629$), and perspective taking (Davis, 1980; $r = .561$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.96$, $SD = .804$), with higher scores indicating a greater expression of each trait.

Demographics (Wave 1 only). A range of demographics were assessed including gender, age, ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, and political affiliation. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the demographics per recency of inspiration felt from different media platforms. We offer these as a portrait of the current U.S. audience for inspiring media, similar to Raney et al. (2018).

———Table 1 and 2 here———

Results

Inspiring Media Exposure

Participants reported having felt inspired by something in the media or on the internet almost weekly ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.32$) (RQ1). A plurality of respondents indicated having felt inspired a few times a week (31.1%), followed by almost every day (19.8%), and once or twice a month (19.5%). More than one in eight (12.6%) said they felt moved, touched, or inspired by media on a daily basis.

Additionally, we compared the ways people came across inspiring media across the two years (H1a), using McNamar statistics for dependent data. A marginally significant difference was observed between Waves 1 and 2 in terms of people indicating that they specifically searched for inspiring content (Wave 1: 5.2%, Wave 2: 6.6% $p = .06$), with the trend leaning

toward more people actively searching for inspiring content in the most recent data-collection cycle, lending marginal support to H1a. Chance encounters with inspiring media were less common in Wave 2, with 67.7% indicating that they came across inspiring media randomly, as compared to 70.8% in Wave 1 (p = .023). No differences were observed between the waves in terms of encountering inspiring content because of recommendation from friends or family members (Wave 1: 14.7%, Wave 2: 15.2%, p = .695) or because of an advertisement (Wave 1: 6.1%, Wave 2: 6.6%, p = .540).

With regard to sharing behaviors (H1b), respondents reported *less* sharing behavior in Wave 2 (58.6% shared) compared to Wave 1 (62.2% shared, p = .006), meaning H1b was unsupported.

To investigate H2, three logistic regression analyses were conducted with gratitude and spirituality (search for meaning in life and universality) expected to impact (1) search for inspirational media content, (2) randomly coming across inspirational media content, and (3) sharing behavior (all measured at Wave 2) as a binary outcome variable. Neither gratitude nor spirituality predicted searching for content ($\chi^2(3)$ = 6.645, p =.084) or randomly coming across content ($\chi^2(3)$ = 5.377, p =.146), leaving H2a unsupported. However, increased sharing behavior was explained by trait gratitude (χ^2 (2) = 56.44, p < .001, Nagelkerke R^2 = .071; B = .411, p < .001, Exp(B) = 1.508) and universality (B = .245, p<.001, Exp(B) = 1.27); however, search for meaning in life did not predict sharing. Thus, H2b was partially supported.

Virtue of Transcendence and Inspiring Media Experiences

To investigate H3-6, a hierarchical regression procedure was conducted with the overall recency of inspiring media experience score regressed on the demographic variables, attendance at religious and spiritual gatherings, and the various personality traits. The results indicated that

females and people with higher education were particularly prone to feel inspired by media

(replicating Raney et al., 2018). For the personality variables of interest, as expected, gratitude

(H3) and spirituality (search for meaning in life [H4a] and universality [H4b]) were significant

predictors of inspiring media experiences. In contrast, neither attendance at spiritual (H5a) nor

religious (H5b) gatherings were significantly contributing to inspiring media use. Finally, as

expected (H6), traits related to the virtue of transcendence (descriptively) explained more

variance than the other eudaimonically oriented traits (see Table 3). Combined, all personality

variables explained 10.2% of the variance of inspiring media experiences, with the

transcendence-related predictors alone contributing 7.1%.

———Insert Table 3 here———

Self-Transcendent Emotional Experiences and Inspiring Media Experiences

Finally, we were interested in the role inspiring media experiences play in day-to-day

self-transcendent emotional experiences, as compared to non-media elicitors of those emotions

(RQ2). To explore these relationships, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with

demographic variables, overall non-media inspiring activities, overall media exposure,

attendance at religious and spiritual gatherings, self-transcendent emotional experiences (from

Wave 1), and overall inspiring media experiences as predictors of the frequency of self-

transcendent emotional experiences in Wave 2 (see Table 4). As to be expected, self-

transcendent experiences at Wave 1 explained a sizeable amount of the variance in self-

transcendent experiences in Wave 2 (18.7%). Beyond that, non-media inspiring activities

(10.2%) and overall inspiring media experiences (10%) explained nearly equal amounts of

variance for self-transcendent emotional experiences. Demographics, general media exposure

and attendance at religious or spiritual gatherings explained negligible proportions of variance in self-transcendent emotional experiences (in Wave 2).

———Insert Table 4 here———

Discussion

The goals of this study were three-fold: (1) to investigate the prevalence of and potential changes in how Americans come across and share inspiring media, (2) to expand our knowledge of the role of trait transcendence—particularly, the aspects related to gratitude and spirituality— in inspiring media consumption, and (3) to better understand the role of inspiring media experiences (compared to non-mediated ones) in the routine elicitation of self-transcendent emotions.

With regard to the first goal, it is increasingly clear that inspiring content plays a significant role in the routine media diets of many Americans. Nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of the respondents reported being inspired by media at least a few times a week, with 12.6% reporting being inspired by media at least once per day. Clearly this is a phenomenon deserving of more scholarly (and industry) attention. To that end, our hope is that the extensive demographic profile of the American inspirational media audience provided in Tables 1 and 2 can serve as the basis for new research ideas.

Further, the data reveal quite a bit about how inspiring media is encountered by audiences. As outlined by selective exposure and related media-use approaches (Bryant & Davies, 2006; Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010), media content is sought after based on various emotional, functional, conscious, and unconscious motivations. However, the vast majority of people in our sample came across inspiring media by chance (67.7%). One interpretation of this finding is that it underscores the longstanding critique of the uses-and-gratifications approach

that media choices are not always conscious (e.g., Vorderer, 1992). In fact, only 6.6% of the

current sample searched for inspiring content purposefully. Moreover, people high in

transcendent virtue—measured as trait gratitude and spirituality—did not search for inspirational

media more nor did they come across it any more than people at lower levels of transcendence.

Thus, quite often inspiring media may be not consumed as a conscious, need-satisfaction tool,

even for those persons higher in transcendent-related traits. Rather, the data suggest that those

higher in transcendent-related traits may be more likely to feel—or they may be more sensitive

to feeling—inspired by different types of media more frequently (H3 and H4), independent of

how they come across it. This makes the personality traits related to transcendence unique to the

experience of inspiration, supporting Thrash and Elliot's (2003) conceptualization of

transcendence as an integral part of inspiration. Also, caution is strongly encouraged in

interpreting these findings as suggesting that people *do not* or *rarely* seek out inspiring media.

The item used asked only about the *most recent* inspiring media experience. Given the

prevalence of inspiring media use reported, we think that these findings suggest that in addition

to seeking out inspiring media, individuals are also routinely "surprised" by inspiration, via

inspirational advertisements or news stories, for example. Future research should explore the

possibility in greater detail.

Additionally, people higher in transcendent traits were quite likely to share the

inspirational content they experienced with friends or family members (H2b). Once more, fitting

with the theory of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003), people higher in transcendence-related

traits not only find more media inspiring (H6), but once they feel inspired, they also have a

greater tendency to share those experience with others. This echoes the motivational component

of inspiration discussed by Trash and Elliot (2003). One conclusion to draw is that people with

strong transcendent character traits may be more likely to be consumers who propel and spread

inspiring media to others. They might be the "influencers" who could have real impact in making

inspiring messages go viral, indicating to media gatekeepers (e.g., film studios, advertisers) the

forms of inspiring media that audiences prefer to consume. Specifically, within the social media

landscape, the consumers of content have also become the producers (or, at a minimum, the re-

transmitters) of content. For media researchers, it may not be sufficient anymore to only consider

how people come across certain types of media, since that assumes a reception model in which

the consumer is dependent on gatekeepers' distribution of content. It is now pertinent to also

consider what consumers *do with* the content they consume, as well as the effects of creating

original content on their own. Knowing who the audiences are that consume inspiring content

and what they do with it (e.g., share, recreate, comment, review) are important factors to better

understand the dynamics of such reception trends across the media landscape.

　　　　With regard to goal 2, the findings indicate that transcendent character traits are of great

importance to the experience of emotional gratifications with inspiring media. Two specific

character strengths (based on the VIA framework) associated with the virtue of transcendence—

gratitude and spirituality—were the strongest predictors of inspiring media exposure, more so

than numerous demographic variables, attendance at religious or spiritual gatherings, and other

traits previously associated with eudaimonic media selection (Oliver & Raney, 2011). These

results offer some of the first empirical support for the proposal that eudaimonic media should be

conceptualized along a continuum from self-oriented "meaningful content" on one end to others-

oriented "self-transcendent content" (see Oliver et al., 2018). The current study suggests that

U.S. audience members higher in transcendence (at least as manifest in spirituality and gratitude)

are more likely to feel inspired via media than people lower in the trait. On the other hand, the

eudaimonic traits (need for affect, perspective taking, empathic concern) were ==weaker==

==explanatory variables== of inspiring media experiences, indicating a potentially useful expansion of

eudaimonic media motivations as previously established by Oliver and Raney (2011). Better

understanding who the audiences are that seek out media that elicits self-transcendent

emotions—as compared to media that is contemplation-evoking, poignant, and moving (Bartsch,

Kalch & Oliver, 2014)—could be important for researchers designing experimental studies of

inspiring (or eudaimonic) media effects and content creators who aim to better understand their

target audience. Future research is needed to explore this proposition in more detail. Moreover,

given the current findings, future research could expand to additional transcendent character

traits as ==explanatory variables== of inspirational media use, perhaps exploring the other dimensions

of transcendence (i.e., hope, appreciation of beauty, humor; Park et al., 2004) for a

comprehensive model to explain inspiring media selection and consumption.

      Curiously, attendance at spiritual and at religious gatherings as markers of spirituality

were unrelated to inspiring media experiences, when controlling for demographic variables (H5).

It is possible that some people choose to seek and find inspiration with like-minded individuals

in group settings, while others prefer to encounter inspiration via media. Thus, attendance at

spiritual and religious events may be an outcome, rather than a predictor, of inspiring media

exposure. More research is needed to disentangle the complexity of spirituality and its

relationship to inspiring media exposure.

      In reference to goal 3, to our knowledge, this is the first study to compare the "power" of

inspiring media to elicit self-transcendent emotions with other sources, with promising news for

the former. With no doubt, non-media activities related to transcendence—particularly prayer

and meditation—remain extremely important in the lives of audiences, leading them to feel

connected to those around them, to experience feelings of gratitude, and to forge a stronger connection with nature and earth. However, the survey results provide strong evidence that inspiring media consumption is also an important factor in the elicitation of self-transcendent experiences. That is, consuming inspiring media seems to be an excellent option for people to get their daily dose of self-transcendence in life, which we know has various beneficial well-being effects (i.e., Diessner et al., 2008; Stellar et al., 2017). Moreover, the earlier evidence suggests that the experience of self-transcendence specifically via media may increase the tendency for people to share and seek out similar content in the future, leading to an upward spiral of self-transcendence as argued by the broaden-and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). Future research should more directly test the role of inspiring media in the upward spiral of human flourishing, perhaps through a longitudinal study of inspiring media consumption.

Despite the generalizable knowledge gained through the representativeness of our sample, the nature of the study has some limitations. First, the data are correlational. Thus, we cannot make causal arguments for the relationship between transcendent traits and inspiring media exposure or inspiring media exposure and self-transcendent emotions. Second, the measure of inspirational media exposure is (necessarily) subjective and assessed people's perceptions rather than "actual" inspiring media exposure per se. However, previous content analytical research suggests that people's perceptions of inspiration from media are in line with content containing depictions of inspirational and transcendent themes (Dale et al., 2017a, Dale et al., 2017b). Thus, it can be argued that asking participants about one's "most recent inspirational media encounter" indeed measured (at least to some degree) content that was transcendent in nature. Recalling previous media experiences is a common practice in entertainment research (see Oliver & Raney, 2011). However, future research is encouraged to

replicate these findings in an experimental setting with previously validated inspirational media content. Lastly, due to restrictions in survey length (primarily because of associated costs) only abbreviated personality scales, a limited number of character strengths, and a potentially non-exhaustive list of non-mediated inspiring activities could be used. Future research would benefit from using the full trait scales and a more comprehensive list of character strengths and inspiring activities for a more comprehensive assessment. Using full scales for the personality factors could potentially change the results since the current assessment fails to measure the full scales of the respective personality traits. However, the selected items were part of validated, full psychometric scales, thus measuring at least in part the construct in question. Consequently, we are confident our results have sufficient construct validity, but future research is needed to further verify our findings using full scale assessments.

Despite these limitations, the current study is important on a number of aspects. First, it provides compelling evidence that inspiring media is a common reception and socially shared phenomenon in the U.S. Second, it firmly establishes the significant role that transcendent character strengths play in the consumption of inspiring media. Third, it illuminates how inspiring media consumption contributes meaningfully to the day-to-day experience of self-transcendent emotions, over and beyond the influence of many variables, including non-mediated inspiring activities. Finally, it provides a solid basis for scholars to pursue the study of inspirational media in more detail. Better understanding how media content inspires and for whom it is inspiring is an important step in illuminating ways people can intentionally use media to better themselves, others, and humanity at large.

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Table 1.
Recency of Having Felt Inspired by Different Media by Demographics

	Gender		Ethnicity/Race				Education			
	Male (*n*=975)	Female (*n*=1041)	White (*n*=1306)	Black (*n*=236)	Hispanic (*n*=314)	Multi-Racial (*n*=65)	<HS (*n*=248)	HS/GED (*n*=596)	Some college (*n*=519)	BA+ (*n*=653)
TV	3.76^a	4.06^b	3.87^a	4.01^{ab}	4.04^b	3.98^{ab}	4.17^a	4.00^a	3.84^b	3.79^b
	(1.23)	(1.11)	(1.20)	(1.23)	(1.01)	(1.11)	(1.07)	(1.18)	(1.19)	(1.19)
Movie	3.55^a	3.87^b	3.68^a	3.80^a	3.73^a	3.63^a	3.62^a	3.71^a	3.78^a	3.69^a
	(1.21)	(1.08)	(1.15)	(1.29)	(1.11)	(1.22)	(1.31)	(1.18)	(1.13)	(1.09)
Radio/podcast	3.21^a	3.31^a	3.15^a	3.54^b	3.53^b	3.05^a	3.37^a	3.15^b	3.22^{ab}	3.35^a
	(1.3)	(1.38)	(1.39)	(1.42)	(1.25)	(1.30)	(1.45)	(1.38)	(1.38)	(1.35)
Book	2.93^a	3.32^b	3.17^a	3.20^{ac}	2.94^b	2.82^{bc}	2.69^a	2.98^b	3.06^b	3.46^c
	(1.29)	(1.29)	(1.32)	(1.33)	(1.21)	(1.17)	(1.31)	(1.32)	(1.25)	(1.24)
Music	4.00^a	4.37^b	4.16^{ab}	4.25^b	4.28^b	3.93^{ac}	4.13^a	4.35^a	4.18^a	4.16^a
	(1.20)	(.96)	(1.12)	(1.19)	(.958)	(1.13)	(1.24)	(1.05)	(1.14)	(1.06)
News story	3.51^a	3.72^b	3.67^a	3.73^a	3.38^b	3.06^b	2.99^a	3.60^b	3.58^b	3.88^c
	(1.34)	(1.24)	(1.28)	(1.40)	(1.25)	(1.33)	(1.50	(1.27)	(1.30)	(1.15)
Online video	3.21^a	3.68^b	3.35^a	3.40^a	3.84^b	3.51^{ab}	3.16^a	3.36^{ab}	3.58^c	3.51^c
	(1.44)	(1.31)	(1.40)	(1.52)	(1.24)	(1.27)	(1.63)	(1.38)	(1.34)	(1.33)
Social Media	2.83^a	3.79^b	3.22^a	3.35^a	3.72^b	3.12^a	2.92^a	3.43^b	3.40^b	3.29^b
	(1.59)	(1.44)	(1.61)	(1.66)	(1.38)	(1.45)	(1.81)	(1.48)	(1.54)	(1.53)
Total	3.37^a	3.76^b	3.53^a	3.66^b	3.68^b	3.42^a	3.38^a	3.55^b	3.58^b	3.64^b
	(.889)	(.762)	(.844)	(1.02)	(.708)	(.808)	(.898)	(.834)	(.845)	(.840)

Note: Cells include means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different superscripts ($^{a\ b}$) within rows indicate significance between groups at $p < .05$ for each category (i.e., gender, ethnicity, education).

Significant results for Gender were obtained for (F (1,1979)): TV: 31.61, $p<.001$; Movie: 38.25, $p<.001$; Books:43,97, $p<.001$; Music: 56.97, $p<.001$, News: 13.95, $p<.001$; Online video: 59.65, $p<.001$; Social Media: 196.87, $p <.001$. Across all inspiring media multivariate test: F (8,1972) = 31.72, $p <.001$, partial η^2 = .114

Significant results for Race were obtained for (F (3,1877)): Radio: 9.93 $p <.001$; Books: 3.92, $p =.008$; News: 8.24, $p <.001$; Online video: 10.17, $p <.001$; Social Media: 8.51, $p <.001$. Across all inspiring media multivariate test: F (24,5616) = 6.48, $p =.005$, partial η^2 = .027; Data from Other race category (*n*=95) are not reported.

Significant results for Education were obtained for (F (3,1977)): TV: 7.98, $p <.001$; Radio: 2.74 $p =.042$; Books: 27.26, $p <.001$; News: 29.13, $p <.001$; Online video: 6.09, $p <.001$; Social Media: 6.50, $p <.001$; Across all inspiring media multivariate test: F (24,5916) = 12.67, $p <.001$, partial η^2 = .049

Table 2.
Recency of Having Felt Inspired by Different Media by Demographics Continued

	Age				Relationship status		Party Affiliation		
	18-29 (*n*=407)	30-44 (*n*=504)	45-59 (*n*=536)	60+ (*n*=570)	Married or living with a partner (*n*=1118)	Single, widowed, divorced, separated (*n*=898)	Republican (*n*=510)	Independent (*n*=659)	Democrat (*n*=697)
TV	3.69[a]	3.78[a]	4.02[b]	4.07[b]	3.91[a]	3.92[a]	3.90[a]	3.78[a]	4.07[b]
	(1.11)	(1.22)	(1.14)	(1.19)	(1.19)	(1.17)	(1.14)	(1.20)	(1.10)
Movie	3.54[a]	3.78[b]	3.91[b]	3.57[a]	3.71[a]	3.72[a]	3.64[a]	3.65[a]	3.84[b]
	(1.02)	(1.13)	(1.10)	(1.30)	(1.18)	(1.15)	(1.17)	(1.18)	(1.08)
Radio/podcast	3.33[a]	3.36[a]	3.31[a]	3.07[a]	3.24[a]	3.29[a]	3.25[a]	3.29[a]	3.31[a]
	(1.31)	(1.31)	(1.42)	(1.46)	(1.38)	(1.38)	(1.37)	(1.40)	(1.32)
Book	2.96[a]	3.21[b]	2.98[a]	3.30[b]	3.17[a]	3.07[a]	3.15[a]	3.11[a]	3.10[a]
	(1.11)	(1.30)	(1.31)	(1.39)	(1.34)	(1.24)	(1.37)	(1.26)	(1.25)
Music	4.26[a]	4.15[a]	4.23[a]	4.14[a]	4.13[a]	4.26[b]	4.17[a]	4.15[a]	4.23[a]
	(.991)	(1.11)	(1.09)	(1.18)	(1.13)	(1.06)	(1.14)	(1.12)	(1.05)
News story	3.39[a]	3.71[b]	3.57[b]	3.72[b]	3.61[a]	3.63[a]	3.54[a]	3.59[a]	3.67[a]
	(1.19)	(1.24)	(1.30)	(1.40)	(1.29)	(1.30)	(1.31)	(1.29)	(1.29)
Online video	3.84[a]	3.73[a]	3.49[b]	2.83[c]	3.35[a]	3.56[b]	3.29[a]	3.51[b]	3.53[cb]
	(1.08)	(1.26)	(1.38)	(1.53)	(1.40)	(1.37)	(1.44)	(1.37)	(1.35)
Social Media	3.71[a]	3.51[ab]	3.41[b]	2.74[c]	3.26[a]	3.38[a]	3.28[a]	3.19[a]	3.46[b]
	(1.29)	(1.53)	(1.57)	(1.71)	(1.59)	(1.59)	(1.58)	(1.61)	(1.55)
Total	3.58[a]	3.65[a]	3.62[a]	3.42[b]	3.54[a]	3.60[a]	3.53[a]	3.54[a]	3.64[b]
	(.747)	(.902)	(.824)	(.878)	(.853)	(.845)	(.841)	(.869)	(.803)

Note. Cells include means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different superscripts ([a b]) within rows indicate significance between groups at $p < .05$ for each category (i.e., gender, ethnicity, education).

Significant results for Age were obtained for ($F_{(3,1977)}$): TV: 11.4, $p <.001$; Movie: 10.89, $p <.001$; Radio: 4.68 $p =.003$; Books: 8.12, $p <.001$; News: 6.08, $p <.001$; Online video: 56.95, $p <.001$; Social Media: 36.03, $p <.001$; Across all inspiring media multivariate test: $F_{(24,5916)} = 19.39$, $p <.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .073$.

Significant results for Relationship Status were obtained for ($F_{(1,1979)}$): Music: 6.59, $p =.010$; Online video: 11.00, $p =.001$; Across all inspiring media multivariate test: $F_{(8,1972)} = 2.76$, $p =.005$, partial $\eta^2 = .011$

Significant results for Political Party Affiliation were obtained for ($F_{(2,1836)}$): TV: 10.73, $p <.001$; Movie: 6.05, $p =.002$; Online video: 4.93, $p =.007$; Social Media: 4.99, $p =.007$; Across all inspiring media multivariate test: $F_{(16,3660)} = 3.24$, $p <.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$

Party affiliation was assessed with the question: "In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or independent"? Data from Other/Refused category (*n*=150) are not reported.

Table 3.

Predictors of Inspiring Media Experiences

		β	R^2/R^2 Change	F/F Change
Step 1[a]	Gender	.219***	.053	36.53[3,1968]***
	Age	-.040		
	Marital Status	.014		
Step 2[b]	Education		.005	3.81[3,1965]*
	HS/GRE	.023		
	Some College	.050		
	BA+	.097**		
Step 3[c]	Ethnicity		.004	1.97[4,1961]
	White	.004		
	Black	.043		
	Hispanic	.042		
	Multi-Racial	-.030		
Step 4 [d]	Attendance		.007	7.07[2,1959]***
	Religious	.055		
	Spiritual	.038		
Step 5	Eudaimonic Traits		.031	22.36[3,1956]***
	Need for Affect	.142***		
	Perspective Taking	.019		
	Empathic Concern	.069**		
Step 6	Transcendent Traits		.071	56.09[3,1953]***
	Universality	.126***		
	Gratitude	.206***		
	Search for Meaning	.102***		

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. Model F (18,1954) = 22.38, adj. R^2 = .163, $p < .001$
[a]Gender was coded as males = 1, females=2. Marital status was coded as 1 = not married, 2 = married.
[b]The omitted reference category for education was less than a high school diploma.
[c]The omitted reference category for ethnicity was "other" ethnicity
[d] Religious and spiritual attendance was used as continuous variable
No multicollinearity issues were observed in the model. The tolerance for each variable was > .6 and the VIF < 2.0.
The same results ensued when using the frequency of inspiring media experience measure as outcome variable. The explained variance for eudaimonic traits was 5%, and for the transcendent traits was 8.6%. Thus, the current measure results in a more conservative estimation.

Table 4.
Predictors of Self-Transcendent Emotional Experiences

		β	R^2/R^2 Change	F/F Change
Step 1	Gender	.156***	.030	$19.29_{3,1891}$***
	Age	.093***		
	Marital Status	-.025		
Step 2	Education		.024	$16.08_{3,1888}$***
	HS/GRE	-.160***		
	Some College	-.072*		
	BA+	.013		
Step 3	Ethnicity		.003	$1.70_{4,1884}$
	White	-.072		
	Black	-.045		
	Hispanic	-.010		
	Multi-Racial	.010		
Step 4	Attendance		.050	$53.01_{2,1882}$***
	Religious	.040		
	Spiritual	.203***		
Step 5	Non-Media Inspiring Activities		.102	$48.45_{5,1877}$***
	Being with friends	.119***		
	Meditate	.142***		
	Gardening, being outside	.099***		
	Yoga	.052*		
	Praying (outside of religious context)	.241***		
Step 6	Overall Media Exposure		.009	$2.79_{8,1869}$**
	Radio	-.015		
	TV	.012		
	Film	-.056*		
	Social Media	.057*		
	Books	.022		
	Music	.036		
	Online Video	.055*		
	News	-.011		
Step 7	Transcendent Emotions		.187	$589.83_{1,1868}$***
	Self-transcendent Emotions (Wave 1)	.528***		
Step 8	Inspiring Media		.100	$377.61_{1,1867}$***
	Recent Inspiring Media Experiences (Wave 2)	.365***		

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.
Final Model $F(27, 1868) = 70.89$, adj$R^2 = .499$, $p < .001$

All variables were measured on a continuous scale
Media experiences were measured with the combines score of the recency with which
participants felt touched moved or inspired across eight different types of media.
The same results were obtained when using the overall frequency of inspiring media experience
measure, which explained slightly more variance (13.9%) of self-transcendent emotions,
indicating that the used measure of recent inspiring media experiences is a more conservative
measure.