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Other-Focus Versus Self-Focus: The Power Of Self-Transcendent TV Shows

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The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/p4nh3/?view_only=ce9c564e375f4c18853d6c18bcea6ea5

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Abstract

Recently, a group of media scholars (Oliver et al., 2018) proposed that eudaimonic entertainment experiences can be differentiated into inward driven and outward driven experiences. The current study empirically tested this proposition by focusing on transcendent portrayals (i.e., content or character portrayals that focus on something greater than oneself) as one content characteristic to differentiate the proposed inward/self-focused from more outward/other-focused effects within the context of eudaimonic TV shows. A pre-registered experiment (N =147) revealed that highly transcendent TV shows elicited more self-transcendent emotions, universalism, and money donation behavior, as well as fewer self-image goals, than less transcendent TV shows. As expected, there was no difference between conditions in mixed affect (all but one of the TV shows), contemplation, and intrinsic need satisfaction. The results indicate that outward-oriented narratives include entertainment experiences previously associated with inward oriented narratives, but not necessarily vice versa. The role of types of transcendent portrayals, quality of portrayals, and number of portrayals for the differentiation of various eudaimonic entertainment experiences are discussed.

Keywords: eudaimonic media, self-transcendent emotions, altruism, TV shows

Public Policy Relevance Statement

Entertainment can lead to a variety of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. When media perceived as meaningful depicts little instances of transcendence, audiences mainly feel thoughtful, happy and sad at the same time (mixed affect), and intrinsic need satisfaction. When meaningful entertainment contains more transcendent portrayals it also leads to greater self-transcendent emotions, universalism and altruism and fewer self-image goals. In short, it makes us focused more on others than ourselves.

Other-Focus Versus Self-Focus: The Power Of Self-Transcendent TV Shows

With the variety of media contents available, audience experiences and effects from media consumption can take many forms as well. Recently, Oliver et al. (2021) explicated the Model of Inspiring Media in which they outline the complex nature of specifically eudaimonic media experiences and effects, which emphasize the elaborative processes through which individuals grow, self-actualize, and self-transcend through media. These experiences and effects include, for example, feeling inspired, a sense of meaning, contemplation, and connectedness. Because eudaimonic experiences are so vast, Oliver et al. (2018) suggests differentiating these diverse experiences on a continuum of those that are more self-focused, inward oriented (e.g., need satisfaction, meaning making), or other oriented, self-transcendent (e.g., inspiration, connectedness, prosociality). However, what content portrayals lead to specifically more inward or outward oriented experiences and effects has not been explored yet. The current study focused on transcendent portrayals as one content characteristic to differentiate the proposed inward/self-focused from more outward/other-focused entertainment effects as introduced by Oliver et al., (2018) within the context of eudaimonic TV shows. A pre-registered experiment with TV show exposure was employed with the goal to investigate the proposed differentiation and commonalities using a comprehensive set of variables to assess inward oriented and outward oriented eudaimonic effects.

Inward Oriented vs. Outward Oriented Eudaimonic Entertainment Experiences

In the past, eudaimonic entertainment gratifications have mainly been associated with pondering life's meaning (contemplation), feeling happy and sad at the same time (mixed affect) and intrinsic need fulfillment (Bartsch et al., 2014; Bartsch, 2012). However, more recent conceptualizations (Oliver et al., 2021) include experiences of inspiration, universality and

prosociality under eudaimonic entertainment which makes the aspect of entertainment experiences extremely broad and challenging to predict effects. Therefore, Oliver et al. (2018) differentiate these vast experiences on a continuum of experiences that are more inward oriented (Oliver et al., 2018) and shown to be elicited from content that portrays the difficult aspects of the human condition, such as life struggles, death, and suffering (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2011), or more outward-oriented. That is, entertainment consumers may also experience other oriented outcomes of universal orientation, altruism and spirituality, particularly when transcendence is portrayed (such as moral beauty; e.g., Kraemer et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2012). Transcendence is defined as a state or trait that orients oneself to others, truth, or higher nature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Exposure to transcendent portrayals can elicit self-transcendent experiences, which vary in their level of self-annihilation (i.e., reflecting a state of smallness) and connectedness (Yaden et al., 2017).

Self-transcendent emotions are one manifestation of such self-transcendent experiences and have been specifically explored in the entertainment context (e.g., Dale et al., 2017). Self-transcendent emotions are a subset of positive emotions that concern others more so than the self and include awe, elevation, gratitude, admiration, hope, compassion, and love (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Those emotions draw us out of our usual state of (ego-centric, self-) consciousness and can make us feel more connected (Janicke & Oliver, 2017) and prosocial (e.g., Schnall et al., 2010). Each self-transcendent emotion has a specific set of elicitors. Such elicitors can be a) content features (e.g., nature, gift) or b) modeling of transcendent character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which are five dispositional traits all aimed at connecting with and finding purpose in something greater than oneself (see also Dale et al., 2017). Research suggests that the presence of these transcendent portrayals in media is directly related to self-transcendent

emotions. For example, portrayals of moral virtue have been shown to elicit elevation (e.g., feeling moved, touched) in viewers (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Oliver et al., 2012). Videos with depictions of stunning nature, architecture or art have been shown to elicit awe (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019). In addition, narratives with such transcendent portrayals have also been found to be associated with general self-transcendent experiences as explicated by Yaden et al. (2017) including small self-experiences (in case of awe; Yang et al., 2016) and connectedness to others (e.g., Kraemer et al., 2017). However, such past studies have only descriptively looked at the presence of specific transcendent portrayals on transcendent emotions, but a systematic investigation of transcendent elicitors in mainstream TV and effects on inward and outward oriented effects, has not been explored yet. The current study is expanding this research by investigating the relationship between relative presence of transcendent elicitors as systematically coded in content analysis, with the relative presence of transcendent effects in an exposure based experimental design.

Theoretical Foundation Of Transcendent Entertainment Experiences

Research seems to indicate that there is a relationship between the amount of self-transcendent elicitors present and increased emotional responses as a result. For example, Dale et al. (2017) found that inspiring YouTube videos with more transcendent elicitors present (specifically elicitors of hope), were more likely to be viral videos than inspiring videos with less elicitors. In another study on inspiring Facebook posts, Dale et al. (2020) found that the more self-transcendent elicitors a Facebook post contained, the more likely it predicted emotional reactions measured as number of likes and number of reactions toward the post. Theoretically, the eudaimonic emotions framework (Landman, 2021) can help us understand why a greater quantity of self-transcendent portrayals should elicit greater self-transcendent experiences and

emotions. According to Landman, eudaimonic emotions can be differentiated into those that are elicitor based or feeling based. Elicitor based emotions are evoked by specific elicitors (e.g., self-transcendent emotions), such as elevation from moral virtue or awe from nature portrayals (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Feeling based emotions are a response to appraising the media stimulus and don't rely on a specific elicitor (e.g., tenderness, being moved). Consequently, the more elicitors of self-transcendent emotions are present within a narrative, the more likely self-transcendent experiences result. That is because each portrayal—for example, moral beauty for the elicitation of moral elevation—would automatically elicit the corresponding self-transcendent emotions even without the viewer actively appraising the stimulus.

As outlined, self-transcendent experiences are specifically outward oriented compared to other eudaimonic experiences that previously have been argued to be more inward oriented including contemplation and need satisfaction (Oliver et al., 2018). Specifically, Tamborini et al. (2017) referred to intrinsic needs as conceptualized in self-determination theory as egoistic (i.e., self-focused) motivations, supporting Oliver et al.'s (2018) differentiation. Contemplation has been found to be a common response to feeling specific eudaimonic emotions (mixed affect, feeling moved; Bartsch et al., 2014) and thus could be referred to more self-focused eudaimonic entertainment as well. However, it is likely that there is an overlap between self and other oriented experiences even in self-transcendent narratives. In fact, Landman (2021) outlines that elicitor-based emotions can also be accompanied by feeling based emotions, based on the additional appraisal of the stimulus. To explain the overlap between self and other oriented experiences we also borrow from Self-Categorization Theory (SCT, Turner, 1999). According to SCT individuals differentiate between their personal and social identities that affect behaviors and cognitions based on which identity is salient in a given situation such as media exposure.

Social identity refers to an individual's self-description in relation to others whereas personal identity is independent of others but refers to thoughts about the self. When a certain social identity becomes salient individuals can temporarily redefine their self-concept to focus more so on the group and collective behavior instead of self-focused thoughts (i.e., depersonalization, Turner 1984). For example, a TV show that triggers the social identity of being a kind and prosocial person, for example, can temporarily reduce self-focus (i.e., personalization) and trigger behaviors that are in line with group norms (i.e., prosocial behavior). In fact, we argue that the categorization of the depiction of character traits within eudaimonic narratives generally will be attributed to the self, and only when many transcendent elicitors are present then also social identity is primed and with that a shift from personal to other orientation. That is because eudaimonic narratives have been described to include themes of personal struggles or hardship that lead to personal meaning finding and contemplation first and foremost (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011). But when the eudaimonic narrative also includes transcendent elicitors then personal and social identities can become salient at the same time and trigger behaviors and thoughts in line with self *and* other oriented identities (e.g., need satisfaction *and* prosociality). That is, self and other oriented entertainment experiences overlap.

A preliminary study seems to support this conceptualization of co-occurrence of self-perceptions based on personal and other oriented identities in transcendent eudaimonic entertainment. Janicke-Bowles (2020) found that previously content analyzed inspiring films with a high number of transcendent portrayals that participants remembered led to lower self-focus compared to films with a low number of self-transcendent elicitors. They also found no difference between the two narratives in contemplation and need satisfaction. However, as of yet, we don't know if these results replicate in another media context (e.g., TV shows), after direct

exposure to the narrative (versus film recall) and weather transcendent content will also lead to outward oriented effects (e.g., prosociality, universality) as proposed by Oliver et al., (2018)

Based on the theoretical rationale and preliminary research findings, we predicted that narratives with transcendent portrayals will elicit outward-oriented experiences *in addition to* inward oriented experiences of mixed affect, reflection and need satisfaction. Conversely, TV shows with a low number of transcendent portrayals should elicit fewer self-transcendent experiences and outward-orienting responses¹.

H1: Among eudaimonic TV shows, no difference will be expected between TV shows with a high or low number of transcendent portrayals for a) mixed affect, b) contemplation and c) fulfillment of intrinsic needs.

H2: Among eudaimonic TV shows, those with a high number of transcendent portrayals will elicit greater a) self-transcendent experiences and b) self-transcendent emotions compared to TV shows with low amounts of transcendent portrayals.

Investigating Oliver et al.'s (2018) proposition of inward vs. outward oriented narrative effects, we explored the role of thought about the self and goal setting as it relates to the self as an indicator of inward focus. Thus, a TV show with relatively few transcendent depictions should make the viewer more focused on thinking about how the narrative relates to themselves (self-relevant thoughts), as opposed to narratives with many transcendent portrayals. As outlined, Janicke-Bowles (2020) found greater self-focused experiences for films with few transcendent portrayals. Therefore, it was predicted:

¹ The order of the hypotheses deviates from the order of the hypotheses in the pre-registration. H1 = preregistration H5; H2 = preregistration H1; H3 = preregistration H2; H4 = preregistration H3; H5 = preregistration H4; H6 = preregistration H7&H8. Preregistration link can be found here: <https://osf.io/4cmwg>

H3: Among eudaimonic TV shows, those with a small number of transcendent portrayals will elicit more self-relevant thoughts than those TV shows with many transcendent portrayals.

Furthermore, because of increased self-relevant thoughts of narratives with a lower number of transcendent portrayals, participants should also experience greater self-image goals. Self-image goals have been defined as goals that help the individual construct, maintain, and defend their public image to gain something for the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Thus, self-interest is at the center of the goals that enhance one's self-image. It was predicted:

H4: Among eudaimonic TV shows, those with a small number of transcendent portrayals will elicit more self-image goals than those TV shows with many transcendent portrayals.²

Inward and Outward Oriented Entertainment Effects

Beyond immediate emotional and cognitive audience experiences, research also demonstrates several specific media effects. Self-focused effects, according to Oliver et al. (2018) manifest in finding greater insight and meaning in one's life, being more willing to accept death and more mature decision making. Other-focused effects, however, would manifest in universal orientation and altruism (Kraemer et al., 2017; Janicke & Oliver, 2017; Schnall et al., 2010). Universality has been defined as one component of a personality trait of spiritual transcendence (Piedmont, 1999) that has been adapted as a state measure within the entertainment context (e.g., Kraemer et al., 2017). It refers to the experience of unity and interconnectedness of all humanity, which is different from more concrete connectedness feelings toward one's friends or community as it taps into the transcendent aspect of unity with everything (Piedmont, 1999).

² As per the pre-registration, we also investigated identification as an additional variable. However, to streamline the theoretical rationale of this paper we omitted the report of our pre-registered hypotheses related to identification in this manuscript. However, the rationale, measure, results and discussion related to this hypothesis on character identification can be found in the OSF repository.

Furthermore, the current study also operationalized loneliness as variable to assess peoples subjective feeling of lack of companionship and social isolation (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) as the opposite concept of connectedness with others. Given that transcendence eliciting narratives have been associated with greater experiences of connection to others and humanity at large, we would predict lower levels of loneliness as well. Therefore, it was predicted:

H5: Among eudaimonic TV shows, those with many transcendent portrayals will elicit a) greater universal orientation³ b) greater altruism and c) less loneliness than TV shows with a small amount of such portrayals.

Mediation for Outward Oriented Effects

Research has repeatedly shown that effects from eudaimonic entertainment experiences, such as altruism and universalism are mediated by self-transcendent emotions (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2018; Kraemer et al., 2017). For example, Bartsch et al. (2018) found that the relationship between exposure to a clip about a Paralympian achieving greatness and a destigmatization effect of physically challenged individuals was explained by experiences of elevation and reflective thoughts. Other studies showed similar effects: only via a mediation effect of elevation did narratives which portrayed some aspect of transcendence predict universality orientation, compassion, and altruistic intentions (Janicke & Oliver, 2017). Yet, self-transcendent emotions have only been modeled separately on transcendent outcomes. The current study incorporates a latent trait model of self-transcendent emotions that involve the subjective labeling of the emotional state (awe, gratitude, elevation) and self-transcendent experiences as a subjective

³ The description has been changed to universality orientation from the wording of connectedness in the pre-registered hypotheses to conform with previous research that assessed this concept (see Kraemer et al., 2017).

quality of transcendent emotions (small self, connectedness to others; Yaden et al., 2017). Based on past research it was predicted⁴:

H6: Narrative based self-transcendent emotions will mediate the relationship between high transcendent portrayal TV show exposure and a) universal orientation and b) altruism.

Method

Sample

A 1-factorial pre-registered experimental design was employed. An online survey was issued to a student population that participated for research credit as part of a subject pool at a southwestern University. After data cleaning, 147 participants remained in the final sample, with the majority being female (75.5%) and an average of 19.33 years. A supplemental document in OSF outline the sample characteristics. Participants were randomly assigned to either a TV show condition with a high number of transcendent ($N= 50$) or low number of transcendent portrayals ($N= 97$).

Procedure

After completion of the pre-test which assessed participants consent (IRB#20-35), demographics⁵ and their donation intentions (time and money), participants signed up for a timeslot within a 2-week period to come to a lab session. Overall, 21, 1.5-hour long lab sessions were offered that took place in similar rooms on campus that had video screen capability and could hold between one and 15 participants. During each lab session, students were instructed to

⁴ This Hypothesis deviates slightly from the pre-registered hypotheses that investigated self-transcendent experiences as a separate mediator in the model. Based on reviewer feedback and the original results of the SEM which indicated very strong correlation between self-transcendent emotions and experiences, and to simplify the path model, we opted to change the hypothesis to fit more closely to the literature. The original hypothesis analysis can be found in OSF.

⁵ The pre-questionnaire contained additional assessments of eudaimonic media motivations, which due to space restrictions and for the sake of the purpose of this paper, are not further described. The whole questionnaire is available on the OSF supplemental material link

https://osf.io/p4nh3/?view_only=5c60a5469aeb4fcc96bf508b23442b6c.

watch the TV show projected on the screen without engaging in any distractions. After completion of the show, participants were instructed to complete the post-questionnaire on their computers, were thanked and dismissed.

Stimulus Material

Four eudaimonic TV shows, two with a large and two with a small number of transcendent portrayals, were selected based on a content analysis of transcendent elicitors in what audiences referred to as “inspiring” TV shows by Dale et al. (2017). In this content analysis, Dale and colleagues coded a preselected number of what audiences referred to as inspiring TV shows according to their presence of modeled character strengths of transcendence or content elicitor of self-transcendent emotions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For this study, the TV shows with the highest and lowest number of elicitors were picked while holding the number of scenes coded, the length of the episode and the rating (*TV14* or *TVG*) constant across all four shows (see Dale et al., 2017 for the specific coding categories).

The two episodes with many transcendent portrayals were from the TV shows *Fixer Upper* and *Chicago Fire*. The two episodes with a small number of transcendent portrayals were from the TV shows *NCIS* and *One Tree Hill (OTH)*. Supplemental documents in OSF provide a synopsis and numbers of scenes and elicitors of each show. Compared to the other 3 shows, *Fixer Upper* has more elicitors of appreciation of beauty, *NCIS* less portrayals of gratitude, and *Chicago Fire* a higher number of modeled hope portrayals (See OSF Follow-Up Study document).

Measures

All variables, unless indicated otherwise, were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = not true/not at all/strongly disagree to 7 = absolutely true/very much/strongly agree.

Mixed affect

Mixed affect is an emotional response that is calculated by using the minimum score of participants' positive and negative affect responses (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008; $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.15$). Four positive (cheerful, happy, joyful, upbeat, $\alpha = .900$, $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.55$) and three negative affect items (sad, depressed, melancholy, $\alpha = .755$, $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.48$)⁶ were adopted from Oliver et al. (2012)

Contemplation

Contemplation was measured with Bartsch's (2012) contemplative experience scale which originally consists of four items. Items were adapted to exclude any wordings referring to emotions to ensure a pure assessment of contemplation. Because two of the items in the scale directly overlapped with self-reflection or reflection on others, only two items were used: "The TV show was thought provoking," and "The TV show inspired me to think about important issues" ($r = .619$, $p < .001$, $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.61$)

Fulfillment of intrinsic needs

Need satisfaction was measured with an adapted version of the 12 items Facebook Need Satisfaction Scale by Reinecke et al. (2014). Items were reworded to measure how much the participant felt their needs were satisfied at the moment. Four items were used for each subscale, including autonomy (e.g., "Right now, I feel free to be who I am," $\alpha = .732$, $M = 5.73$, $SD = .940$),

⁶ The fourth negative affect item "gloomy" was accidentally omitted from the questionnaire.

competence (e.g., “Right now, I feel competent,” $\alpha = .771$, $M=5.28$, $SD=.980$) and relatedness (e.g., “Right now, I want to be loving and caring toward others,” $\alpha = .772$, $M=5.25$, $SD=1.06$).

Self-transcendent experiences

Self-transcendent experiences were measured using two operationalizations following Yaden et al.’s (2017) definition.

First, the small self-experience was assessed using four items from the vastness subscale by Shiota et al. (2007) to measure feelings of the small self in the current moment. For example: "I feel small or insignificant," and "I am in the presence of something grand" ($\alpha=.798$, $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.43$).

Second, the connectedness component of self-transcendent experiences was measured with the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron et al., 1992) as suggested by Yaden et al. (2017). This scale shows seven overlapping circles that increased in their overlap to represent connection one feels with others. Two “other” reference groups were employed, measuring connectedness in the current moment to one’s community ($M=3.78$, $SD = 1.38$) and inner circle (e.g., friends, family, mentors; $M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.65$).

Self-transcendent emotions

The current study measured media related elevation, gratitude, awe, compassion, and love as self-transcendent emotions. Elevation was measured with nine items from the elevation experience scale by Kraemer et al. (2017). An example item is: “While watching the TV show I felt emotional to see human greatness” ($\alpha = .949$, $M= 4.24$, $SD= 1.49$). The other self-transcendent emotions were measured using three items each from the mDES scale (modified Differential Emotion Scale, following Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019). All 12 items were subject to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA, principal axis analysis with Promax rotation). Bartlett’s test

of Sphericity ($\chi^2(66) = 825.23, p < .001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) score ($= .86$) indicate high sampling adequacy. The analysis revealed three factors with eigenvalues > 1 , explaining 55% of variance. The first factor measured gratitude (grateful, thankful, appreciative, $\alpha = .899, M = 3.98, SD = 1.79$), the second factor awe (awe, wonder, amazement, $\alpha = .791, M = 4.12, SD = 1.62$) and the third factor compassion (compassion, sympathy, concern, $\alpha = .658, M = 4.98, SD = 1.30$) as previously suggested. The items related to love (love, closeness, trust) did not yield a fourth factor, nor did they load highly enough ($\geq .42$) on any of the other factors to be considered. Consequently, love was excluded from the analysis.

Self-relevant thoughts

Five items as previously assessed by Nelson-Coffey et al., (2019) were used to measure the degree to which participants felt the TV show made them think about themselves. A sample item is: "While watching the TV show I felt like I am trying to figure myself out" ($\alpha = .902, M = 2.95, SD = 1.59$).

Self-image goals

Six items from the self-image goals scale by Crocker and Canevello (2008) were employed that asked participants to rate their motivation to behave in self-interested ways in the future. A sample item is: "Thinking about your interactions with other people in the future, how much do you want to or try to avoid being rejected by others" ($\alpha = .799, M = 3.98, SD = 1.79$).

Universality orientation

To determine one's perceptions of universality, six items following previous scholars were used (e.g., Kraemer et al., 2017). These scales evaluated the degree to which participants feel a unity with humanity assessing their current state of thinking ($\alpha = .813, M = 5.24, SD = 1.07$). A sample item is: "On some level, my life is intimately tied to all humankind."

Altruism

Altruism was operationalized with three measures, namely compassionate goals, and donation behavior (time and money). Compassionate goals are defined by Crocker & Canevello (2008) as a focus on uplifting the well-being of others and measured with seven items.

Participants were asked to think about their interactions with others in the future and indicate how much they intend to, for example, “be supportive of others” or “make a positive difference in someone else’s life” ($\alpha=.707$, $M = 6.22$, $SD = .668$).

Donation behavior of time was operationalized by asking participants to indicate how many hours and minutes out of five hours total, they would spend helping tutor first and second graders on their reading in a hypothetical scenario. Participants provided their volunteer time estimation at the pre-and post-test. The average amount of time donated across the sample was 160.17 minutes ($SD = 82.30$) at the pre-test and 158.97 minutes ($SD = 81.78$) at the post-test.

Donation behavior of money was operationalized by asking participants to indicate how much money they will donate to the Red Cross if they win the \$25 reward raffled that was conducted as being part of the study. On average participants indicated to donate \$2.71 dollars ($SD = 6.61$) in the pre-test and \$6.23 dollars ($SD = 8.86$) in the post-test.

Loneliness

Loneliness was measured at the pre-and post-test using 20 items from the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980), adapted to the current state. A sample item is: “Right now, I feel in tune with people around me.” After recoding the reverse coded items, the scale yielded acceptable reliabilities allowing for a composite measure where higher values indicate more loneliness ($\alpha_{pre}=.893$, $M=2.62$, $SD=.907$; $\alpha_{post}=.904$, $M=2.52$, $SD=.941$).

Manipulation check

To assess if the condition manipulation was successful, two scales were adopted. First, the transcendent character portrayal scale consisting of eight items was adopted from Dale et al. (2020). Participants indicated how much they felt the TV show portrayed characters that modeled specific transcendent character strengths such as “overcoming obstacles or perseverance” or “kindness to another person” ($\alpha = .692$, $M = 4.99$, $SD = .883$).

Second, five bipolar items were constructed to form a semantic differential scale with one pole indicating outward orientation and the other pole inward orientation. Participants had to select the option that most closely described how much each word/phrase encompassed the content of the TV show they just watched on a 7-point bipolar scale. The poles included helping oneself vs. helping others, personal struggles vs. societal struggles, separateness vs. interconnectedness, individualism vs. collectivism, meaning finding vs. meaning giving ($\alpha = .732$, $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.205$). Higher values indicate greater perception of outward orientation.

Result

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses on random assignment to condition, previous exposure to the TV shows and episodes, and gender effects on the outcome variables were conducted as well as ANOVAs between the two high and two low transcendent TV shows and are reported in OSF. Random assignment to conditions was successful as there was no difference between high and low transcendent conditions on participants’ pre-test measures of age, gender, race, loneliness, time, and money donation behavior ($p > .05$).

Manipulation Check Results

First, for the character portrayal scale, a regression analysis testing whether condition significantly predicted self-transcendent character portrayals was significant ($F(1,145) = 15.004$,

$p < .001$, $adjusted R^2 = .088$) indicating that high transcendent TV shows ($M = 5.37$, $SD = .807$) were perceived to depict significantly more self-transcendent character portrayals than low transcendent TV shows ($M = 4.80$, $SD = .861$).

Second, for the inward and outward focused bipolar scale, a regression analysis testing whether condition significantly predicted inward and outward focus was also significant ($F(1,145) = 13.668$, $p < .001$, $adjusted R^2 = .080$) indicating that high transcendent TV shows ($M = 5.07$, $SD = .807$) were perceived to portray more outward orientation (e.g., interconnectedness, meaning giving, helping others), compared to low transcendent TV shows ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.299$). Consequently, we deem our manipulation of high versus low transcendent TV shows reflecting inward versus outward orientation as successful.

Hypotheses Results

H1 predicted no significant differences between conditions in the variables mixed affect (H1a), contemplation (H1b) and fulfillment of intrinsic needs (H1c). First, ANOVAs were conducted that revealed no significant difference between conditions in either of the dependent variables, besides in mixed affect between the low transcendent condition and *Fixer Upper* (see results of ANOVA in OSF). Equivalence testing (Weber & Popova, 2012) was conducted with an average effect size for medium effects of $r = .190$ and a balanced approach for $\Delta = \sqrt{(r^2/2)} = \sqrt{(.190^2/2)} \approx .134$, to test if the two conditions were truly non-different from each other in the three dependent variables. Neither of the non-significant ANOVA results for H1a-H1c yielded a significant equivalence test result ($p > .05$) indicating that we cannot confirm that there is absolutely no difference between the two groups in mixed affect, contemplation, and fulfillment of intrinsic needs, leaving H1a-H1c only partially supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted significant differences between groups in self-transcendent experiences and emotions. A MANOVA (Box test was not significant ($F(28, 35854.58) = 1.36, p = .094$; correlations of dependent variables was between $r = .159 - .671$ assuming no multicollinearity) with the indicators of self-transcendent experiences as well as the four self-transcendent emotions revealed a significant main effect ($F(7,139) = 4.29, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .178$). First, for the self-transcendent experiences, no significant differences were observed between conditions for the small self-experiences, self-other overlap with one's inner circle or broader community (see Table 1). Consequently, H2a was not supported. For the self-transcendent emotions, a significant difference between conditions resulted in gratitude, awe, and elevation, with higher values for the high transcendent condition (Table 1), but no difference between conditions for compassion. Thus, H2b was supported for all transcendent emotions besides compassion⁷.

Hypothesis 3 and 4 predicted more self-relevant thoughts (H3) and self-image goals (H4) in low transcendent compared to high transcendent TV shows. An ANOVA analysis revealed no significant difference between conditions in self-relevant thoughts ($p > .05$), leaving H3 unsupported. For self-image goals a significant effect in the expected direction resulted, supporting H4 (see Table 1).

⁷ Because of the within condition difference in elevation, awe and compassion, separate ANOVAs across all 4 conditions were conducted. The post-hoc tests revealed that for awe, Fixer Upper ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.10$) yielded significantly ($p < .05$) higher scores than both low transcendent shows ($M_{NCIS} = 4.28, SD = 1.45; M_{OTH} = 3.36, SD = 1.73$), and Chicago Fire ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.64$) yielded significantly higher only compared to OTH but not NCIS. For compassion, Chicago Fire ($M = 5.37, SD = 1.42$) resulted in significantly higher scores than NCIS ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.23$), but not OTH ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.15$). In fact, OTH (low transcendent condition) resulted in significantly higher compassion scores than the high transcendent Fixer Upper show ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.13$), explaining the overall non-significant results between conditions for compassion. For elevation, even though NCIS elicited more elevation than OTH, still both high transcendent shows ($M_{Chicago} = 4.74, SD = 1.44; M_{FixerUpper} = 5.49, SD = 1.06$) elicited significantly more elevation than both low transcendent TV shows ($M_{NCIS} = 4.11, SD = 1.38; M_{OTH} = 3.43, SD = 1.39$).

Hypothesis 5 predicted a) greater universal orientation, b) greater altruism (which was assessed with the donation of time, money, and compassionate goals) and c) less loneliness for high transcendent compared to low transcendent TV shows. A set of ANOVAs and ANCOVAs (for the variables money and time donation and loneliness that were assessed pre-post) revealed a significant effect in the expected direction for universal orientation and the donation of money to the American Red Cross, supporting H5a and partially H5b. The other altruism measures of donation of time and compassionate goals were not significant between conditions. Loneliness was also not significantly different between conditions, leaving H5c unsupported. Table 1 outlines the statistical results.

---Table 1 here---

Lastly, we predicted that media based self-transcendent emotions would mediate the relationship between condition and universalism (H6a) and altruism (H6b). To test these relationships, structural equation modeling was performed using STATA. Condition served as the exogenous variable in the model, self-transcendent emotions including experiences as mediator and money donation (as the single measure for altruism as per the previous analysis) and universal orientation as dependent variables. Self-transcendent emotions were treated as a latent variable that was estimated from the four transcendent emotions and the small self, connectedness to community and close other's variables. Maximum likelihood significance tests for indirect and total effects were estimated. After modifying the measurement model for self-transcendent emotions acceptable fit was achieved (see Supplemental file in OSF for results). Next, the hypothesized relationships of H6 were tested in a structural equation model which resulted in acceptable fit: $\chi^2 = 22.28$ $df = 14$, $p = .073$; RMSEA = .064 (90% CI [.000 - .111]), $pclose = .292$; CFI = .963; SRMR = .054; overall $R^2 = .143$. In support of H6a, self-transcendent

emotions significantly mediated the relationship between condition and universalism (indirect effect: $\beta = .103, p=.013$; 95% CI = [.048, .417]) but not altruism (money donation; indirect effect: $\beta = .030, p=.403$; 95% CI = [-.754, 1.87]), leaving H6b unsupported. Figure 1 outlines the model.

--- Figure 1 here---

Discussion

In line with our predictions, high transcendent narratives differed from low transcendent narratives in their elicitation of self-transcendent emotions (besides compassion), self-image goals, and short-term effects of universal orientation and altruism (money donation). Additionally, we found self-transcendent emotions to significantly mediate the relationship between transcendent narratives and universalism, supporting previous research findings on the importance of self-transcendent emotions as necessary processes to predict future other oriented media effects (Kraemer et al., 2017; Bartsch et al., 2018). For our operationalization of altruism, only the money donation variable was significantly different between conditions but not donation of time or compassionate goals. We think this can be explained by the operationalization of the constructs and social desirability. For the time donation measure, a hypothetical scenario asked participants about how much time they would dedicate to help first and second graders with their reading skills. This scenario was neither very concrete, in terms of when and where this event would happen, what exactly participants would have to do, nor personally relevant to the participants (students) lives, which are important components to consider when assessing altruism as per previous research (Ellithorpe et al., 2015). Consequently, participants gave an overall socially desirable answer regardless of condition. Alternatively, it could be argued that donating one's time and effort is an even greater altruistic act than donating future earned

money, which may not be as easily manipulated by simply watching a more or less other oriented TV show episode. In fact, participants did not differ in their willingness to donate time between the pre- and post-test ($t(142) = .465, p = .644$) indicating that either the treatment was not strong enough to elicit an effect or the time donation assessment was not sensitive enough to detect an effect.

For compassionate goals, a ceiling effect was detected with an average of 6.21 ($SD = .668$) on a 7-point Likert-type scale, which could explain the non-significant results between conditions. Given the items in the scale and the question stem (e.g., “In my future interactions with others I will try to be supportive of others; avoid doing anything that would be harmful for others”), the results reflect a highly socially desirable answers, which needs to be considered in future studies. In contrast, the donation of money measure was concrete and relevant to the participants, reducing the impact of socially desirable response bias and sensitive enough to detect pre-post differences ($t(146) = 5.79, p < .001$).

While still preliminary, the current findings seem to map high transcendent narratives to lower self-focus and more other orientation—in the form of self-transcendent emotions, universalism, and money donation—and low transcendent narratives to higher self-focus, supporting Oliver et al., (2018) proposition of inward vs. outward oriented experiences under the umbrella of eudaimonic entertainment. Additionally, outward oriented narratives may elicit entertainment experiences that overlap with experiences previously associated more with inward oriented narratives. This would support the general theoretical argument that regardless of number of transcendent portrayals (and the genre of the TV show), TV shows labeled as inspiring by audiences elicit seemingly (yet not statistically) similar feelings of mixed affect,

contemplation, and need satisfaction (i.e., personalized attribution of situations to one's identity, according to SCT).

Even though the equivalence test was not significant for contemplation, mixed affect and need satisfaction—which could have been a power problem as discussed in Weber and Popova (2012)—we also don't have evidence that the narratives were different. This is true besides for mixed affect, which was not significantly different when comparing *Chicago Fire* with the low transcendent condition, but not *Fixer Upper*. One of the stark differences between *Fixer Upper* and the other TV shows was that the former contained a very large number of appreciation-of-beauty-and-excellence portrayals (ABE; $n = 111$, compared to 17, 15 and 30 for *Chicago Fire*, *OTH* and *NCIS*, respectively), which is related to the elicitation of awe. Awe, in turn, is highly positively valenced (Yaden et al., 2019), which could explain why *Fixer Upper* overall was more positively perceived as the other TV shows, and consequently, elicited lower levels of mixed affect. Indeed, a follow-up analysis of positive affect across all four groups showed that *Fixer Upper* ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.30$) scored significantly higher in positive affect ($p < .05$) than *Chicago Fire* ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.57$), *NCIS* ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.42$) and *OTH* ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.06$) ($F(3,143) = 14.75$, $p < .001$).

Contrary to our expectations, there was no significant difference between the conditions on self-transcendent experiences as identified by Yaden et al. (2017), loneliness, or self-relevant thoughts. The low transcendent condition still contained a small number of transcendent portrayals, as opposed to none, which can explain why there was no difference between conditions in self-transcendent experiences (small self, connectedness). Because people did not feel significantly more connected to their community or inner circle, they also did not feel less lonely. Furthermore, even though loneliness was measured on the state level in the current study,

the use of the UCLA loneliness trait measure may have not been sensitive enough to detect change over time or between groups. Or loneliness may simply not have been relevant in terms of the content of the show⁸. The non-significantly different results between groups on self-relevant thoughts, that was expected to be higher (lower) for the inward (outward) oriented narratives, can be explained by appraisal theories of emotions (Lazarus, 1991). That is, before an outward orientation as a response to an emotional reaction can result, the narrative is first appraised on its personal relevance before an emotional response arises (see also Nelson-Coffey, et al., 2019). Thus, while watching either of the narratives, participants appraised the content first as self-relevant, which led them to an emotional experience (e.g., mixed affect). This is in line with the way self-relevant thoughts were assessed, namely with respect to the experience *during* the consumption rather than afterwards. In fact, self-image goals, which were assessed in form of future motivation to enhance the self in interactions with others were indeed higher for the low transcendent compared to the high transcendent condition. This explanation is also in line with findings by Janicke-Bowles (2020) whose measure of self-centeredness was also assessed as a response to the transcendence eliciting narrative rather than during the narrative and indeed found the expected effects.

Theoretically, the current findings also support SCT (Turner, 1999) specifically as it has been applied to media (Trepte et al., 2016). Eudaimonic experiences in general may contribute to a positive self-esteem by satisfying intrinsic needs. Contemplation and mixed affect can be the mechanisms through which the self-categorization of salient portrayals into one's personal or social identities takes place (since these were common experiences in high and low transcendent

⁸ Group size of participants watching the shows was not controlled for in this study, which could have also affected the outcome of loneliness.

TV shows). When the narrative is also transcendent then it can also contribute to a person's positive social identity of feeling more connected to others (universality) and wanting to help others. Thus, depending on what is in the foreground of the narrative a person seems to be categorizing themselves more on the person level (higher self-image goals for low transcending TV shows) or group level (universality, donation behavior for high transcendent TV shows).

Despite our study being largely underpowered⁹, the effects that were significant (or trended into the direction after Bonferroni correction) provide us with insightful information about the processing of differently transcendent narratives. From the eudaimonic emotion's framework (Landman, 2021) the current data suggests a potential relationship between quantity of transcendent portrayals in a narrative and intensity of elicitor based (self-transcendent) emotions experienced and outward oriented effects as a result. However, we want to acknowledge that the focus on the quantity of portrayals is not sufficient to fully differentiate self- from other oriented entertainment effects. Future research is needed to explore the relationship between the specific type of elicitors present and self-transcendent experiences and outward oriented effects. That is, some elicitors, for example, giving thanks or showing optimism, may be eliciting stronger elicitor-based emotions than others. To address this question, continuous response studies are needed. Notably, a follow-up analysis of each TV show with its specific elicitors revealed a direct relationship between the type of portrayals (e.g., gratitude portrayals) and their respective self-transcendent emotional experiences (see OSF for follow-up analysis).

Additionally, the quality of transcendent portrayals is important to investigate further as well. For example, it is reasonable to believe that the portrayal of a backyard as in *Fixer Upper*,

⁹ A post hoc power analysis using G*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2007) for omnibus ANOVA with a small effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .10$), alpha of .05 and sample of 147 with two conditions resulted in power estimates below .3.

for example, elicits a less intense awe response than an image of the starlight night sky. In fact, we believe the quality of the portrayal could explain the non-significant difference in compassion in our main analysis. That is, when investigating compassion for each TV show separately, as in the follow-up analysis, we find that qualitatively the portrayals of moral goodness/kindness in *Chicago Fire* and *OTH* may have been greater than the sheer quantity of said portrayals in *Fixer Upper*. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that transcendent experiences and effects are highest when the stimulus contains a high quantity *and* quality of transcendent portrayals, whereas the effects on emotional responses may be distinctly related to specific types of portrayals. While it remains to be seen what type of transcendent portrayal or combination of portrayals elicits the strongest self-transcendent emotional response, the current data seems to indicate that for the outward oriented outcomes (universalism, altruism), the type of portrayal may not be as important. This is also likely the case because such outward oriented effects are mediated by self-transcendent emotions and experiences.

One of the main limitations of the study is that *Fixer Upper* was the only reality show in the stimulus material sample, compared to dramas for the other TV shows. Dramas are among the most often mentioned genres of inspiring TV shows (Raney et al., 2018) with mixed affect being one of the main descriptive features, one that reality TV does not seem to share to the same extent. The greater positivity of *Fixer Upper* and increased realism of the portrayal seems to have particularly strong power to prime the social identity of viewers and direct their attention more to others than themselves. Thus, it is important to keep the genre of stimulus materials constant in future studies.

Conclusion

The current study is one of the first to empirically examine the proposed difference between self- versus other oriented eudaimonic narratives and their respective outcomes as proposed by Oliver et al. (2018). The findings suggest that eudaimonic TV shows vary in their capacity to elicit self-transcendence in viewers and as such predict outward orientations such as universality and altruism. However, regardless of the inward or outward orientation, generally eudaimonic TV shows from the drama genre seem to satisfy intrinsic needs, lead to contemplation and mixed affect. Future research is needed to find additional support for the differentiation between these two types of eudaimonic media, whereas promising effects for interconnectedness and kindness toward others seem to be related to those narratives that contain many or a high quality of transcendent elicitors.

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All data and analysis files are available via the OSF:

https://osf.io/p4nh3/?view_only=5c60a5469aeb4fcc96bf508b23442b6c

Table 1.

ANOVA Results and Mean Differences For The Outcome Variables Between Conditions

	High transcendent portrayal condition <i>M (SD)</i>	Low transcendent portrayal condition <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 145)	<i>p</i> ⁴	<i>partial</i> η^2	<i>partial</i> ω^2
Mixed Affect ¹	2.36 (1.30)	2.45 (1.08)	.180	.672	.001	.000
Contemplation	4.32 (1.78)	4.41 (1.53)	.107	.745	.001	.000
Autonomy need satisfaction ²	5.33 (1.01)	5.21 (1.09)	.485	.487	.003	.000
Competence need satisfaction	5.21 (1.06)	5.31 (.962)	.448	.504	.003	.000
Relatedness need satisfaction	5.72 (1.00)	5.74 (.923)	.018	.892	.000	.000
Self-relevant thoughts	3.16 (1.69)	2.84 (1.54)	1.36	.244	.009	.002
Self-image goals	4.49 (.995)	4.88 (1.12)	4.42	.037	.030	.023
Small self	3.73 (1.57)	3.39 (1.34)	1.83	.179	.012	.006
Connectedness to community	3.58 (1.43)	3.89 (1.34)	1.64	.202	.011	.004
Connectedness to inner circle	5.24 (1.74)	5.32 (1.60)	.076	.783	.001	.000
Gratitude	4.75 (1.79)	3.58 (1.67)	15.20	.000*	.095	.088
Awe	4.50 (1.58)	3.93 (1.62)	4.07	.046	.027	.020
Compassion	5.04 (1.44)	4.95 (1.22)	.128	.721	.001	.000
Elevation	4.95 (1.37)	3.85 (1.41)	20.32	.000*	.123	.116
Universality orientation	5.53 (.873)	5.07 (1.14)	6.17	.014*	.041	.034
Money donation (\$) ³	7.92 (1.01)	5.36 (.727)	4.18	.043	.028	.021
Time donation (minutes) ³	163.24 (6.11)	156.56 (4.48)	.778	.379	.006	.000
Compassionate goals	6.26 (.763)	6.19 (.619)	.303	.583	.002	.000
Loneliness ³	2.47 (.084)	2.56 (.060)	.610	.436	.004	.000

Note. ¹ Mixed affect was evaluated separately for the 2 TV shows in the high transcendent conditions and outcomes are described in the text. ² Autonomy need satisfaction differed by gender but only in the low transcendent condition ($F(1,142) = 5.19, p=.024, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .035$) where males (*adj. M* = 5.14, *SE* = .203) experienced significantly ($p=.003$) greater autonomy need satisfaction than females (*adj. M* = 5.01, *SE* = .123). This difference was not revealed in the high transcendent condition (males: *adj. M* = 5.11, *SE* = .345; females: *adj. M* = 5.41, *SE* = .164, $p=.441$). ³ Money and time donation as well as loneliness were investigated with an ANCOVA, with condition predicting the outcome variables, controlling for their measure at the pre-test. Thus, the means are adjusted means and in parentheses are standard errors. ⁴ Asterix denotes significant results after Bonferroni correction $p \leq \alpha/n = .03$.

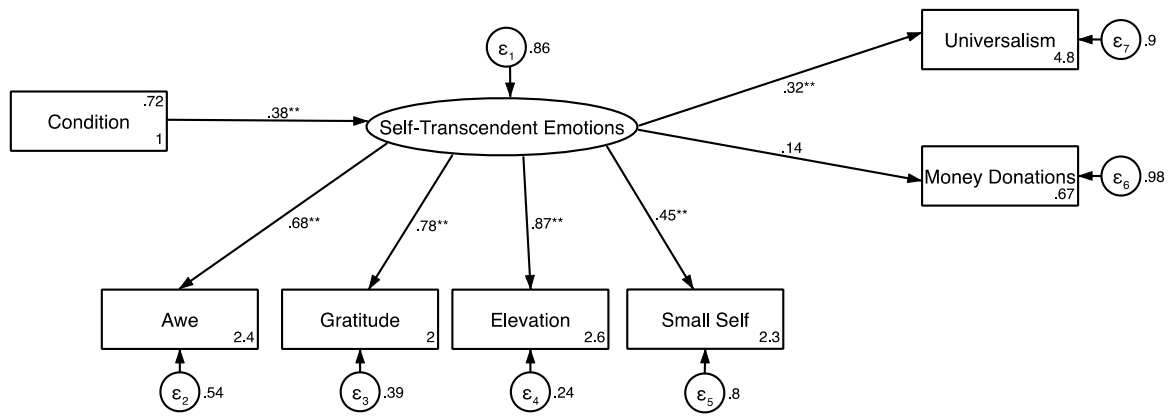


Figure 1. Final SEM model with standardized estimates capturing H6 and H7. Note. ** $p < .001$; Condition: 0 = low transcendent, 1 = high transcendent.