

Running Head: YOUTUBE FOR GOOD

YouTube for Good:

A Content Analysis and Examination of Elicitors of Self-Transcendent Media

by

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Abstract

Despite increased attention to eudaimonic media experiences, to date scholars have paid little attention to the specific portrayals responsible for those experiences. Study 1 of this project reports the first systematic content analysis of self-transcendent media—a particular type of eudaimonic media—using a sample of 100 “inspirational” YouTube videos. The presence of 20 specific elicitors associated with self-transcendent emotions were examined and reported. In Study 2, respondents provided real-time self-transcendent emotional reactions while viewing three “inspirational” videos. As expected, ratings significantly increased immediately following exposure to each specific elicitor. Thus, this project reports the first empirical evidence directly linking specific representations to content identified as “inspirational,” and directly linking those representations to self-transcendent emotional reactions.

Keywords: self-transcendent emotions, eudaimonic media, meaningful media, inspirational media, transcendence, hope

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YouTUBE for Good: A Content Analysis and Examination of Elicitors of Self-Transcendent Media

In recent years, entertainment scholars have moved beyond exploring primarily hedonic media experiences to also consider eudaimonic ones, those facilitating a reflection on life purpose, potential, virtue, and meaning (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). These eudaimonic (or meaningful) media experiences are characterized by the presence of mixed affect, contemplation, and appreciation, and have been shown to activate and promote core human values, self-acceptance, and feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (e.g., Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, & Bente, 2014; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). As demonstrated in a small number of recent studies (e.g., Lai, Haidt, & Nosek, 2014; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010), some eudaimonic media experiences involve the elicitation of self-transcendent emotions: awe, elevation, admiration, or gratitude (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Fredrickson, 2009). This set of emotions is particularly important due to its presumed role in the development of trait transcendence. Thus, media encounters involving these emotions can be referred to as *self-transcendent* media experiences, which were the focus of this project.

Transcendence is one of six core human virtues thought to be present in and valued by all cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is the dispositional trait associated with striving for and connecting with purpose and meaning greater than ourselves. Humans exhibit and can further develop trait transcendence when performing various behaviors (or character strengths); these behaviors include appreciating (moral) beauty and excellence, being grateful, being hopeful, and

practicing religion or spirituality.¹ Individuals also develop trait transcendence when experiencing self-transcendent emotions. Thus, media experiences involving self-transcendent emotions may prove beneficial to viewers and to those around them, as (non-mediated) situations involving these emotions are thought to inspire virtue, character building, an “others orientation,” and prosociality (see the broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2001; 2009).

As noted, a growing body of literature has demonstrated that media content can facilitate elevation (in particular), awe, admiration, and gratitude. Elevation is the warmth and expansion one feels when encountering moral beauty and humanity’s better nature (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Diessner, Iyer, Smith, & Haidt, 2013; Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe is the amazement elicited by vast stimuli, such as certain forms of beauty and perfection that require a measure of accommodation because our capacity to comprehend the experience is challenged (Haidt, 2003). Admiration is the motivation and energy individuals feel when encountering non-moral excellence, extraordinary skill, talent, or achievement, while gratitude is the feeling of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life in response to something done for you or simply toward the positive things in life (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Although these self-transcendent emotional experiences differ slightly, they share a common elicitor: goodness or virtue found outside of ourselves, often in other people. Given this, it is understandable that the experience of such emotions—whether with media content or without—could promote trait transcendence.

Previous research has identified multiple, non-mediated situations that can elicit self-transcendent emotions, like gathering with close friends and family or being alone in nature.

What remains unexplored is specific media portrayals that might be responsible for the

¹ Peterson and Seligman (2004) also identified “humor” as a character strength related to trait transcendence. However, given the complex and idiosyncratic nature of the term (especially within a media context), as well as its minimal association with our phenomenon of primary interest, we did not include an examination of humor herein.

elicitation of self-transcendent emotions. In this project, we developed a systematic approach for analyzing media messages that audiences report elicit such experiences. Next, we validated that approach by examining reactions to specific media depictions conceptually associated with self-transcendent emotions. In doing so, we offer the first systematic analysis of self-transcendent media content, with corresponding evidence of its effects on self-transcendent emotions.

Previous studies suggest that viewers (and industry professionals alike) can readily identify examples of media content that can inspire self-transcendent media experiences (e.g., Janicke, Taylor, & Raney, 2016; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Quite often people use the term “inspirational” to describe this content. For example, video streaming services tag certain offerings as “inspirational” or “inspiring”; media and lifestyle blogs routinely generate lists of what contributors consider to be the “most inspirational” books, movies, songs, and websites. Conceptually, this colloquial use of the term “inspiration” is in line with scholarly uses. For example, Thrash and Elliot (2003) define inspiration as (among other things) a motivational state that includes an orientation “toward something that is better or more important than one’s usual concerns” (p. 957). The authors refer to this orientation as transcendence.

Thus, the type of content associated with self-transcendent media experiences is generally understood and (to some extent) agreed upon by audiences, media makers, and academics alike: films like *The Pursuit of Happyness* or *Pay it Forward*; television shows like *This is Us* or *Friday Night Lights*; or “good news” stories about someone overcoming a seemingly insurmountable obstacle or lives being saved through medical discoveries, just to name a few. For a majority of people, however, the self-transcendent content that most readily comes to mind is the videos shared through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, most of which are hosted on YouTube.com. In fact, one recent study found that more than 75% of American adults

18 to 44 report having been “touched, moved, or inspired” by an online video (Raney et al., 2016). These videos—many of which might also be described as viral—are particularly interesting because they differ from other mainstream entertainment content, dealing with incredibly varied topics: from a nature video to a TED talk, a reunion to a departure, a toast to a eulogy, playful kittens to karaoke. Despite this variance, the emotional experiences that viewers have with such videos are strikingly similar: a lump in the throat, a warmth in the chest, a tear forming in the corner of an eye, a growing desire to be a better person, to connect with others (Janicke & Oliver, 2015; Oliver et al., 2012; Oliver, et al., 2015). In fact, the strength of these emotional experiences may be, in part, what leads individuals to widely share this content online.

At least at first glance, these reactions appear to include self-transcendent emotions. Thus, we targeted “inspirational” videos hosted by YouTube to develop an approach for analyzing self-transcendent media experiences. Based on the previous discussion, it seems reasonable to expect that if viewers are to develop trait transcendence while viewing such videos, then they are likely to do so by experiencing self-transcendent emotions in response to particular portrayals. We contend that two types of portrayals may lead to those emotional reactions. First, as noted above, self-transcendent emotions can be elicited by stimuli in the environment: awe through the vastness of the night’s sky (Frederickson, 2009; Keltner & Haidt, 2003) or gratitude for a gift given (Frederickson, 2004), to name a few. It follows that mediated representations of those stimuli—the night’s sky or gift giving—should also elicit self-transcendent emotions. We refer to those portrayals as *direct elicitors* of self-transcendent emotions.

Second, as noted above, humans exhibit trait transcendence through specific behaviors: appreciating beauty and excellence, being grateful, being hopeful, and practicing religion or spirituality. Witnessing others act in such a way can be inspiring in its own right, leading to self-

transcendent emotions in the witness, as well as to possible modeling of the behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1986). For example, seeing a person respond to another's kindness with gratitude might lead you to also feel gratitude (as well as elevation, admiration, or hope); it might also serve as an encouragement for you to act in a similar way under similar circumstances. Thus, witnessing others display trait transcendence may prompt its further development in a witness through self-transcendent emotional and social-learning processes. We refer to depictions of media characters enacting trait transcendence as *modeled elicitors* of self-transcendent emotions.

In Study 1, we conducted a content analysis of “inspirational” YouTube videos in which we explored depictions of modeled and direct elicitors of self-transcendent emotions. More specifically, we examined four types of modeled elicitors corresponding to four manifestations of trait transcendence (Peterson and Seligman, 2004): appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, and religiousness. Additionally, we coded 16 direct elicitors of self-transcendent emotions identified in past literatures, such as nature, skill, and vastness (a complete list is provided below). Three primary research questions guided our investigation. To begin, we asked:

RQ1: How frequently do direct and modeled elicitors of self-transcendent emotions appear in “inspirational” YouTube videos?

We were also interested in how direct and modeled elicitors may be depicted in conjunction with one another. Such an analysis might be instructive on a few fronts. First, because self-transcendent emotions stem from a common elicitor—goodness, virtue, or beauty outside of ourselves—such an analysis may shed light on discreet emotional experiences or on the complexity of such experiences. Furthermore, such an analysis can reveal how frequently characters respond to direct elicitors in the media environment, responses which might serve as socio-emotional models for viewers. For instance, an inspirational video depicting someone

walking through beautiful nature (direct elicitor) expressing awe at the beauty (modeled elicitor) could serve as an instructive (or reinforcing) model for viewers. Thus, we explored:

RQ2: To what extent are direct and modeled elicitors depicted in combination with one another in “inspirational” videos?

Finally, we were also curious about how the various elicitors of self-transcendent emotions might impact the popularity of the videos. Therefore, we asked:

RQ3: Are there differences in the number of direct and modeled elicitors present in viral “inspirational” videos compared to non-viral ones?

Study 1: Method

Content Selection

Video titles were collected from YouTube.com using the search term “inspiration” (which also pulled videos tagged as “inspirational”), with the initial search yielding a list containing more than 3 million videos. However, YouTube limits the number of active search links to fewer than 1,000. From what was accessible, we selected the first 200 videos listed, sorted by relevance as a default. Then, because of our interest in virality, we used the search filters to re-sort the list, selecting the top 200 most-viewed videos and the top 200 highest-rated videos from the initial list. “Sponsored results” were treated as ads and excluded. This procedure resulted in a list of 600 videos. After deleting duplicate titles, we were left with a sample of 567 videos. After extensive training sessions, three graduate students independently coded all 567 videos for relevance (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .90$).

To obtain a diverse and inclusive sample, videos were coded as relevant unless they met one of the following criteria: (1) videos not in English (without English subtitles); (2) music or karaoke videos featuring the term “inspiration” in the title (e.g., Chicago’s “You’re the

Inspiration”); (3) clothing or party decoration “inspiration” videos offering new ideas about these topics; (4) playlists and channels; (5) videos for companies whose name includes “inspiration” (e.g., Beats Inspiration); (6) clips from one episode of *My Little Pony* called “Inspiration Manifestation”; and, (7) medical videos using “inspiration” to mean “the drawing of breath.”

Relevance disagreements were resolved by the authors. After removing the non-relevant videos, 367 remained. All 367 videos were downloaded from YouTube during the same week, along with the title, creator, date downloaded, number of subscribers, length of video, date published, view count, number of upvotes, number of downvotes, descriptive text (provided by the uploader), and number of comments. We then selected the top 50 most viewed videos and randomly selected 50 additional videos from the remaining set, for a final sample of 100 videos. The final sample contained 21.44 total hours of video (video length in minutes: $M = 12.86$, $SD = 39.6$; video length range: 15 seconds to 6 hours, 13 seconds).

Content Coding

The final sample was coded by two groups of codebook-trained students and one senior researcher. Because of the extensiveness of the codebook, one group coded the videos using half of the codebook and the second group coded the same videos using the other half. The senior researcher coded all variables to ensure consistency in the reliability coding.

Scene served as the unit of analysis. A change in place or time indicated a scene change with the exception of montages or instances where two or more characters were communicating from two different locations within the same time frame, both of which were considered as part of the same scene. The final sample contained a total of 822 units or scenes.

Coders practiced on videos not included in the final sample and refined the codebook after each round of practice. All coders then independently coded 25% of the final sample;

Krippendorff's α was used to calculate reliability (see variable descriptions below). Because our ultimate goal in this line of research is to explore how inspirational media can promote the development of trait transcendence, we broadly framed the coding scheme around Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of transcendence-related character strengths: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, and religiousness. In doing so, we propose a conceptual link between 20 direct and modeled self-transcendent emotional elicitors and specific aspects of trait transcendence. Given the complexity of these experiences, a different classification system is undoubtedly possible; we offer the one below—guided by the existing moral and positive psychology literatures—as an initial attempt at a typology. If nothing else, the linking of specific elicitors to specific aspects of trait transcendence aids in the interpretation of our results.

We coded the presence (1) or absence (0) of the following 20 direct and modeled elicitors within each scene. Each elicitor represents a distinct coding category. However, it is possible for scenes to include multiple categories. For instance, with a scene of the Grand Canyon, both “nature” and “vastness” could be coded as present.

Appreciation of beauty and excellence elicitors. Based on the existing literature, we identified seven direct elicitors associated with an appreciation of beauty and excellence: another's accomplishment, architecture, art, nature, skill or talent, performances, and vastness (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Zhang, Piff, Iyer, Koleva & Keltner, 2014). The corresponding modeled elicitor reflected a character responding emotionally to these specific elicitors in conceptually related ways (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Another's accomplishment (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .88$). This category included formal and informal recognition that an individual had accomplished a goal; it was coded as present regardless of other characters witnessing the accomplishment (because the audience does so).

Architecture ($\alpha = .79$). This category included grand or moving architectural spaces or designs (e.g., castles, cathedrals, large estates, cityscapes with skyscrapers).

Art ($\alpha = .95$). This category included paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, engravings, and nontraditional forms of art. Artwork displayed in the background that was not discussed by the characters or brought to the attention of the viewer was not included. For instance, a decorative painting on the wall behind a character was not included.

Nature ($\alpha = .89$). This category included all examples of outdoor nature (e.g., forest, field, mountain, ocean). Animals not typically domesticated or kept as pets were also included (e.g., butterfly on a window sill, zebra grazing in a field).

Performances ($\alpha = .94$). This category included all live performances (e.g., formal performances, street musicians, live theater) and music recordings intentionally played by a character (e.g., playing a song for someone).

Skill ($\alpha = .90$): This category included displays of superior ability that require practice or training to master, such as mastery of a skill the average person would not be able to perform.

Vastness ($\alpha = .72$). Vastness refers to stimuli that are too large or difficult to fully comprehend, including vastness in physical space, number (e.g., “millions of lives”), ability, or volume. Examples included aerial shots of distant mountains and images of the Earth from space.

Modeled elicitor of appreciation of beauty and excellence ($\alpha = .80$). This category was coded as present when any character showed an appreciation of beauty or excellence, including portrayals of awe, wonder, elevation, or admiration. Examples included a sports crowd cheering wildly for an incredible play or a character speaking about a beautiful landscape.

Gratitude elicitors. Based on the existing literature, we identified five direct elicitors associated with gratitude: birth/new life, cheating death, gifts, kindness/moral virtue, and

positive end-of-life/death experiences (Frederickson, 2004; Haidt, 2003; McCullough & Tsang, 2004; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010). The corresponding modeled elicitor reflected a character responding emotionally to these specific elicitors in conceptually related ways (Frederickson, 2004; 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Birth/New life ($\alpha = 1$). Depictions of new life entering the world may elicit hope. This category included instances of new human, animal, and plant life (e.g., flowers blooming).

Cheating death ($\alpha = n/a$). This category included near-death experiences where a character survived or talked about themselves or others surviving. However, no variability was observed because no examples of cheating death were present in our reliability sample. Thus, Krippendorff's alpha could not be calculated, and this variable was excluded.

Gifts ($\alpha = 1$). This category included physical gifts or items such as birthday presents, flowers, paying for someone else's dinner or items, and monetary gifts to charity. Only gifts given during or before the scene (e.g., talking about a gift from the past) were coded; promises of or talking about future gifts were not included.

Kindness/Moral virtue ($\alpha = .86$). This category included displays of kindness, compassion, helpfulness, and the perception that someone had done something good for another person. Examples included giving up a seat on a bus, a deaf child helping a blind child navigate city streets, and individuals discussing their charity work.

Positive end of life/death ($\alpha = 1$). This category included depictions of positive end-of-life or death experiences (e.g., reminiscing about someone passing and how that made them rethink their life). It also included situations such as an individual in the final stages of life thinking back over her life, what she had done, her relationships, etc. A character simply dying was not coded unless the death or death process was portrayed positively.

Modeled elicitor of gratitude ($\alpha = .94$). Gratitude was coded as present when any character showed thankfulness. Examples included characters saying “thank you” or “I am grateful for,” recognizing that they benefited from another’s action, or displaying gratitude-related nonverbal actions (e.g., hugging in response to an act of kindness).

Hope elicitors. The existing literature revealed two direct elicitors associated with hope: encouragement and overcoming obstacles/perseverance (Frederickson, 2009; Prestin, 2013). The modeled elicitor associated with hope reflected a character responding emotionally to these specific elicitors in conceptually related ways (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Encouragement ($\alpha = .83$). Encouragement was coded as present when a video depicted positive encouragement, either between characters or directly to the viewer. Examples included one character saying to another “You can do this!” or the narrator giving the audience a pep talk.

Overcoming obstacles/Perseverance ($\alpha = .85$). This category included stories or depictions of persistence or triumphing over setbacks. For instance, someone trying again after facing difficulty would be coded for this category.

Modeled elicitor of hope ($\alpha = .83$). Hope was coded as present when any character was optimistic about the future or showed a positive future-mindedness or future orientation. A common example of this category was quotes about being hopeful.

Religiousness/spirituality elicitors. The existing literature also revealed two direct elicitors associated with religiousness and spirituality: religious symbols and religious traditions/rituals (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The corresponding modeled elicitor reflected a character responding emotionally to these specific elicitors in conceptually related ways.

Religious symbols ($\alpha = .95$). This category included all depictions of symbols used and recognized by organized religions (e.g., cross, star of David, prayer beads, star and crescent, Om). It also included references to religious texts (e.g., quotes from the Bible or Koran).

Religious traditions or rituals ($\alpha = 1$). This category included all depictions of religious traditions and rituals, including prayer, religious services, and religious holidays.

Modeled elicitor of religiousness/spirituality ($\alpha = .92$). Religiousness was coded as present when characters showed or discussed their spirituality, religiousness, faith, or purpose. This included references to a god or the spirit and was coded as present when individuals were shown engaging in religious traditions or rituals.

To summarize, through our review of the existing literature, we identified 20 possible elicitors of self-transcendent emotions. We conceptually organized them using Peterson and Seligman's (2004) framework for trait transcendence, which specifies four behavioral manifestations of the trait: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, and religiousness/spirituality. Although our categorization procedure was guided by this framework, it must be acknowledged that the same elicitor may trigger several self-transcendent emotional reactions. For instance, participating in a religious ritual may elicit awe, gratitude, hope, and spirituality; the same may be the case when observing the vast night sky. As a result, we recognize that our classification system is not definitive; as noted above, at a minimum, it should assist with organizing and interpreting the results.

Study 1: Results

To explore RQ1, we analyzed the frequency of the modeled and direct elicitors of self-transcendent emotions present in each video. Of the 100 videos examined, 99 depicted at least

one type of elicitor. Seven videos included portrayals of all four modeled elicitors; no video contained all 16 direct elicitors.

Regarding the modeled elicitors, as Table 1 indicates, hope was the most commonly depicted, appearing in 64% of the videos (representing 49.7% of the total instances of modeled elicitors). Characters expressing an appreciation of beauty and excellence were the next most common (48% of videos, 24.8% of total instances), followed by religiousness (23% of videos, 14.8% of total instances) and gratitude (24% of videos, 10.6% of total instances). Thus, though depictions of religiousness and gratitude appeared in a similar number of videos, characters expressing the former appeared more often within the videos when present.

As noted above, we selected videos from the (relevant and de-duplicated) search results at random; in doing so, we sought to acknowledge and validate the various types of content that are posted to YouTube and, in turn, the varied ways that viewers use that content. However, this process meant that ten videos were included in our final sample that some might consider much longer than the (stereo)typical YouTube offering (e.g., 6 hours, 13 seconds; 2 hours, 12 minutes). In order to address concerns of the latter, we elected to analyze a subset of videos ($n = 90$) that are (arguably) more representative of the “typical” content (< 20 minutes). As Table 1 indicates, the more “typical” videos contained a higher concentration of modeled elicitors compared to the full sample. For instance, displays of an appreciation for beauty and excellence and religiousness occurred more than five times (per minute) as often in the “typical” YouTube videos, with displays of hope and gratitude occurring nearly three times as often.

—————Insert Table 1 here—————

With regard to the direct elicitors of self-transcendent emotions, as Table 2 indicates, those related to the appreciation of beauty and excellence were by far the most common,

appearing in 94% of the total videos (accounting for 70.6% of the total number of elicitors present). Direct elicitors associated with hope appeared in 66% of the videos (accounting for 19.2% of the total), followed by direct elicitors associated with gratitude (41% of the videos, 6.4% of the total) and religiousness (22% of videos, accounting for 3.8% of the total). As with the modeled ones, we found a greater concentration of direct elicitors in the subset of “typical” YouTube videos. For example, direct elicitors associated with appreciation of beauty and excellence appeared once every 28.5 seconds in the subsample, as compared to every 67 seconds across the full sample. Similarly, direct elicitors associated with gratitude, hope, and religiousness were all depicted at more than three times the rate per minute in the subsample (as compared to the full sample).

—————Insert Table 2 here—————

Examining the specific direct elicitors, we found that nature was most commonly depicted, accounting for 27.2% of the total number of elicitors present. This was followed by vastness (14.6%) and art (11.6%). Unsurprisingly given the information above, these top three most commonly shown direct elicitors are all associated with the appreciation of beauty and excellence. Encouragement (11%) was the hope-related direct elicitor more often presented. As Table 3 indicates, the remaining direct elicitors each accounted for less than 10% of the total number of direct elicitors, with birth/new life and end of life/death each accounting for only .4% of the direct elicitors present. Of the direct elicitors related to gratitude, kindness was the most frequently depicted (4.4% of direct elicitors present); religious symbols were the more common direct elicitor associated with religiousness (3.1% of the total).

—————Insert Table 3 here—————

Next, we examined the relationships between the modeled and direct elicitors portrayed within the same scene; this included *any* modeled elicitors paired with *any* direct elicitor. This analysis can help illuminate the complexity of mediated inspiration. For instance, a particular modeled elicitor might be depicted in conjunction with a variety of direct elicitors. For instance, a scene showing a wedding could include gift giving (gratitude), religious traditions (religiousness), encouragement (hope), and a musical performance (appreciation of beauty and excellence), with a character responding to any one or more of these stimuli. Therefore, to better understand how various portrayals appear in relation to one another, these particular results include units where *any* modeled elicitor was depicted along with *any* direct elicitor.

Of the number of units containing both a modeled and direct elicitor, 68.4% contained characters expressing hope, 45% contained characters expressing their religiousness, 33% contained expressions of an appreciation of beauty and excellent, and 13.2% contained expressions of gratitude. Thus, not only was the modeled elicitor of hope depicted most frequently overall (e.g., a character expressing optimism about the future), but when it was depicted it was also the most likely to be paired one of the 16 direct elicitors. Table 4 reports data from scenes in which *any* modeled elicitors was shown with *any* direct elicitor.

—————Insert Table 4 here—————

Further, with units containing both a modeled and a direct elicitor, we found that 78.2% contained direct elicitors of appreciation of beauty and excellence; this is unsurprising given that these were the most common direct elicitors overall. We also found that 63.2% of the scenes containing some portrayal of a modeled elicitor also contained direct elicitors of hope, 21.8% contained direct elicitors of gratitude, and 14.5% contained direct elicitors of religiousness. The hope-related findings here are interesting given that those direct elicitors represented less than

20% of the overall total; this finding—in conjunction with the hope-related modeled elicitor findings reported in the previous paragraph—perhaps suggests that scenes containing hope are more “self-transcendent emotionally dense” than others.

Narrowing the frame of analysis more, we isolated cases in which (1) a character displayed one of the four elements of trait transcendence, and (2) a conceptually related elicitor was also present. We did so to examine how modeled and direct elicitors that we have conceptually grouped together were shown in tandem, potentially with the direct elicitor prompting the character in the video to act in a way that leads to a behavior (e.g., someone giving a gift [direct elicitor] and the recipient showing gratitude in response [modeled elicitor]). Such portrayals might be important sources of transcendence-oriented (or spiritual) modeling (e.g., Oman & Thoresen, 2003), in line with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

In units where appreciation of beauty and/or excellence was depicted through the action of a character (modeled elicitor), 58.5% of those units showed nature, 43.9% showed another’s accomplishment, 36.6% showed vastness, 35.4% featured a skill, 18.3% showed art, and 11% featured music or live performance. Architecture was shown in less than 10% of the units featuring a modeled elicitor of appreciation of beauty and excellence. When a gratitude-related modeled elicitor was depicted and a related, direct elicitor was simultaneously present, 40% of the units featured an act of kindness, 22.9% showed a gift, 8.6% showed birth or new life, and 5.7% showed an end of life/death situation. When isolating elicitors depicted while hope was expressed, we found that 77.4% of the units contained overcoming obstacles or perseverance and 49.4% contained encouragement. Finally, when we isolated acts of religiousness to examine the co-present direct elicitors, 22.2% of the units contained religious symbols, and 26.5% contained religious traditions.

We were also interested in exploring the differences between viral and non-viral “inspirational” videos (RQ3). As a reminder, the videos in the viral condition included the top 50 most viewed (on YouTube) videos in our full sample at the time of data collection (view count range: 1,429,675 to 16,317,982). The videos in the non-viral condition were 50 videos randomly selected from the remaining videos in our full sample (view count range: 137 to 1,396,866). Of course, view count may be impacted by the length of time the video had been posted to YouTube; in our sample this ranged from 37 to 3,328 days ($M = 1197.93$, $SD = 786.46$).

We conducted one-way ANCOVAs comparing the viral and non-viral videos on each of the modeled elicitors, controlling for length of time the video had been on YouTube. For each ANCOVA, viral video status (viral or non-viral) served as the independent variable and the total number of scenes in which a specific modeled elicitor appeared served as the dependent variable. Viral and non-viral videos contained similar levels of behavioral expressions ($p > .1$) related to appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and religiousness. However, videos in the viral condition contained more instances of hope being expressed by a character ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 2.7$) than those in the non-viral condition ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 1.68$): $F_{1, 97} = 4.18$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$.

To explore the presence of direct elicitors in viral and non-viral videos, we conducted additional ANCOVAs (again controlling for length of time on YouTube) comparing the viral and non-viral videos to examine the elicitors as grouped by their conceptually related transcendence dimension. For each ANCOVA, viral video status (viral or non-viral) served as the independent variable and the total number of scenes in which a direct elicitor for each category was present served as the dependent variable. Viral videos had more direct elicitors conceptually associated with appreciation of beauty and excellence ($M = 16.16$, $SD = 45.87$) than non-viral videos ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 5.89$); however, this difference only approached significance ($F_{1, 97} = 3.18$, $p = .07$, η^2

= .03). As seen with the modeled elicitors, viral videos contained significantly more direct elicitors associated with hope ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 5.45$) than non-viral videos ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 3.25$): $F_{1,97} = 4.70$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. No differences were observed between the viral and non-viral videos with regard to the direct elicitors associated with gratitude or religiousness.

Study 1: Discussion

The purpose of the content analysis was to examine if, and how, media content categorized as “inspirational” contains depictions of behaviors associated with trait transcendence or other elicitors of self-transcendent emotions. Such self-transcendent media content can theoretically promote an “others-oriented” perspective among viewers, leading to greater prosociality. Given this important potentiality, we began our investigation with a sample of YouTube videos, an oft-cited source of such content.

From past literature, we know that self-transcendent emotions can be triggered when individuals encounter specific stimuli and situations, like nature, vastness, religious traditions, encouragement, and displays of extraordinary skill (to name a few). Additionally, as social creatures, humans (as viewers) can also feel those emotions when we see others experiencing them. Thus, with media content, viewers might have a self-transcendent emotional response to a depiction of, for instance, the birth of a child (direct elicitor) or to a depiction of a media character emotionally responding to the birth of a child (modeled elicitor) or both. Therefore, our coding scheme included both direct depictions of self-transcendent emotional elicitors, as well as displays of the behaviors associated with trait transcendence (modeled elicitors).

One thing is clear from the analysis: YouTube videos that carry the “inspirational” tag contain a wide variety of elicitors associated with trait transcendent. In our sample, 99% of the videos included at least one behavior or elicitor, with a handful of videos including portrayals of

behaviors indicative of all four dimensions of trait transcendent. More specifically, hope dominates the videos, accounting for nearly half of the modeled elicitors present in our results. Perhaps unsurprisingly, direct elicitors of hope also appeared frequently, quite often in scenes containing other types of elicitors as well, suggesting that hope plays a starring role in self-transcendent content. In fact, hope was the only content category that was more present in viral (as opposed to non-viral) videos. This suggests that elicitors of hope may be the key to explaining why some meaningful videos go viral. Although there is still a great deal of research needed in order to definitively claim that certain elicitors can cause a video to go viral, this is an important first step in understanding the role of transcendence-related content in virality.

But more importantly, we argue that the findings of Study 1 serve as an initial validation of our content-analytic approach. It may seem obvious that content which is intended to “inspire” (or that, at a minimum, is associated with “inspiration” on some level) would contain depictions related to inspiration, as outlined in moral and positive psychology. Our findings confirm that to be the case. But to this point, researchers conducting studies in the area have yet to empirically make this connection. And as a result, the scientific community has been left to ponder: what exactly is it about Media Content X that might lead to Meaningful Experience Y? We contend that these results serve as an important first step in trying to answer that question. The approach we offer herein can serve as a lens through which eudaimonic media can be examined, which can then be used to explore audience responses to particular representations, which may theoretically be tied to future altruistic behaviors and human flourishing.

Despite this important step forward, we acknowledge that Study 1 has its limitations. First, the “inspiration” tag we used to select videos was applied by the person who created or posted the video to YouTube. Although the search term pulled more than 3 million videos, it is

possible that we missed applicable videos because they were not labeled as such. Additionally, we have no guarantee that the videos in our sample would, in fact, be interpreted as meaningful, inspiring, or transcendent by the population. Without a doubt, the experience of transcendence is quite subjective. Given this reality, we chose to include *all* relevant videos that had been labeled with “inspiration” to avoid biasing our sample based on what we deemed as transcendent.

Additionally, although previous research suggests that (non-mediated) displays of the elicitors we examined can lead to self-transcendent emotions, researchers have not yet systematically explored *media* portrayals of these elicitors. Due to the nature of any content analysis, we cannot claim that the portrayals we examined (or similar ones) actually lead to self-transcendent emotional experiences. Because of this, we conducted a second study to explore whether the presence of specific transcendence-related elicitors are, in fact, associated with self-transcendent media experiences among audience members.

Study 2

The results of Study 1 were encouraging: using a content-analytic approach informed by past work in moral and positive psychology, we consistently observed depictions of character behaviors and other direct elicitors associated with trait transcendence—particularly, hope-related representations—in a sample of YouTube videos tagged with the term “inspiration.” To our knowledge, this is the first such study to empirically examine the specific content features associated with self-transcendent media experiences. Despite these encouraging findings, we readily acknowledge that the observation of these self-transcendent emotional elicitors in “inspiring” content is just a first step. In order to further validate our analytic approach and to explore the specific depictions that might be associated with self-transcendent media

experiences, it was necessary to observe actual emotional reactions to the viewing of specific elicitors. To that end, in Study 2 we sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: Will reactions associated with self-transcendence predictably correspond to depictions of specific elicitors of self-transcendent emotions in media content?

Study 2: Method

A total of 125 undergraduate from a research university in the United States participated in the study for course credit. Participants were 77.1% female (with 1.7% gender variant/non-gender conforming) and ranged in age from 18 to 35 ($M = 20.22$, $SD = 2.39$). A majority identified as White (78.8%), while another 15.3% identified as African American, 5.1% Latino, and 3.4% as being of Asian descent. As a part of a larger study, participants completed an online pre-exposure survey including demographic items and then attended a follow-up laboratory session. During the lab sessions, small groups of participants viewed six videos from YouTube on a large screen; none of the videos viewed were examined in Study 1. Three of the videos primarily elicited humorous reactions (hedonic content), with the other three eliciting self-transcendent emotional reactions (eudaimonic content), as confirmed in a previous study with a sample drawn from a population similar to that of the current project (Oliver et al., 2017). For the current study, only reactions to a set of specific depictions in the three eudaimonically oriented videos were isolated and are reported below.

In the lab, participants provided real-time, second-by-second responses to each video using Dialsmith Perception Analyzers on a 0-100 scale, with higher numbers indicating more of the particular response; participants began rating each video from the 50/neutral position. In the larger study, participants were randomly assigned to rate each video as either “inspiring,” “funny,” or “arousing.” Only “inspiring” ratings of the three eudaimonic videos are of interest in

this study. Participants were instructed “For this video, please use the dials to indicate how inspiring you find the video, as you’re watching it. That is, to what extent is the video moving, touching, heart-warming or hopeful? How much does it make you want to be a better person?”

In terms of procedures, in each session, all participants rated the first two videos using the same adjective (e.g., “inspiring”). The next two videos were rated using a different adjective (e.g., “funny”), with the final two videos rated with the final adjective (e.g., “arousing”). Both the order of the assigned adjectival rating and the presentation order of the videos were systematically rotated for each session. Because of this rotation, as well as differences in the number of participants attending each session, the number of participants rating each of three eudaimonic video as “inspiring” necessarily differed. Of the three eudaimonic videos, 43 participants rated Video 1, 44 rated Video 2, and 46 rated Video 3 as “inspiring.”

Additionally, at a different research university in the United States, four of the trained coders from Study 1 analyzed the three eudaimonic videos for the presence and duration (in seconds) of the 20 self-transcendent emotional elicitors. To ensure the accuracy of the time coding, the four researchers met together to agree upon the second an elicitor appeared in and disappeared from each video. In total, the three videos contained 32 elicitor depictions: 10 associated with appreciation of beauty and excellence, 15 associated with gratitude, and seven associated with hope; no depictions of religiousness/spirituality were observed in the three videos. More specifically, Video 1 (157 seconds) contained nine depictions of gratitude; Video 2 (81 seconds) contained all 10 of the depictions associated with appreciation of beauty and excellence, three associated with gratitude, and six associated with hope; and, Video 3 (87 seconds) contained three depictions of gratitude and one of hope.

Based on the results of the content analysis, audience reactions during eight (or 25% of the) transcendence-related depictions were isolated in the dataset for analysis. The selection of the eight specific depictions was based on two criteria: (1) elicitors that were temporally distant from one another, and (2) attempts to investigate a diversity of elicitors. More specifically, one goal was to analyze responses to depictions that were (relatively) isolated from others to avoid, as much as possible, carryover effects driven by physiological excitation; that is, we selected depictions that were separated by time in an attempt to allow arousal associated with one specific transcendence-related depiction to dissipate before a second one was encountered. In this way, we hoped to isolate as best possible the influence of the specific depiction on ratings of “inspiring.” Within the three videos, the isolated depictions ranged from 13 to 62 seconds apart, with an average distance of 27.2 seconds (though, in truth, unexamined elicitors may have been present in the interim). Secondly, we aimed to examine a variety of depictions. As noted above, of the four categories of elicitors defined in our content-analytic approach, at least one example of three—appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and hope—was present across the three videos. Based on the selection criteria discussed above, we analyzed three depictions of gratitude (two in Video 1 and one in Video 3), two depictions of the appreciation of beauty and excellence (both in Video 2), and three depictions of hope (two in Video 2 and one in Video 3).

Three variables for each depiction were calculated using the continuous-response data by averaging “inspiring” ratings for each participant for (1) the five seconds immediately preceding the introduction of the self-transcendent elicitor, (2) the duration the elicitor was depicted (ranged from 2-9 seconds), and (3) the five seconds immediately following the depiction.

Study 2: Results and Discussion

A series of within-subjects, repeated measures procedures were conducted to explore differences in the “inspiring” emotional responses before, during, and after the presence of the elicitors (RQ1). Theoretically, inspiring ratings should increase following exposure to each of the self-transcendent elicitors. This was indeed observed in all eight cases (see Table 5). That is, observed ratings of feeling inspired were significantly higher following all eight depictions of appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and hope.

—————Insert Table 5 here—————

The goal of Study 2 was to seek initial validation of the analytic approach developed in Study 1 by observing real-time emotional reactions to specific depictions associated with self-transcendent media experiences. Indeed, ratings of “inspiration” increased during and after all eight of the isolated scenes containing elicitors. Although not all of the elicitors examined in Study 1 were represented in the Study 2 stimulus material, the ones that were present were associated with increased feelings associated with trait transcendence among viewers. These findings are the first to our knowledge to demonstrate the direct relationship between transcendence-related depictions in media and associated emotional responses in viewers. As such, the findings serve as a “proof of concept” for media researchers seeking to understand the impact of specific representations of moral virtue on corresponding emotional reactions.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge some limitations in Study 2. For one, the adjectival rating of “inspiring” was a single item (though this is simply the nature of continuous-response studies). Nevertheless, participants could have rated each video with adjectives associated with a specific self-transcendent emotion (e.g., awe-inspiring, gratitude-inspiring, hope-inspiring). However, as alluded to earlier, the experience—and likely the elicitation—of self-transcendent emotions does not appear to be discreet, especially given the conceptual overlap between the

emotions. Further, at least at this point, our research is driven by the goal of understanding transcendent media experiences, not media experiences that differentially elicit discreet self-transcendent emotions. Therefore, we contend that the analysis of the more general “inspiring” ratings—a term which is arguably more familiar to and more often used by the participants—was appropriate and justified. Also, our instructions for participants to rate the videos as “inspiring” raised another possible limitation. As alluded to throughout the manuscript, self-transcendent emotional reactions to stimuli are complex. Although we attempted to clarify for the participants what we meant by “inspiring,” it is possible that altering that description—for instance, to one that included references to awe or gratitude—could have yielded slightly different results.

General Discussion

Despite increased interest in and examination of eudaimonic media experiences, to date scholars have paid little attention to the specific depictions and portrayals that might be responsible for those experiences. Therefore, in this project, we conducted the first systematic content analysis of self-transcendent content—a particular type of eudaimonic media—using a sample of 100 videos categorized by YouTube.com as “inspirational.” Using the same technique, we analyzed stimulus materials utilized by previous researchers to elicit self-transcendent emotions (Oliver et al., 2017), identifying and isolating eight scenes containing specific elicitors across three videos. Respondents then reported second-by-second, real-time emotional reactions associated with “inspiration” while viewing the three videos. As expected, those ratings significantly increased immediately following exposure to each of the eight eliciting scenes. Together these two studies offer the first empirical evidence (1) directly linking specific representations of transcendence-related elicitors to content identified as “inspirational,” and (2) directly linking those specific representations to self-transcendent emotional reactions in

viewers. This evidence provides a framework for researchers to better map the anatomy of eudaimonic media experiences from both a content and a viewer perspective. Such work is important as media researchers continue to search for ways that content can promote psychological well-being, human flourishing, an “others orientation,” and prosociality.

With that in mind, the two studies revealed a few specific relationships that are of particular interest. Study 1 showed that hope (and its associated elicitors) was present in our sample of “inspirational” YouTube videos at a much higher rate than other elicitors; study 2 showed that portrayals of hope can lead to transcendence-related feelings among audience members. More research is needed to understand why hope is so relatively appealing. Although feelings of hope arguably play an implicit role in some media theories—for instance, anticipatory emotions in affective disposition theory (Zillmann, 2000; Raney, 2006)—they have received little attention by media psychologists. Nabi and Keblusek (2014) surveyed participants about the possible role of hope in motivating upward social comparisons with media characters, but Prestin (2013) serves as the only study we know of that directly explored hope within an entertainment context. The author examined how “underdog narratives” (i.e., “stories depicting characters struggling to meet their goals despite unfavorable odds,” p. 319) can elicit hope in viewers. She found that the narratives did indeed elicit hope, which was durable across several days and was associated with increased motivation to pursue personal goals. Underdog narratives likely contain similar depictions of encouragement and overcoming obstacles as we measured herein. It is also possible that differences in the length of narratives and diversity of elicitors also present may impact both strength and duration of these effects. More work on the impacts of all types of media content containing such portrayals is needed.

Additionally, despite the large role played by hope-related depictions, the high concentration of other elicitors implies that self-transcendent media content is quite complex, featuring a variety of relevant representations. For example, consider the category of appreciation of beauty and excellence, which approached statistically different levels in terms of representations in viral versus non-viral videos in Study 1. As reported, three specific direct elicitors were prominently featured: scenes of nature, art, and vastness. An informal analysis of qualitative descriptions of these instances (coded but not systematically analyzed for this study) indicated that common examples of each ranged from “the natural” to “the human”: nature was often represented by mountains, sunsets, and forests; art was often represented by paintings, and sculptures; and vastness was often represented by shots of Earth from space, large landscapes featuring a very small person, and shots of the open sky with smaller objects in the foreground. But these two key elicitor types—the natural and the human—point to more questions. Researchers should seek to better understand the relationship between witnessing someone else experience self-transcendence, witnessing the stimulus/situation triggering that reaction in someone else, and witnessing a stimulus/situation on our own that might lead to self-transcendent emotions. As our analyses reveals, transcendent videos contain *all* of these representations, and all of the elicitors included in Study 2 can lead to feelings associated with trait transcendence. However, we still do not know if certain elicitors are more “powerful” than others. More specifically, which are more potent in eliciting self-transcendent emotions in the viewer? As social beings, are we more likely to respond to another’s emotions or does the nature of these emotions lend themselves to more individual, personalized encounters?

We also do not yet know if some combinations of elicitors may be more emotionally impactful than others or to what extent cumulating elicitors may influence self-transcendent

emotions. Table 5 reports that, within each video, ratings of “inspiration” increase across time in general, perhaps pointing to a cumulative effect of exposure to the elicitors. In fact, a follow-up analysis revealed that ratings of “inspiration” significantly increased from the first five to the final five seconds (though the trend was not perfectly linear for each video). This may simply be a function of *all* narratives: it takes time to tell stories; so, ratings of “inspiration” (or any number of other variables) are likely to increase as we learn more information about a situation or scenario. It is also possible that residual physiological excitation from one elicitor builds on the next (see excitation transfer theory; e.g., Zillmann, 1996). Or it may be possible that certain elicitors require more time to influence audience emotions. For instance, a story of perseverance and overcoming obstacles may take longer to unfold than depictions of kindness. However, we do not yet know if these cumulative effects ultimately lead to greater self-transcendent emotions or if elicitors must be presented in a certain order or combination in order to reach maximum inspiration potential. These are just a few of the many issues that remain unexplored. But we think that the current project provides a framework for systematically examining those issues.

To summarize, this project is the first to use the moral and positive psychology literatures to systematically and empirically identify specific depictions in eudaimonic media and to measure conceptually related responses in audiences following exposure to those depictions. Theoretically, such representations are important because they can trigger self-transcendent emotional experiences, which may lead to human flourishing and social engagement. Admittedly, this is one of the first steps in a long journey to understanding this underexplored-but-increasingly-popular content and the effects thereof. More studies must follow. However, we think that this project provides a foundation upon which those studies can be conducted.

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Table 1

Modeled Elicitors

	Total Sample ($n = 100$)			“Typical” YouTube sample ($n = 90$) ¹		
	Videos Depicting	Scenes Depicting	Depictions per min ²	Videos Depicting	Scenes Depicting	Depictions per min ²
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	48	82	0.0937	41	67	0.4753
Gratitude	24	35	0.0763	19	26	0.2247
Hope	64	164	0.1574	56	135	0.5147
Religiousness	23	49	0.0664	19	36	0.3450

¹ Analysis limited to videos of 20:00 minutes or less.

² To maintain meaningful and interpretable values, these findings were generated by averaging across videos actually containing representations only.

Table 2

Direct Elicitors, Summed and Grouped by Conceptually Related Transcendence Dimensions

	Total Sample ($n = 100$)			“Typical” YouTube sample ($n = 90$) ¹		
	Videos Depicting	Scenes Depicting	Depictions per min ²	Videos Depicting	Scenes Depicting	Depictions per min ²
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	94	1098	0.8970	85	655	1.6597
Gratitude	41	99	0.1206	36	80	0.3852
Hope	66	299	0.28668	58	243	0.9223
Religiousness	22	60	0.08464	18	44	0.4450

¹ Analysis limited to videos of 20:00 minutes or less.

² To maintain meaningful and interpretable values, these findings were generated by averaging across videos actually containing representations only.

Table 3

Frequency of Individual Direct Elicitors

Elicitors related to:	Frequency	Percentage
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence		
Nature	423	27.2%
Vastness	228	14.6%
Art	181	11.6%
Skill	88	5.6%
Another's Accomplishment	83	5.3%
Architecture	74	4.7%
Music	21	1.3%
Gratitude		
Kindness	68	4.4%
Gifts	17	1.1%
Birth/New Life	7	.4%
End of Life/Death	7	.4%
Hope		
Overcoming Obstacles/Perseverance	127	8.2%
Encouragement	172	11%
Religiousness		
Religious Symbols	47	3.1%
Religious Traditions/Rituals	11	.7%

Table 4

Percentage of Scenes Depicting Both Modeled and Direct Emotional Elicitors

	Direct Elicitors			
	ABE ¹	Gratitude	Hope	Religiousness
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	87.8%	19.5%	47.6%	12.2%
Gratitude	62.9%	45.7%	51.4%	25.7%
Hope	75.6%	18.9%	84.1%	11%
Religiousness	63.3%	36.7%	40.8%	38.8%

¹ Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence

Note on interpreting Table 4: These data represent cases in which both a modeled and direct elicitor were depicted in the same scene. Values indicate the percentage of scenes in which each direct elicitor was present with a modeled one. For example, when a character expressed gratitude (modeled elicitor), it was accompanied by a direct elicitor associated with appreciation of beauty and excellence 62.9% of the time.

Table 5

“Inspiring” Ratings of Self-Transcendent Elicitors, Across Three Inspiring Videos

	Depiction timing		Ratings of “Inspiring” (scale: 0-100)				
	Start	Length	Pre	During	Post	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Video 1			<i>n</i> = 43				
Gratitude 1	:36	9 sec	63.72	67.97	71.42	<.001	.471
Gratitude 2	1:38	3 sec	65.29	66.53	70.02	<.001	.311
Video 2			<i>n</i> = 44				
ABE ¹ 1	:14	9 sec	52.12	53.38	55.28	.001	.156
Hope 1	:32	4 sec	54.37	54.62	55.91	.010	.101
ABE 2	:46	3 sec	59.51	63.33	68.09	<.001	.508
Hope 2	:59	2 sec	71.08	74.14	76.76	<.001	.436
Video 3			<i>n</i> = 46				
Gratitude 3	:47	8 sec	34.96	35.51	39.57	<.001	.493
Hope 3	1:16	7 sec	52.66	58.75	66.96	.001	.147

¹Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence

Note: “Pre” refers to the 5 seconds preceding the elicitor, “During” to the time during which the elicitor is present, and “Post” to the 5 seconds immediately following the elicitor.