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Profiling the Audience for Self-Transcendent Media: A National Survey

by

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Abstract

This article reports the findings from a national survey of self-transcendent (or inspiring) media audience members in the United States. Exposure to self-transcendent content is socially significant because, theoretically, it can orient users towards matters beyond themselves, ultimately promoting connections with others and altruistic behaviors. However, to date, little is known about the daily audiences for such fare. Four primary questions guided the investigation: (1) What are the media sources and contents identified as “inspiring” by the audience?, (2) Who makes up the current U.S. audience for self-transcendent media content?, (3) What personality traits and viewer characteristics are associated with self-transcendent media consumption?, and (4) What prosocial and altruistic behaviors are associated with self-transcendent media consumption? To address these questions, a nationally representative survey ($n = 3,006$) was conducted. The findings are discussed in relation to the growing body of scholarship on positive media psychology.

Keywords: self-transcendent media, inspiring media, self-transcendent emotions, audience research, positive media psychology, broaden-and-build theory

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Browsing social-media and video-hosting sites, one can find thousands of clips—narratives, montages, music videos, lectures, performances, confessionals, slices of life—that are heart-warming, touching, moving, and thought-provoking; videos that leave a lump in the throat and that cause a tear to form in the corner of the eye; videos that depict or encourage human goodness, sacrifice, compassion, beauty, and hope. Many users and content providers alike routinely refer to this content as *inspirational*. Of course, inspirational content is not reserved to online videos. It can be found across the media landscape: touching films like *Hidden Figures*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and *Life is Beautiful*; meaningful television series like *This is Us*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *The Biggest Loser*; print and electronic reports of “good news” and other hopeful stories posted to websites like Upworthy and Huffington Post, just to name a few.

In the past few years, mass communication scholars have started to explore the effects of exposure to this content (e.g., Rieger et al., 2015; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016), or to what can be called *self-transcendent media experiences* (Oliver et al., in press). To date, however, virtually no attention has been paid to the daily use of inspiring or self-transcendent media.¹ Understanding such usage is important and socially relevant because of the potential for self-transcendent content to trigger emotional experiences that promote empathy, human virtue, character building, an “others orientation,” and prosociality (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003; Oliver, Hartmann, & Wooley, 2012; Prestin, 2013; Schnall, Roper & Fessler, 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). More specifically, self-transcendent media experiences can foster the

¹ A host of terms are used to refer to the same content. “Inspiring media” (or “inspirational media”) is arguably the most common and familiar term, especially among consumers. Scholars in the area have routinely used broad terms like “meaningful” and “eudaimonic” to differentiate content that is not primarily “hedonic” in nature. However, “self-transcendent media” is arguably the most scientifically accurate term to refer to the specific content in question (see Oliver et al., in press), as it explicitly associates particular content with a concrete set of emotional responses. From our perspective, all terms are acceptable; but, for the sake of precision, the latter will be used exclusively herein.

development of trait transcendence in its audience members. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of that audience, our team surveyed a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults to explore day-to-day experiences with self-transcendent media.

Transcendence in Media

Peterson and Seligman (2004) identify transcendence as one of six core human virtues presumed to be present in and highly valued by all global cultures. As a trait, transcendence refers to the disposition to forge connections with the larger universe and to strive for meaning and purpose that is greater than one's self. Although transcendence often connotes religion or spirituality, it need not do so. "[W]hat is transcendent does need to be sacred but does not need to be divine ... [it] is that which reminds us of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance" (p. 39). Transcendence as a virtue can be developed in two primary ways. First, individuals can develop it by performing specific behaviors: expressing gratitude, demonstrating an appreciation for (moral) beauty and excellence, expressing hope, and enacting religiousness or spirituality. For example, when people acknowledge the moral beauty in another person's sacrificial kindness, or participate in a meaningful discussion of a spiritual matter, they are enacting, experiencing, and further developing transcendence.

Secondly, and more importantly for the current project, individuals can develop trait transcendence through the experience of self-transcendent emotions, specifically awe, elevation, hope, and admiration (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Fredrickson, 2009; Haidt & Morris, 2009). Although these emotional experiences differ slightly, they share a common elicitor: moral goodness or virtue found most often in other people and their actions. To return to the example above, a person can experience admiration, awe, or hope by witnessing another person's act of sacrificial kindness. In turn, the experience of self-transcendent emotions helps to direct one's

orientation outward, facilitating an increased openness to exploring and engaging with one's environment. As a result, people are drawn out of themselves, their perspectives are broadened, and their attention and actions turned toward others (see the broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2001; 2009).

Research identifies many (non-mediated) situations and circumstances that can lead to the experience of self-transcendent emotions, like gathering with close friends and family, being alone in nature, or seeing others display kindness, to name a few (Haidt, 2003). A small set of laboratory experiments have demonstrated that self-transcendent emotions can also be triggered by elicitors found in media content like the examples mentioned above (e.g., Lai, Haidt, & Nosek, 2014; Oliver, Hartmann, & Wooley, 2012; Prestin, 2013; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010; Van Cappellen, et al., 2013). The current study sought to better understand how audience members experience these self-transcendent emotions through their daily media consumption. Four primary goals motivated the project: (1) to create a profile of the audience of self-transcendent content, (2) to create a profile of the media sources and contents that those audience members claim lead to self-transcendent experiences, (3) to explore the relationships between various audience member characteristics and self-transcendent media consumption, and (4) to explore the relationships between self-transcendent media consumption and various prosocial and altruistic behaviors in audiences.

Self-Transcendent Media Experiences

Before a description of how those goals were pursued can be discussed, a clear operationalization of the media content—or, rather, the media experience—in question must be offered. Oliver and her colleagues (in press) argue that self-transcendent media experiences occur when audience members recognize in themselves elements of shared humanity, as well as

the potential for moral beauty, hope, and courage. Such experiences make audience members aware of and provide insight into the human condition by shifting one's focus from mundane concerns to an increased interconnectedness with others and higher causes. However, given various personality variables and media-usage patterns, the actual content that prompts such experiences undoubtedly varies from person to person. That is, what touches, inspires, moves, and elevates one person may not do so for another.

Therefore, to measure self-transcendent media experiences, it was necessary to avoid assumptions about particular genres or narrative forms and to focus instead on subjective perceptions and reactions to content (regardless of genre, format, channel, or authorial intent). Therefore, an audience-centered perspective was adopted for the project, with self-transcendent media experiences characterized as those described as “moving, touching, or inspiring” by audience members (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011; Oliver, Hartmann, & Wooley, 2012). This approach mirrors one taken by scholars when defining and examining “entertaining” media (see Vorderer, 2001).

With that stated, four broad research questions were interrogated in the project:

RQ1: What is the profile of the media sources and contents identified as “inspiring” by the current U.S. audience?

RQ2: What is the profile of the current U.S. audience for self-transcendent media content?

RQ3: What personality traits and viewer characteristics are associated with self-transcendent media consumption?

RQ4: What prosocial and altruistic behaviors are associated with self-transcendent media consumption?

Method

The survey instrument was designed in conjunction with the research staff of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan member organization of the National Council on Public Polls dedicated to research at the intersection of religion, values, and public life. The random sample of 3,006 adults was drawn from participants in AmeriSpeak, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the national U.S. adult population, operated by NORC at the University of Chicago. A majority of the survey responses were collected online using a self-administered design ($n = 2,510$ or 83.5%); responses from panel participants without internet access were collected by telephone using professional interviewers under the direction of NORC ($n = 496$). Survey responses were collected between January 28 and February 21, 2016, in both English and Spanish ($n = 22$).

Responses to the survey were weighted to represent the current U.S. population. First, panel base weights were calculated for every household based on the probability of selection from the NORC National Frame. Household-level weights were then assigned to each eligible adult in every recruited household. Next, the sample demographics were balanced to match the U.S. population parameters for gender, age, education, race, ethnicity, housing type, and telephone usage. The telephone-usage parameter was derived from an analysis of the National Health Interview Survey. All other weighting parameters were derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The sample weighting was accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting process that simultaneously balanced the distributions of all variables. Weights were trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results. All analyses were calculated with the weights applied to the dataset.

The margin of error for the survey was +/- 2.5%, at the 95% level of confidence. The design effect for the survey was 1.9. The survey was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Florida State University (HSC#2015.16301; approved 11/6/2015) and NORC/University of Chicago.

Measures

The survey contained a variety of measures, not all of which are germane to the current discussion.² The variables of interest to the current analyses included the following:

Demographics. Five demographic characteristics were of chief concern: gender, ethnicity, marital status, age, and educational attainment. Additionally, a four-item life satisfaction scale was created: “In general, how satisfied would you say you are with your (a) personal health, (b) family life, (c) relationships with friends, and (d) quality of life in your community?” Responses to each item on a 5-point, Likert-type scale proved to be sufficiently reliable (observed $\alpha = .77$); thus, a life satisfaction factor was created by averaging the responses for each participant across the four items ($M = 3.65$; $SD = .74$). Table 1 reports the demographic information for the sample.

—————Insert Table 1 here—————

Inspiring media experiences. Participants indicated (yes/no) if they had ever felt “moved, touched or inspired” while consuming any of the following eight forms of media: watching a television show, watching a movie, listening to a radio program or podcast, reading a book, listening to a song or piece of music, reading a news story, watching an online video, and using social media. For each media form, an audience-centered approach was taken, with the mode of delivery and content provider being of little concern. Therefore, no attempt was made to

² A copy of the complete questionnaire is available upon request from the lead author.

differentiate, for instance, “watching a television show” on a television set, a tablet, or computer; similarly, no attempt was made to differentiate between broadcast, cable, on-demand, or streaming television. If the participant defined her/his experience as “watching television,” then the experience was recorded. For all affirmative responses, participants then described the TV, movie, radio, and book content by selecting the most appropriate genre from a set provided. For the music, news, online video, and social media items, participants provided open-ended descriptions of the content.

To calculate a global self-transcendent media experience factor, responses to the eight yes/no items were examined. Responses were sufficiently similar across the items ($\alpha = .74$); as a result, a single factor ($M = 5.86$; $SD = 2.02$) was created for each participant by summing the affirmative responses for the eight items, with higher numbers reflecting more diverse self-transcendent media experiences.

Two items specifically examined the most recent self-transcendent media experience, without regard to media source or form. The first probed how the participant came to encounter the content: specifically searching for it, recommended by a friend or family member, as an advertisement, or just by chance. The second asked whether the participant subsequently shared the inspiring content with friends or family members (yes/no).

Personality traits. To explore more about the people who consume inspiring media, two items each (due to survey time constraints) were selected from existing personality trait measures previously shown to be associated with meaningful media use (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011): need for affect (Appel, Gnambs, & Maio, 2012), empathic concern and perspective taking (Davis, 1980), need for cognition (Cacioppo, Perry, & Kao, 1984), and universality (Piedmont, 1999). Two criteria guided the selection of the items from each scale: (1) conceptual matching between

an item on the existing scale and the survey goals was considered, with those with the greatest match being selected, and (2) when conceptual matching was determined to be equal, items loading highest/performing most reliably in the seminal article reporting the scale were selected.

Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale measuring how well the item described them (“Not at all well” to “Exactly”). As expected, item pairs correlated moderately to strongly with each other and were combined into short-form scales measuring need for affect ($r = .457, p < .001; M = 3.55, SD = .896$), empathic concern ($r = -.209, p < .001$; one item reverse coded; $M = 3.09, SD = .656$), perspective taking ($r = .569, p < .001; M = 3.92, SD = .826$), and universality ($r = .561, p < .001; M = 3.43, SD = .979$). Unexpectedly, the two need for cognition items were not sufficiently correlated ($r = -.060$; one item reverse coded) and were therefore omitted from the analyses.

Prosocial and altruistic behaviors. To assess how often participants engaged in prosocial and altruistic behavior, 10 items were developed by the research team, with several adapted from Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken’s (1981) altruistic personality scale. Participants indicated how often they performed certain behaviors (e.g., loaned a personal possession to a non-family member; volunteered time at a charity, school, or religious organization) in the last month. Responses were recorded on a 6-point scale, from “have not done this in the past month” to “nearly every day.” Together the items were sufficiently reliable ($\alpha = .78$). As a result, they were averaged for each participant to yield a single factor ($M = 2.88; SD = .875$), with higher scores associated with greater prosocial and altruistic behaviors.

Results

The first goal was to understand the sources and nature of content identified as “moving, touching, or inspiring” by the participants.

Sources of Self-Transcendent Media Experiences

As noted above, eight possible sources of such content were identified. The largest proportion (90.5%) of the sample reported having been previously moved, touched, or inspired while listening to music. Watching a movie (86.9%) and a television show (80.2%) were the next most likely sources of self-transcendent experiences; radio and podcasts inspired a much lower proportion of respondents (58.9%). Participants reported experiencing self-transcendent emotions at similar rates with two text-based media forms: reading a news story (77.6%) and reading a book (74.7%). Of the sources listed, social media sites (53.0%) were the least likely sources of self-transcendent content, though the reader is reminded that “online videos,” which may be posted to social media sites, was a separate category (62.7%).

A vast majority of participants stated that they came across the most recent self-transcendent media content by chance, while they were doing something else (68.1%); only a small percentage encountered it through an advertisement (5.6%) or by specifically seeking it out (5.2%). Of our sample, 14.6% indicated that their most recent self-transcendent media experience was recommended to them by a friend or family member. However, a much larger percentage (62.3%) stated that they had shared their most recent encounter with self-transcendent media with a friend or family member.

Content Associated with Self-Transcendent Media Experiences

Dramas were listed as the top genre source for the most recent self-transcendent media experience for both movies (33.0%) and television (30.9%), with documentaries listed second most often for both as well (17.4% and 29.8% respectively). For films, the remainder of the top five genres for the most recent self-transcendent media experience included romance (15.0%), Christian/spiritual (11.5%) and science fiction/fantasy (5.4%); for television, Christian/spiritual

programming (11.4%), reality TV (8.5%), and comedies (4.7%) rounded out the top five most recently viewed self-transcendent film genres.

Three out of four participants stated that they had experienced self-transcendence while reading a book, with the most recent encounter coming from nonfiction (20.6%), Christian/spiritual (20.0%), romance (13.4%), self-help (8.7%), and classic literature (6.4%) titles. Of the participants touched or moved while listening to the radio or a podcast, the largest proportion reported that the content featured news and current events (29.8%), followed by Christian/spiritual (23.7%), entertainment (13.3%), non-religious music (9.7%), and political talk show (7.2%) programming.

Open-ended descriptions of the self-transcendent content from three sources—news stories, online videos, and social media—were collected and categorized based on the predominant theme. Three researchers working together conducted a preliminary thematic analysis of the open-ended responses; the analysis yielded seven content themes: animal and children, family and other personal relationships, tragedies/human suffering, compassion/hope/perseverance, politics, religion/spiritual matters, and other. Next, two of the researchers worked independently to code each response into one of the seven categories. All differences in coding were resolved by the third researcher.

News stories about tragedies and human suffering were most frequently reported to be sources of self-transcendence (29.1%), followed by those dealing with compassion, hope, and perseverance (17.1%) and political matters (13.5%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two online sources offered quite a variety of idiosyncratic themes, with the Other category being the largest source of inspiration with online videos (24.3%) and the second highest for social media (18.1%). Nevertheless, for the video and social media themes that were classifiable, a pattern

similar to the news stories emerged. For social media, posts dealing with tragedies and human suffering (19.2%) and with compassion, hope, and perseverance (16.4%) were the most often cited, followed by posts about family and other personal relationships (11.9%). For the online video category, videos portraying compassion, hope, and perseverance were the most frequent source of self-transcendence (15.6%), followed by videos featuring animals and children (12.4%) and tragedies and human suffering (11.9%).

Characteristics of the Self-Transcendent Media Audience

To construct a profile of the audience for self-transcendent media content, data for six demographic variables described above were analyzed: gender, ethnicity, marital status, age, educational attainment, and life satisfaction. These were first examined in relation to each of the eight potential sources for self-transcendent content; then, participants were classified based on the global self-transcendent media experiences factor described above (i.e., sum of yes/no responses to each of the eight source items).

Gender. As Table 2 shows, male and female participants reported significantly different experiences with each media source, except for radio/podcasts. In each case, females reported experiencing self-transcendent emotions more often than males.

—————Insert Table 2 here—————

Ethnicity. With regard to ethnicity, Whites, Black, and Hispanics reported similar frequencies for self-transcendence from music, movies, books, and online videos, but differed when it came to television, news stories, radio/podcasts, and social media. A general pattern of differences appeared: Hispanic participants reported a greater likelihood of being moved, touched, or inspired through social media (with a nonsignificant, but similarly trending difference for online videos), but a lesser likelihood for news. African American respondents

reported being more likely to experience self-transcendent emotions through television and radio/podcasts.

Marital status. Single and married participants reported similar frequencies of having encountered self-transcendence through five of the eight media sources. Differences emerged for experiences with music, online videos, and social media, with single respondents reporting greater frequency of experiencing self-transcendent emotions with all three.

Age. Differences were found across the age spectrum for all media sources, except for reading books. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the frequency with which participants reported experiencing self-transcendence through online videos and social media decreased with age (see Table 3). The youngest demographic (ages 18-29) was also most likely to report self-transcendence from music but less likely to have encountered it with television, news stories, and (along with those 60 years and older) radio/podcasts. The oldest participants (i.e., 60+ years) were also the least likely to have experienced self-transcendent emotion with movies but the most likely to have done so with television.

Educational attainment. Generally speaking, a linear relationship was observed between educational attainment and frequency of experiencing self-transcendent emotions with news stories and books, with the likelihood increasing with higher levels of education. A similar pattern was found for movies and online videos; however, in both cases, those with a college degree or more (i.e., the highest level of education) were less likely (at least, descriptively speaking) to encounter self-transcendence through those sources than their counterparts who had some college education but no degree. Also, those without a high school diploma reported experiencing self-transcendent emotions through social media less frequently than all others.

Life satisfaction. Those scoring in the highest quartile on the 4-item satisfaction with life scale were more likely to experience self-transcendence through news and social media than those scoring in the bottom quartile. The opposite was the case for movies. Otherwise, no differences were observed among participants at different levels of self-reported life satisfaction.

—————Insert Table 3 here—————

Varying levels of exposure. In an attempt to identify broader patterns, we examined those who reported having been moved, touched or inspired by all eight (26.4% of the sample), by only a few (1-4 sources; 20.2% of the sample), and by none (2.7%) of the media sources. Tables 4 and 5 report those findings. As expected given the previous results, females were significantly more likely than males to have encountered self-transcendence through all media sources, with males more likely to report self-transcendence with a few or none. Significantly more African American respondents reported self-transcendence through all media sources than Whites or Hispanics; White participants were more likely to have been inspired by just a few sources. No differences were observed for marital status. Persons 60 years and older and those without a high school diploma were the least likely to experience self-transcendence through all media sources and the most likely to have only done so through only a few. No differences were observed for persons at different levels of life satisfaction.

—————Insert Tables 4 and 5 here—————

Audience Characteristics Predicting Self-Transcendent Media Experiences

Next, the relationships between the various audience characteristics, several personality traits (need for affect, empathic concern, perspective taking, and universality), and self-transcendent media consumption were investigated through a hierarchical regression procedure, with the various demographic variables entered and controlled for in a stepwise fashion. As

Table 6 indicates, gender, age, and educational attainment were all significant predictors of overall self-transcendent media experiences. Above and beyond these predictors, the personality traits of universality, empathic concern, and need for affect also significantly predicted overall inspiring media experiences, explaining an additional 8.6% of the observed variance in those experiences.

—————Insert Table 6 here—————

Predicting Prosocial Behaviors Among Self-Transcendent Media Audiences

Finally, the relationship between self-transcendent media experiences and various prosocial and altruistic behaviors was explored through another hierarchical regression, with the demographic variables again entered as controls in a stepwise manner. In the final step, the personality traits and the global self-transcendent media factor were introduced. As Table 7 reports, need for affect, empathic concern, and universality all significantly predicted the prosocial and altruistic behaviors, as did self-transcendent media experiences. This final step explained more than two-thirds of the total variance explained by the model (7.7% of 11%).

—————Insert Table 7 here—————

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to offer a descriptive snapshot of the day-to-day audience for, reception of, and experiences with self-transcendent media content. To that end, a nationally representative survey of more than 3,000 U.S. adults was conducted. A better understanding of these audiences and practices is important and socially relevant because of the potential for self-transcendent content to trigger emotional experiences that promote the virtue of transcendence, which has been associated with an “others orientation,” prosociality, and altruism. Four primary questions guided the investigation: (1) What are the media sources and contents identified as

“moving, touching, and inspiring” by audiences?, (2) Who makes up the current U.S. audience for self-transcendent media content?, (3) What personality traits and viewer characteristics are associated with self-transcendent media consumption?, and (4) What prosocial and altruistic behaviors are associated with self-transcendent media consumption?

One note is warranted before the results are discussed: Because this is a new area of mass communication research (with limited existing theoretical and empirical evidence), and given the correlational nature of a survey, attempts have been made to avoid an “over-interpretation” of the data. To that end, a few noteworthy findings are highlighted and discussed below. The aim of this section is to situate what is being learned about the audiences for and experiences with self-transcendent media in a broader disciplinary context, with potential avenues of new research identified.

With regard to sources of self-transcendent media messages, music and movies were reported to be the most common sources of self-transcendence across the sample. This is perhaps unsurprising since retailers, content providers, and other marketers routinely use the term “inspirational” to describe both music and movies, almost as if it was a genre unto itself. Online videos and social media sites were among the least common sources of self-transcendence. Given the seeming ubiquity of viral videos in the culture, this might be surprising to some; but in reality, this finding reflects the age representativeness of the sample. In fact, among the youngest participants (ages 18-29; i.e., “digital natives”), the online sources were indeed quite prominent suppliers of self-transcendence, with online videos ranking third overall for that demographic, ahead of books and television.

As “traditional” forms of media continue to converge with “newer/emerging” ones— moreover, as all audiences more fully embrace the “anytime-anywhere” mobility of media

content—it is likely that these channel distinctions will become increasingly insignificant. But, for now, these data point to differences in the forms and formats for self-transcendent messages being consumed, as well as the social and physical contexts in which audiences encounter them. It seems reasonable to expect that such differences may be reflected in the elicitation, experience, and (possible) effects of the resulting self-transcendent emotions. For instance, does the feeling of elevation triggered by a song lead to the same effects—both in terms of intensity and duration—as a film? If so, do different effects on well-being and altruistic motivation follow? Does the experience of self-transcendence “build” differently between fictional and nonfictional or narrative and non-narrative messages? Can a moving YouTube video viewed on a bus have the same psychological and social impact as one viewed at home? These few questions (and the countless others that could be posed) highlight the need for research into the naturally occurring, daily consumption of self-transcendent media content.

As one might have anticipated, the specific content reported to be responsible for self-transcendent emotional experiences tended to be “serious” in nature: dramatic and documentary films and television programs, nonfiction books, current events programming on radio, news stories and online videos depicting human suffering and tragedy. These findings mirror past studies linking eudaimonic motivations and meaning to specific types of content (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011). What remains understudied are the specific portrayals contained in those contents that might lead to transcendence-related experiences, though one recent content-analytic approach examining 20 known elicitors of self-transcendent emotions found in “inspirational” YouTube videos shows much promise (Dale, Raney, Janicke, Sanders, & Oliver, 2017).

In terms of the audience for inspiring content, it is clear that females are significantly more likely to report experiencing self-transcendence through media than are men; this was the

case for every medium except radio. Unsurprisingly, women were also significantly more likely to report being touched or moved by all eight media sources, with men more likely to report inspiration from just a few or from no sources at all. These findings are in line with past research on gender differences in content-relevant factors like empathy (e.g., Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983), need for affect (e.g., Maio & Esses, 2001), and religiosity (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975), as well as in response to different types of media entertainment (e.g., females preferring sad films more than males; see Oliver, 2000 for a summary). However, this is the first study to witness such a difference with inspiring media messages. Further studies are needed to examine the extent to which these differences in exposure may contribute to observed gender variance in related outcomes, such as reported spiritual well-being (Hammermeister, Flint, El-Alayli, Ridnour, & Peterson, 2005).

Less attention has been paid by scholars to differences in the appeal of various media by ethnicity (with a few studies on children's media being notable exceptions; e.g., O'Connor, Brooks-Gunn, & Graber, 2000). Our survey revealed (relatively) lower frequencies for inspiration from television shows and news stories among the Hispanic participants; this is in contrast to high levels of inspiration from social media among the same group. These findings may well reflect native language- and availability-based media preferences; further investigation of this phenomenon is warranted. Overall, African American respondents were the most likely to report finding inspiration from all eight media sources, with particularly high frequencies for television- and radio-based experiences. In contrast, White respondents tended to be inspired by only a few sources. It is possible that these findings reflect previously noted differences in the importance that African Americans and Whites place on spirituality in their daily lives (Johnson, Elbert-Avila, & Tulksy, 2005; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 2007), perhaps manifest in a greater

openness to seeking out self-transcendent media experiences (see Oliver et al., in press, for a summary on the possible relationship between spirituality and self-transcendent media). This may prove to be an interesting area for future study.

Only a few studies have previously examined the appeal of meaningful media across the age spectrum, reporting that motivation to consume (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011) and meaningful experiences with (e.g., Hofer, Alemand, & Martin, 2014) eudaimonic content (broadly defined) generally increase with age. The current findings paint a much more complex picture, as great variance in exposure was observed among persons at different ages. As mentioned above, younger participants tended to report being moved more often by online sources (as well as music), especially compared to their 60-years-and-older counterparts. In fact, persons 18-29 were most likely to be inspired by all media sources, with the 60+ group being the most likely to be inspired by just a few sources. Interestingly, the two groups were similar with regard to radio: both reported much less inspiration than 30-59 year old participants. Three age-based linear relationships were found: inspiration from television increased with age, while inspiration from online videos and social media decreased with age. Only one medium proved to be equally inspirational to all ages: books. Thus, the relationship between age and self-transcendent media content seems to be quite source dependent and more complex than originally thought. However, it is not clear whether these differences are primarily explained by variance in adoption/usage patterns or by (possible) differences in the nature of inspiring content available across medium platforms, which may appeal to different age groups in distinct ways.

Few previous studies have examined the relationship between education level and meaningful media content (e.g., Bartsch, 2012), with no discernible pattern of results emerging. In the current study, text-based sources—news stories and books—were increasingly reported as

inspirational as educational attainment rose, though, to be fair, the likelihood to read *any* news (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2016a) or books (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2016b) also generally increases with education. However, persons without a high school diploma reported the lowest levels for inspiration across most media, particularly with movies, online videos, and social media (which may reflect issues related to income-based access); similarly, this group was the least likely to be inspired by all forms of media and the most likely to be inspired by just a few. In the same general domain as this study, the relationship between education and general religiosity/spirituality has come under greater scrutiny in recent years (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2017; Schwadel, 2011); the current findings suggest that related scholarly attention may be deserved for the role of self-transcendent media in the religious/spiritual—as well as the daily, secular—lives of people at different levels of educational attainment.

Fewer differences were found based on marital status and life satisfaction. Single persons and those most satisfied with their lives generally reported being moved by more media than married people and those less satisfied, though the less-satisfied group reported more frequent inspiration from movies. It is possible that these findings reflect differences in the use of media to improve self-perceptions (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) or mood states (e.g., Zillmann, 1988); these phenomena warrant more attention in the future.

Beyond creating a profile of inspiring media sources and audiences, we also sought to explore personality traits that might predict related experiences. After controlling for the significant explanatory power of several demographic characteristics, it was found that trait need for affect, empathic concern, and universality all significantly predicted the number of outlets from which a person had received inspiration. This is not unexpected. As alluded to above, previous research (Oliver & Raney, 2011) has found that at least need for affect is also

associated with meaningful (or eudaimonically motivated) media experiences. What remains to be seen is how distinct self-transcendent media experiences—as conceptualized herein with specific regard to transcendence-related emotions and prosocial outcomes (see also, Oliver et al., in press)—may be from those (perhaps more general) meaningful ones. More research is needed to make that determination. One point of possible distinction may be found along the lines of those prosocial outcomes and accompanying others-oriented perspectives. As Table 6 indicates, universality was the strongest of the three predictors of inspiring media experiences. The two items constituting that variable—“On a higher level, all of us share a common bond,” and “On some level, my life is intimately tied to all humankind”—reflect well that outward/others orientation and the associated transcendence-related emotional experiences described earlier. Again, more work is needed to better understand these (possible) differences across media experiences.

Furthermore, while it was encouraging to find that those three traits predicted inspiring media experiences, the reality is that the full model only explained 15% of the total variance in the construct. One explanation for this is that those media experiences are indeed very diverse. While a nationally representative sample is quite helpful in painting a broad-brushstroke picture of this phenomenon, in truth, additional, more fine-grained studies of particular media content and experiences are necessary to gain a fuller perspective on how personality traits influence selection of and responses to inspiring media content. Subsequent research should further examine these, as well as other related, personality traits.

Finally, the extent to which inspirational media experiences predicted self-reported acts of prosociality and altruism was also examined. According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001; 2009), all emotions prepare humans to act. Negative emotions, such as

anxiety or anger, narrow thought-action repertoires for quick actions that promote survival. Positive emotions—especially those associated with transcendence and inspirational media experiences—broaden thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), building personal resources and leading to the exploration of and engagement with one's environment. That is, self-transcendent emotions draw individuals out of themselves, their perspectives are broadened, and their attention turns to others. Thus, one would expect that greater exposure to self-transcendent media would be associated with greater prosocial and altruistic behaviors. This is precisely what the survey revealed. After controlling for the influence of numerous demographic characteristics, it was found that more varied inspirational media encounters significantly predicted prosocial and altruistic behaviors (as did need for affect, empathic concern, and universality). These findings are also encouraging. Of course, the observed relationships are correlational (i.e., not causal) in nature; and it is acknowledged that the aforementioned universality trait was the strongest predictor of the prosocial behaviors (see Table 7). However, the inspiring media experiences variable was the next strongest predictor. One might (cautiously) interpret these results as an initial, large-scale validation of the broaden-and-build theory in action in daily social life. Additional studies are encouraged.

In closing, these are still the early days in our understanding of how media can be used to promote psychological and personal well-being and flourishing. This first attempt to profile the self-transcendent media landscape and its audiences can further illuminate the ways that people are actually utilizing media for life- and others-affirming purposes on a daily basis. It is clear that those uses are varied across the U.S. population and across the media spectrum; similar studies in other cultural contexts are encouraged. Teasing out that variance over the next several years will

not only help to better understand the media and its audiences, but how both can be positive forces for change in the world.

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Table 1.
Demographic Information for Sample (n = 3,006)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	1,452	48.3
Female	1,554	51.7
Ethnicity		
White	1,950	64.9
Black	352	11.7
Hispanic	465	15.5
Other	239	7.9
Marital Status		
Single*	1,490	48.9
Married	1,470	49.7
Age		
18-29 years	645	21.5
30-44 years	753	25.1
45-59 years	801	26.7
60 years and older	806	26.8
Educational Attainment		
Less than a high school diploma	368	12.2
High school Diploma or equivalent	889	29.6
Some college	811	27.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	937	31.2
Life satisfaction		
Highest quartile scores	1,017	33.9
Lowest quartile scores	716	23.8

* The "single" category included respondents who were never married, who were divorced or separated, who were widowed, and who were living with someone else.

Table 2.

Audience Profile for Inspiring Media Experiences by Gender, Ethnicity, and Marital Status

Have you ever felt moved, touched or inspired while ...?	Response	Gender		Ethnicity			Marital Status	
		Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Single	Married
Listening to music	Yes (90.5)	88.5	92.9	90.8	92.9	89.7	92.7	89.1
	No (9.5)	11.5	7.1	9.2	7.1	10.3	7.3	10.9
Watching a movie	Yes (86.9)	85.2	89.6	87.2	87.7	87.9	87.9	86.9
	No (13.1)	14.8	10.4	12.8	12.3	12.1	12.1	13.1
Watching a TV show	Yes (80.2)	76.8	84.2	79.9	86.3	77.8	81.0	80.3
	No (19.8)	23.2	15.3	20.1	13.7	22.2	19.0	19.7
Reading a news story	Yes (77.6)	72.1	83.5	78.7	79.5	73.5	79.2	76.7
	No (22.4)	27.9	16.5	21.3	20.5	26.5	20.8	23.3
Reading a book	Yes (74.7)	68.7	81.5	75.4	77.3	73.7	76.1	74.9
	No (25.3)	31.3	18.5	24.6	22.7	26.3	23.9	25.1
Watching an online video	Yes (62.7)	59.7	67.1	61.9	65.0	66.7	65.2	61.4
	No (37.3)	40.3	32.9	38.1	35.0	33.3	34.8	38.6
Listening to a radio program or podcast	Yes (58.9)	57.8	60.8	57.2	70.7	62.7	58.9	60.3
	No (41.1)	42.2	39.2	42.2	29.3	37.3	41.1	39.7
Using social media	Yes (53.0)	43.8	62.9	52.3	56.0	59.9	55.6	51.9
	No (47.0)	56.2	37.1	47.7	44.0	40.1	44.4	48.1

Note. Shading indicates statistical significance within a category.

Significance tests for Gender: Cramer’s $V_{\text{Music}} = .076, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Movie}} = .068, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{TV}} = .094, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{News}} = .139, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Book}} = .149, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{OnlineVideo}} = .077, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .191, p < .001$

Significance tests for Ethnicity: Cramer’s $V_{\text{TV}} = .060, p < .01$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{News}} = .048, p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Radio}} = .094, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .058, p < .05$

Significance tests for Marital Status: Cramer’s $V_{\text{Music}} = .064, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{OnlineVideo}} = .039, p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .037, p < .05$

Table 3.

Audience Profile for Inspiring Media Experiences by Age, Educational Attainment, and Life Satisfaction

	Response	Age				Educational attainment				Life satisfaction ¹	
		18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	< HS	HS/ GED	Some College	BA+	High	Low
Have you ever felt moved, touched or inspired while ...?	Yes (90.5)	94.6	90.2	92.1	87.1	90.2	91.3	92.0	89.6	90.6	91.2
	No (9.5)	5.4	9.8	7.9	12.9	9.8	8.7	8.0	10.4	9.4	8.8
Listening to music	Yes (86.9)	88.0	87.7	89.6	84.7	81.9	86.9	89.9	88.2	83.2	90.2
	No (13.1)	12.0	12.3	10.4	15.3	18.1	13.1	10.1	11.8	16.8	9.8
Watching a movie	Yes (80.2)	77.2	78.7	82.8	83.0	82.1	79.7	83.2	78.7	80.3	79.2
	No (19.8)	22.8	21.3	17.2	17.0	17.9	20.3	16.8	21.3	19.7	20.8
Watching a TV show	Yes (77.6)	75.8	81.4	75.9	78.8	67.6	76.7	79.2	82.4	78.2	72.7
	No (22.4)	24.2	18.6	24.1	21.2	32.4	23.3	20.8	17.6	21.8	26.2
Reading a news story	Yes (74.7)	78.5	76.5	72.9	74.2	62.3	71.2	76.7	83.3	74.9	74.3
	No (25.3)	21.5	23.5	27.1	25.8	37.7	28.8	23.3	16.7	25.1	25.7
Reading a book	Yes (62.7)	79.5	72.3	60.5	45.3	56.8	57.7	70.6	65.5	64.2	65.1
	No (37.3)	20.5	27.7	39.5	54.7	43.2	42.3	29.4	34.5	35.8	34.9
Watching an online video	Yes (58.9)	54.5	64.3	62.8	55.2	60.9	56.1	61.5	60.1	57.9	60.7
	No (41.1)	45.5	35.7	37.2	44.8	39.1	43.9	38.5	39.9	42.1	40.2
Listening to a radio program or podcast	Yes (53.0)	67.3	62.7	52.4	35.5	44.8	56.2	56.4	52.5	58.3	52.9
	No (47.0)	32.7	37.3	47.6	64.5	55.2	43.8	43.6	47.5	41.7	47.1

¹High and low life satisfaction categories represent top (23.8%, $n = 716$; $M = 4.59$; $SD = .298$) and bottom (24.0%; $n = 721$; $M = 2.67$, $SD = .405$) quartiles.

Note. Shading indicates statistical significance within a category.

Significance tests for Age: Cramer’s $V_{\text{Music}} = .094$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Movie}} = .055$, $p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{TV}} = .063$, $p < .01$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{News}} = .056$, $p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{OnlineVideo}} = .267$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Radio}} = .089$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .244$, $p < .001$

Significance tests for Education Level: Cramer’s $V_{\text{Movie}} = .071$, $p < .01$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{News}} = .108$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{Book}} = .157$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{OnlineVideo}} = .114$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .075$, $p < .001$

Significance tests for Life Satisfaction: Cramer’s $V_{\text{Movie}} = .104$, $p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{News}} = .064$, $p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{\text{SocialMedia}} = .054$, $p < .05$

Table 4.

Percentages of Key Demographic Variables for Respondents Inspired by All, Few, or No Media

	Gender		Ethnicity			Marital Status	
	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Single	Married
Inspired by all media (26.4)	20.2	32.2	25.2	31.8	27.2	27.3	25.8
Inspired by few media (20.2)	26.2	14.6	21.6	16.2	18.6	21.0	19.4
Inspired by no media (2.7)	3.7	1.7	2.4	2.8	3.2	2.6	2.9

Note. Shading indicates statistical significance within a category.

Significance tests for Gender: Cramer’s $V_{All} = .136, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{Few} = .145, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{None} = .064, p < .001$

Significance tests for Ethnicity: Cramer’s $V_{All} = .050, p < .05$; Cramer’s $V_{Few} = .049, p < .05$

Table 5.

Percentages of Key Demographic Variables for Respondents Inspired by All, Few, or No Media

	Age				Educational attainment				Life satisfaction ¹	
	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	< HS	HS/ GED	Some College	BA+	High	Low
Inspired by all media (26.4)	31.2	35.4	24.9	15.9	16.9	25.5	30.1	27.9	28.7	25.9
Inspired by few media (20.2)	17.5	16.4	18.9	27.2	29.4	21.5	17.6	17.6	19.9	21.2
Inspired by no media (2.7)	1.7	3.2	2.6	3.0	2.2	3.3	2.3	2.6	3.8	2.5

¹High and low life satisfaction categories represent top (23.8%, $n = 716$; $M = 4.59$; $SD = .298$) and bottom (24.0%; $n = 721$; $M = 2.67$, $SD = .405$) quartiles.

Note. Shading indicates statistical significance within a category.

Significance tests for Age: Cramer’s $V_{All} = .169, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{Few} = .108, p < .001$

Significance tests for Educational Level: Cramer’s $V_{All} = .090, p < .001$; Cramer’s $V_{Few} = .095, p < .001$

Table 6.
Predictors of Inspiring Media Experiences

		β	R^2/R^2 Change	F/F Change
Step 1 ^a	Gender	.17***	.050	52.14 _{3,2969} ***
	Age	-.13***		
	Marital Status	.00		
Step 2 ^b	Education		.010	10.97 _{3,2966} ***
	HS/GRE	.06**		
	Some College	.13***		
Step 3 ^c	BA+	.13***	.002	1.97 _{4,2962}
	Ethnicity			
	White	.03		
	Black	.07		
Step 4	Hispanic	.01	.086	74.82 _{4,2958} ***
	Multi-Racial	.02		
	Traits			
	Need for Affect	.11***		
	Empathic Concern	.12***		
	Perspective Taking	.02		
	Universality	.16***		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Model $F(14, 2958) = 37.01, R^2 = .15, p < .001$

^aGender was coded as males = 1, females=2. Marital status was coded as 0 = not married, 1 = married.

^bThe omitted reference category for education was less than a high school diploma.

^cThe omitted reference category for ethnicity was “other” ethnicity.

Table 7.
Predictors of Prosocial Behaviors

		β	R^2/R^2 Change	F/F Change
Step 1 ^a	Gender	.08***	.020	22.82 _{3,2969} ***
	Age	-.12***		
	Marital Status	.00		
Step 2 ^b	Education		.003	2.55 _{3,2966}
	HS/GRE	-.05		
	Some College	-.00		
	BA+	-.01		
Step 3 ^c	Ethnicity		.003	2.00 _{4,2962}
	White	.04		
	Black	.08*		
	Hispanic	.03		
	Multi-Racial	.02		
Step 4	Traits		.077	51.20 _{5,2957} ***
	Need for Affect	.05*		
	Empathic Concern	.06**		
	Perspective Taking	-.01		
	Universality	.19***		
	Inspiring Media	.09***		
	Experiences			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Model $F(15, 2957) = 15.75, R^2 = .11, p < .001$

^aGender was coded as males = 1, females=2. Marital status was coded as 0 = not married, 1 = married.

^bThe omitted reference category for education was less than a high school diploma.

^cThe omitted reference category for ethnicity was “other” ethnicity.