

17

Eudaimonia as Media Effect

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In the first edition of this volume, Zillmann and Bryant (1994) offered one of the earliest overviews of the burgeoning field of entertainment theory. In “Entertainment as Media Effect,” the scholars both summarized what was then known about the entertainment experience and further validated—even elevated—the exploration of media enjoyment as a pursuit worthy of intellectual energy. Since then, numerous studies have added to our understanding of how and why we consume media entertainment (see Chapter 21 in this volume). Overwhelmingly, this research has assumed and explored the *hedonic motivations* for selecting entertainment and *enjoyment* as the outcome of doing so.

In the past decade, though, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to responses to and outcomes of the entertainment experience that move beyond “mere pleasure” to those involving the pursuit of meaningfulness, connectedness, and well-being. Such experiences often arise from encounters with content such as moving cinema, inspirational viral videos, poignant novels, and touching songs. Increasingly, researchers refer to this work as “positive media psychology.” In this chapter, we aim to follow in Zillmann and Bryant’s (1994) footsteps to offer a snapshot of this emerging area, with particular emphasis on *eudaimonia*¹ as a media effect.

To that end, we begin with a brief overview of the research area. We then focus on variables that predict emotional and cognitive components of, and outcomes associated with, eudaimonic media experiences. Next, we identify various moderators of those experiences, before concluding with a discussion of avenues for future research.

Beyond Pleasure: Eudaimonic Motivations and Appreciation

Scholarly interest in eudaimonic entertainment experiences has its roots in attempts to resolve the “paradox” of “enjoying” media content that, on its face, does not appear to be “enjoyable.” For example, sad or tear-jerker films clearly gratify audience members (e.g., Oliver, 1993), but they appear to do so without the positively valenced affect typically associated with enjoyment (see affective disposition theory; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Similarly, somber songs hold a particular appeal for individuals who are feeling blue or melancholic already (e.g., Gibson, Aust, & Zillmann, 2000), a phenomenon seemingly in contrast to the well-supported predictions of mood management theory (e.g., Zillmann, 2000).

To address this “paradox,” some scholars hailed the functional benefits that such experiences might provide for audiences, including the opportunity to “purge” negative emotions (i.e., catharsis; Cornelius, 1997), participate in downward social comparisons (Mares & Cantor, 1992; see also Festinger, 1954), or acquire information that may assist with resolving or coping with distressing circumstances in the future (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006). Other scholars approached the “problem” by reconceptualizing enjoyment to better capture the breadth of audience responses, including a focus on intrinsic need satisfaction (Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010), the importance of meta-emotions in media reception (Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Reinhold, 2008), and considering entertainment as a form of “play” (Vorderer, 2001). Regardless of the explanation, though, the assumption that users and viewers are primarily motivated to consume entertainment for hedonic reasons remained generally unchallenged.

In contrast, we proposed that individuals are, in fact, intrinsically motivated to consume entertainment for reasons other than pleasure (Oliver & Raney, 2011). We thought it important to acknowledge and explore ways that media users intentionally consume content to encounter meaningful and poignant portrayals of the human condition, providing fodder for grappling with questions of life purpose and meaning. We joined scholars who made similar pleasure-meaning distinctions in other contexts. For example, Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff (2002) distinguished between subjective and psychological well-being, in which the former is associated with feelings of positive affect and the latter with feelings of personal growth and meaning in life. Similarly, Waterman (1993) differentiated two types of happiness: hedonic happiness conceptualized in terms of pleasure, and eudaimonia conceptualized in terms of personal expressiveness, self-realization, and personal development. Extending this thinking to media selection, we argued that meaningfulness-seeking (i.e., eudaimonic motivations) and pleasure-seeking (i.e., hedonic motivations) represented distinct dimensions of media selection, with the former “reflect[ing] an emphasis on ... the gratification of greater insight concerning the human condition” (Oliver & Raney, 2011, p. 988). Findings from four studies were offered in support of this claim, which together showed that hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for consuming entertainment were distinct, common, invariant across gender, and consistent across the life span.

Using the same reasoning, we also argued that the pleasure-centric term *enjoyment* was extremely limited when applied to eudaimonic entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). As an alternative, we offered the term *appreciation* “to help account for the domain of more serious, poignant, and pensive media experiences and gratifications” (p. 54).² In a series of studies, we demonstrated the close relationship between enjoyment and hedonistic responses (e.g., fun, good time) to various films and film genres, as well as the relationship between appreciation and meaningful responses (e.g., moving, thought provoking). As expected, enjoyment ratings were higher for light-hearted and comedic films, whereas appreciation was higher for somber fare (particularly dramas). Appreciation was also strongly related to perceptions of artistic quality and lasting impression on the viewer, as well as to various eudaimonic concerns.

Importantly, enjoyment and appreciation have not been conceptualized as mutually exclusive or as opposite ends of a continuum, but rather as orthogonal outcomes of entertainment reception. As a result, the experiences are not confined to a specific genre or type of media content. For instance, although participants in our earlier studies rated action films lower in appreciation and higher in enjoyment than dramas, they still appreciated the action films and enjoyed the dramas to some degree (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Thus, appreciation and enjoyment can (and regularly do) co-occur in entertainment experiences. Because of this, it is difficult to speak of eudaimonic media *content* in absolute terms.

Without a doubt, some media messages are more likely to promote reflection on the human condition and life's meaning than are others. But, even the most light-hearted fare often includes meaningful content—such as depictions of love, hope, or kindness—which can trigger eudaimonic reactions and appreciation. Thus, we find it more useful to speak of eudaimonic media *experiences*. Such experiences can be thought of as arising from an interaction between content and user. For instance, when some insight into the human condition is symbolically encoded in a television sitcom, audience members may engage with and appreciate that insight. Alternatively, they may find the insight too complex, confusing, or painful to process in situ, perhaps storing the scene in memory to engage (and appreciate) at a later time. Or they may find the “insight” boring, overly sentimental, emotionally manipulative, or simply out of place, thereby rejecting without appreciating—or perhaps even enjoying—the message. Thus, eudaimonic media experiences require some level of effortful interaction with an element of the content on the part of the audience member, similar to a “reflective” response to a piece of artwork, which is characterized as a slower, more deliberative, and interpretive process (as opposed to a “reactive” response, which tends to be immediate, arousing, and pleasure-centric; see Cupchik, 1995). Recent dual-processing models of entertainment also reflect this perspective (e.g., Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2014).

Predictors of Eudaimonic Media Experiences

Meaningful media experiences can emerge from a host of genres, portrayals, and media formats. Moreover, media audiences are heterogeneous, varying by demographic characteristics, life experiences, and traits. As such, it is important to recognize that not all individuals prefer or seek out meaningful content.

Trait Predictors

Our initial research differentiating hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for media consumption employed a number of trait-like measures in establishing the validity of our measures (Oliver & Raney, 2011). For example, higher levels of reflectiveness, need for cognition, searching for meaning in life, and need for affect were positively associated with eudaimonic motivations for entertainment consumption. In contrast, hedonic motivations were associated with higher levels of optimism, playfulness, and humor. These results parallel additional research showing that liking of sad films and melancholy music is associated with higher levels of empathy (Kawakami & Katahira, 2015; Oliver, 1993). Similar research also has shown that more stable dispositions are associated with *actively selecting* meaningful content. Specifically, Oliver et al. (2017) assessed individuals' selections of and time spent viewing short YouTube-style videos. Higher levels of empathy and lower levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy were associated with greater viewing of the meaningful videos but were unrelated to viewing of humorous or informative videos.

State Predictors

Whereas prior research leaves little doubt that some individuals simply prefer meaningful media more than do others, evidence also highlights the importance of within-individual differences. For example, although a person may have a tendency to seek out more eudaimonic than hedonic films in general, there may be times when that same person has an appetite for more

comedic or less contemplative content. Perhaps the most commonly studied state-like variable is an individual's mood or affective state. In this regard, a considerable amount of research suggests that people in more somber or negative states, at times, appear to have a preference for sad or tragic entertainment (again, which may seem at odds with mood-management considerations; Zillmann, 2000). These preferences have been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, including the selection of movie rentals (Strizhakova & Krmar, 2007) and preference for sad or mournful music (Gibson et al., 2000). However, Oliver (2008) suggested that these types of preferences may not reflect the idea that “sad” people prefer “sad” entertainment, but rather that feelings of tenderness or compassion (often accompanied by sad affect) give rise to interest in entertainment that is meaningful or poignant. Such an interpretation is echoed in similar research regarding the role of mortality salience on entertainment preferences. In particular, Khoo (2017) reported that individuals who had been tasked with thinking about the personal implications of their own deaths reported a greater interest in viewing sad or tragic films over comedic offerings. Khoo interpreted such findings as reflecting “a desire for self-knowledge through entertainment” (p. 744).

Components of Eudaimonic Media Experiences

Eudaimonic media experiences are characterized by numerous affective and cognitive components, many of which can simultaneously be thought of as *responses to* and *effects of* the content. In a broader discussion of media effects, Valkenburg and Peter (2013) acknowledge this as a reality, noting that “media effects themselves can be the cause of other media effects” (i.e., second-order effects; p. 224); Reinecke and Oliver (2017) applied the tags “short-term” versus “long-term” effects to make a similar distinction. Because of this, we discuss responses to and effects directly arising from media use together below. In a subsequent section, we differentiate those experience-related components from second-order/long-term media effects (or outcomes), which the former facilitate and which only arise after the experience.

Affective Components

Affect plays a crucial role in motivating and describing eudaimonic media experiences. Initial studies of meaningful media often focused solely on negatively valenced reactions, such as sadness or grief. But scholars now acknowledge that such experiences involve *mixed affect*, or the complex co-occurrence of both positive and negative emotions (Slater, Oliver, & Appel, 2016). For example, in an early study, viewers reported feeling both happy and sad at the conclusion of the film *Life is Beautiful* (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001). Often such mixed-affective experiences with media are characterized as meaningful, touching, moving, tender, poignant, or even nostalgic (e.g., Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008; Oliver, 2008; Sedikides, Wildschut, & Baden, 2004). Regardless of the descriptor, several studies indicate that moral considerations and depictions instigate these responses (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2011; Oliver et al., 2018). As a result, mixed-affective responses to eudaimonic media often involve moral emotions (see Haidt, 2003); we highlight a few of the more prominent ones found in the research.

Empathy

One key affective component of eudaimonic entertainment experiences is the moral emotion of empathy, an “other-oriented emotional response congruent with another’s perceived welfare”

(Batson et al., 1997, p. 105). Empathy can be elicited by the observation of a real or fictional person in need. It motivates individuals to shift their focus of attention from their own ego-centric concern to the needs of others, such that the well-being of others becomes a priority in both their thinking (empathic perspective taking) and action (prosocial behavior). For example, feelings of empathy elicited by moving stories have been found to result in positive effects on attitudes and behavioral intentions towards stigmatized social groups such as immigrants, prisoners, elderly persons, or persons with mental or physical disabilities (Bartsch, Oliver, Nitsch, & Scherr, 2018; Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012). Moreover, empathic feelings were associated with heightened interest and information seeking about the target group (Bartsch et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2012).

Elevation

Elevation is a self-transcendent emotion triggered by witnessing moral beauty, virtue, and humanity's better nature, such as acts of selflessness, love, kindness, and generosity (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003); the experience is often described as uplifting, moving, and warm. Elevation is associated with heightened motivation to do good for others or to be a better person (Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). Numerous types of media content have been shown to elicit elevation, including news stories highlighting selflessness in the face of tragedy (e.g., Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011), inspiring clips from television programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (e.g., Schnall et al., 2010), and various film depictions (e.g., Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). The experience of elevation through media seems to have particular impacts on one's sense of connectedness to others, including feelings of closeness and perceived goodness of humanity (Haidt, 2003), an openness to other people in general (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), greater feelings of optimism about humanity (Schnall et al., 2010), and more favorable attitudes about diverse others (Oliver et al., 2012).

Hope

Hope is the belief that things can change for the better, whether in our own lives, in the lives of others, or for the world (Fredrickson, 2009). Circumstances that appear to be less favorable than desired can give rise to hope, providing one with the sense that the circumstances can (and will) improve. Hope motivates commitment and action toward goals and other desired outcomes. Persuasive media messages that evoke hope have been found to influence health, energy, and environmental behaviors and policy support (e.g., Arpan, Xu, Raney, Chen, & Wang, 2018; Nabi & Prestin, 2016). Little work has been conducted on hope and entertainment, though content analyses reveal a great deal of hope-related elicitors (e.g., overcoming obstacles, demonstrating perseverance) in films and television programs (e.g., Dale et al., 2017a), social media (e.g., Rieger & Klimmt, 2019), and online videos (e.g., Dale, Raney, Janicke, Sanders, & Oliver, 2017b). In one of the first examinations of hope and entertainment, Prestin (2013) demonstrated that narratives featuring an "underdog" character can promote feelings of hope and increase motivation to pursue one's own life goals.

Awe

Awe is the amazement elicited by a perceptually vast stimulus, which exceeds one's ordinary frame of reference or experience in some domain (e.g., size, power, perfection; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe can be elicited by literal vastness (e.g., natural landscapes), symbolic vastness (e.g., personal transitions like childbirth), and even *perceptions* of vastness (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008). Awe-inspiring news stories are

more likely to be shared with other people (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Furthermore, awe has been proposed as a key component of meaningful experiences during video game play (Possler, Klimmt, & Raney, 2018). In particular, advanced visual gaming technologies (e.g., augmented reality, virtual reality, 3D, 360° perspectives) are thought to increase a player's sense of presence leading to deep immersion in the game world, thereby bringing the vast elements of that world experientially "closer" to the player, triggering awe. However, even slow-motion footage (e.g., colored drops of liquid falling into milk) and video montages of threatening natural phenomena (e.g., volcanoes) have been shown to elicit awe (Piff et al., 2015).

Cognitive Components

Eudaimonic entertainment experiences are also linked to a distinctive pattern of cognitive responses. In contrast to hedonic entertainment experiences that are positive, absorbing, and tending to divert attention away from everyday concerns, eudaimonic entertainment experiences are characterized by serious contemplation of painful, complex, and challenging aspects of the human condition.

Meaning-Making

The content of eudaimonic entertainment often deviates from the just-world scenario of hedonic entertainment fare, where conflicts and problems raised in the narrative are resolved in accord with the viewer's sympathies and moral judgments (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Audiences' seemingly paradoxical attraction to entertainment dealing with unjust negative events and hardships of the human condition can be understood within the context of psychological research on the processes by which individuals strive to make meaning out of negative experiences (Anderson, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2013; Park, 2010). According to this literature, a need for meaning-making is aroused by negative events that violate an individual's belief in a just world, where bad things don't happen to good people (including the self). In some cases, the cognitive dissonance resulting from unjust negative events is easily resolved by focusing on good things that later happen to the same person, such that the negative event is "balanced out" by a happy ending. In the absence of material compensation, however, the process of dissonance reduction tends to focus on compensation by immaterial rewards such as deeper insight, social connection, and personal growth (Anderson, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2013). The concept of meaning-making through immaterial compensation bears a resemblance to typical themes and lessons observed by audiences of meaningful entertainment (Oliver & Hartmann, 2010), including the value and fleetingness of life and the importance of human virtues such as care, courage, love, and persistence that can help individuals to persevere in times of hardship, loss, and pain. Hence, in addition to challenging audiences' just world beliefs, eudaimonic entertainment also seems to address the need for meaning-making aroused by such content in that it focuses on human virtues, values, and loving relationships. To the extent that a story highlights the compensation of characters in terms of such immaterial rewards, audiences' engagement in the cognitive challenge of meaning-making may be facilitated and gratified.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation

Cognitive processes of reappraisal and meaning-making have also been described as an adaptive emotion regulation strategy (Gross, 2002). In research on emotion regulation and well-being,

individuals' ability to reinterpret emotionally negative situations in more positive and meaningful ways has been found to promote emotional stability, relationship quality, and general well-being (Gross, 2002; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). In line with general research on the psychological function of meaning-making, studies of eudaimonic entertainment have found that, despite the initial experience of negative or mixed affect, such experiences ultimately contributed to individuals' well-being in more complex and sustainable ways. For example, eudaimonic entertainment has been linked to increased well-being in terms of mastery experiences and higher levels of vitality after media use (Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, & Bente, 2014). Moreover, Khoo and Graham-Engeland (2014) found that exposure to tragic drama was associated with increased cognitive processing, which in turn led to increases in emotional self-efficacy, self-compassion, and psychological well-being over time. These findings provided initial evidence that the cognitive challenges and meaning-making processes involved in eudaimonic entertainment experience might serve important functions for cognitive emotion regulation and psychological well-being.

Cognitive Challenge

Additional sources of cognitive challenge might arise from the processing of complex story lines and moral conflict. For example, Bartsch and Hartmann (2017) found that movies presenting viewers with cognitive challenges were rated higher on eudaimonic appreciation. In addition, the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME; Tamborini, 2013) assumes that eudaimonic entertainment often presents audiences with moral dilemmas, in which values from one domain of intuitive morality must be violated so that values from other domains can be upheld. In line with the assumption that moral dilemmas are both cognitively challenging and conducive to eudaimonic appreciation, Lewis et al. (2014) found that morally conflicted content took longer to process and that it was rated higher on appreciation than content that did not involve moral conflict.

Elaboration and Involvement

The notion of eudaimonic entertainment as a cognitively engaging experience is also compatible with research that has linked eudaimonic appreciation to a reflective and elaborate mode of information processing, whereas hedonic enjoyment has been linked to superficial, heuristic processing (e.g., Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Lewis et al., 2014). The phrase “dual-process model of entertainment”—which has come to be used as a synonym for the hedonic/eudaimonic framework—highlights the parallels of entertainment theory with dual-process models of cognitive information processing (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In line with dual process models of entertainment, an emerging line of evidence supports the assumption that eudaimonic entertainment can encourage processes of cognitive elaboration, attitude change, and information seeking about social and political issues (Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, & Kerbeykian, 2012).

Outcomes of Eudaimonic Media Experiences

Numerous outcomes (or second-order media effects) have been associated with eudaimonic media experiences; several of these are discussed below. To date, scholars have offered few phenomenon-specific models or theories to explain these effects (for a notable exception, see the

mediated wisdom of experience perspective; Slater et al., 2016). Instead, most studies rely on broader theories of media reception (e.g., MIME, as noted above; the TEBOTS model, see Chapter 12 in this volume) and basic human psychology (e.g., social cognitive theory, see Chapter 7 in this volume; broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson, 2001; various theories of emotion, see Chapter 11 in this volume) as explanatory mechanisms of the following outcomes.

Well-Being

As noted above, scholars generally differentiate between two types of well-being: subjective (or hedonic) and psychological (or eudaimonic). The impact of entertainment on the former is discussed in Chapter 21. Eudaimonic media experiences have been shown to promote numerous aspects of psychological well-being. For example, studies have observed post-media use increases in general life satisfaction (e.g., Janicke-Bowles, Dale, & Hendry, 2018), insight and intrinsic need satisfaction leading to personal growth (e.g., Oliver et al., 2016), self-affirmation and self-worth (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2013), self-actualization (e.g., Shao, 2009), and vitality (Rieger et al., 2014). Moreover, these well-being outcomes serve other beneficial purposes; for instance, eudaimonic media experiences can trigger nostalgic feelings (e.g., Furno-Lamude & Anderson, 1992), which have been shown to (among others) help diminish loneliness (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006) and buffer death anxiety (e.g., Juhl, Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2010). In fact, well-being outcomes have been shown to have wide application and benefit across different life contexts, including social relationships, work-home balance, spirituality, politics, and health. In the interest of space herein, we recommend Reinecke and Oliver (2017) as an excellent volume exploring the many facets of media and well-being.

Connectedness and Social Perceptions

One important outcome associated with viewing meaningful, inspiring, or self-transcendent media pertains to how it affects our perceptions of and interactions with others. In this regard, research generally supports the idea that when exposure to eudaimonic media elicits elevation, individuals report more favorable perceptions of other people, with intensified feelings of connection. For example, Zickfeld et al. (2019) introduced the concept of *kama muta* to refer to feeling moved or touched in response to witnessing the display of love or communal relationships. In validating a measure of the concept across 19 countries, the authors reported that individual viewing or writing about moving content reported higher levels of various feelings, including the motivation to hug or to express love towards another person. In their study, feeling connected to others was operationalized in terms of a specific relationship. However, additional research has suggested that feelings of connection transcend perceptions of any single person and are frequently felt toward humankind overall. For example, Aquino et al. (2011) demonstrated that reading an inspiring news story about the generosity of an Amish community after a mass shooting resulted in more favorable views of humanity (e.g., “There is still some good in the world,” “The world is full of kindness and generosity,” p. 706).

Some scholars have noted that general feelings of connectedness with humanity may have important implications on feelings toward specific others who may be oppressed or stigmatized. For example, Oliver et al. (2015) reasoned that feelings of connection with humans per se should include feelings of connection with diverse cultural and ethnic groups, a finding supported among the white participants in their research. Researchers have reported similar

findings with regard to perceptions of people with physical disabilities (Bartsch et al., 2018) and to perceptions of gay men (Lai, Haidt, & Nosek, 2014).

Prosocial Behaviors

Decades of research on children's television use clearly has shown that exposure to mediated prosocial behaviors can increase their adoption by young viewers (e.g., Mares & Woodard, 2005). For adults, though, the picture is more complicated. Past research shows that many of the factors that predict prosocial behaviors are associated with an attraction to eudaimonic media experiences: empathy, religiosity, spirituality, as well as positive, moral, and self-transcendent affect, to name a few. Thus, isolating the relative influence of eudaimonia as a media effect on, for instance, altruism is difficult, especially since traits, exposure, and prosociality are all thought to symbiotically contribute to an upward spiral of human flourishing (e.g., trait empathy leads to positive media exposure, which promotes prosociality, leading to trait empathy development; see broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2001).

The emotional components of eudaimonic media experiences—feeling elevated, hopeful, in awe, empathic, etc.—are all associated with increased prosocial motivations and actions (e.g., Pohling & Diessner, 2016; Stellar et al., 2017). Moreover, viewing touching films has been shown to increase a viewer's desires to be a better person and to do good things for others (e.g., Oliver et al., 2012). Viewers of inspiring YouTube videos reported a greater intention to share them (as opposed to funny ones) with other people (Clayton et al., 2018). In a nationally representative survey of American adults, Raney et al. (2018) found that those who reported being inspired by more media content were the most likely to self-report prosocial and altruistic behaviors, even after controlling for a variety of demographic characteristics. Finally, in a series of studies, participants reported greater intention to help (Study 1) and devoted more time to actually helping (Study 2) a researcher following exposure to elevating television content (Schnall et al., 2010); similar findings were recently reported with elevating online videos (Zhao, 2018).

Political Engagement

Research on eudaimonic entertainment has also offered a new perspective on the controversial relationship between entertainment and political communication. Can entertaining forms of political communication be useful to reach audience groups who are less interested in politics, or do they rather distract audiences from serious consideration of political issues? Dual-process models of entertainment suggest that the contribution of entertainment to political involvement depends on audiences' entertainment motivations and experiences: Entertainment consumption can either be driven by hedonic, escapist motivations that are associated with a superficial mode of information processing, or by eudaimonic, truth-seeking motivations that can prompt more elaborate forms of information processing. The potential of eudaimonic entertainment experiences in stimulating issue elaboration, political interest, information seeking, and participation has been examined in a recent line of studies (e.g., Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Weinmann, 2017). For example, after viewing a moving film scene about a politically relevant issue, individuals reported more reflective thoughts about the issue and higher levels of issue interest, and spent more time reading news articles about the issue (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014).

Moderators of Eudaimonic Media Experiences and Associated Outcomes

The evidence is mounting that people routinely seek out, feel moved by, and find meaning in entertainment media, with positive benefits to them personally and to those around them. But it is also increasingly clear that eudaimonia is in the eye of the beholder; that is, not everyone is inspired by the same content or touched by media at the same frequency. In our research, we routinely find variation in levels of eudaimonic responses to meaningful content, with a host of variables moderating when people may or may not be moved.

Perhaps an obvious moderator of feeling moved by many types of eudaimonic entertainment is gender, with women typically reporting higher levels of feeling touched, tearing up, and feeling inspired by moving media portrayals (Raney et al., 2018). In many respects this makes sense, as public displays of sadness are generally socially discouraged for males (Brody & Hall, 2000). However, other data suggest that males report equal—and perhaps even higher—levels of eudaimonic media motivation than do women, suggesting that self-reported feelings of elevation may reflect some level of social desirability (Fisher & Dubé, 2005).

Cultural background is another important moderator of responses to eudaimonic media that is only beginning to gain scholarly attention (see Chapter 27 in the current volume). For example, Kim (2017) pointed out that Eastern and Western cultures often differentially define what is meant by “happiness,” with Western cultures placing a greater emphasis on positive valence and Eastern cultures placing a greater emphasis on social harmony. As a result, happiness or pleasure for the self may not be experienced as positive among people in Eastern cultures unless that happiness is shared among the collective. Furthermore, Eastern cultures are more likely to accept contradictory states or forces (e.g., happiness and sadness) as complementary, whereas Western cultures often see them as opposing. There are several implications for these cultural differences on media experiences, including the possibility that mixed affective responses (e.g., bittersweet feelings) to media may be more readily appreciated in some cultures than in others.

Political ideology is another characteristic that may play an important moderating role in responses to eudaimonic media content. Although some U.S.-based research has found small or no differences among Democrats and Republicans in terms of feeling inspired by moving entertainment (Oliver et al., 2017), it is important to note that many experimental studies have employed stimuli that would be expected to appeal to a wide diversity of audiences. In contrast, when the stimuli are more targeted or focus on specific values more closely aligned with some political ideologies over others (e.g., loyalty, deference to authority), differences in feelings of elevation have been observed. For example, Seibt, Schubert, Zickfeld, and Fiske (2018) found that touching political advertisements elicited feelings of inspiration but only when the ads featured a candidate from the same political party as the viewer.

Finally, research is beginning to explore the role of personality traits in moderating the relationship between exposure to inspiring media and resultant feelings of self-transcendence. Prior research has shown that traits such as dimensions of the Dark Triad (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) serve to reduce attraction to inspiring media portrayals. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that for viewers scoring high on such traits, meaningful media may fail to elicit the same feelings of tenderness typically experienced by the average viewer. However, simply failing to feel touched by eudaimonic portrayals may not fully capture the disdain that some viewers experience. Specifically, Appel, Slater, and Oliver (2018) recently reported that higher levels of Machiavellianism and psychopathy were

associated with seeing eudaimonic film clips as particularly corny, inauthentic, overly sentimental, and silly.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

From our perspective, the growing body of scholarship on eudaimonia as a media effect represents a welcomed “response” to the decades of negative-effects research chronicled in most of the other chapters in this volume. But these are still early days in the study of positive media. Eudaimonic media experiences are complex, multi-faceted, and idiosyncratic. As with most content, viewers are active in their media selections, and they experience a diversity of responses ranging from elevation to disgust. As scholars proceed, a nuanced understanding of how viewers receive and perceive meaningful messages is necessary, especially as we consider how experiences therewith can result in personally and socially beneficial outcomes.

As scholars continue to examine how heightened connectedness may forge stronger and more compassionate ties with others, several directions of scholarship may be worthy of our attention. First, research is still lacking on what feelings of inspiration may imply about feelings between groups who are decidedly antagonistic. Given current political fragmentation, this direction of research seems particularly pressing. Another potentially fruitful direction of research concerns feelings of connection, not just with other people, but to animals, nature, or to the planet overall. This direction has important theoretical implications for the boundary conditions of elevation outcomes, but also for scholars and activists who may be interested in harnessing such feelings for purposes of social change (e.g., climate-change activists).

Similarly, researchers must grapple with the access to and selection of meaningful media in a “permanently online, permanently connected” world (see Chapter 1 in this volume). On one hand, one might argue that media users may become less compelled to search for meaning when their desire for pleasure can be so easily and varyingly fulfilled. On the other hand, we note the rise in user-generated media, which provides unique opportunities for both the individual and collaborative creation of content. Initial work suggests that feelings of elevation are more enhanced when individuals create meaningful media content than when they merely consume it. Future studies may benefit from examining how the creative process afforded by emerging technologies can provide further avenues for social good.

Advances in virtual reality (VR; see Chapter 26 in this volume) technology offers another avenue for ongoing meaningful-media research. First, VR environments can be incredibly intricate, complex, and vast, offering new or otherwise impossible opportunities for individuals to experience positive emotions (e.g., awe). Second, the immersive and interactive nature of VR environments promote the feeling of presence, or the sense of “being there” socially, spatially, and sensorially. Thus, VR has the potential for people to explore situations in which they, for instance, can experience the world through the eyes of someone else, perhaps fostering (among others) empathy and stereotype reduction.

To conclude, the landscape of entertainment fare and entertainment experience is vast and highly heterogeneous. In highlighting eudaimonic responses, we have zoomed in on a unique experience that may reflect only a small slice of audience reactions. However, we believe that this small slice represents deeply meaningful, inspiring, and elevating feelings that can leave a lasting impression, and one that holds promise for addressing issues of social good. As such, we look forward to future scholarship on media entertainment, and we celebrate acknowledging

both the pleasure that entertainment can bring, as well as the insights it affords into the human condition.

Notes

- 1 The term *eudaimonia* is most often associated with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Etymologically, it is the combination of two Greek words: *eu* ("good") and *daimon* ("spirit"). In ancient philosophy, the *daimon* is the potential within all humans to be good and ultimately fulfilled; it provides motivation, direction, and meaning to one's life. *Eudaimonia*, then, is that which you do in accordance with your *daimon*. It is the striving for the highest human good and fulfillment.
- 2 The term *appreciation* has previously appeared in the entertainment literature, specifically in humor research (e.g., Goldstein & McGhee, 1972). Similar to its use herein, appreciation for humor scholars reflected reactions that were beyond enjoyment: recognition of a clever witticism, satisfaction in mastering the cognitive hurdles required to "get" a complex joke, etc.

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