



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION  
*School of Communication*

### Sponsored Research Project Overview

**Project Title:** Your Daily Dose of Inspiration: Exploring How People Use and are Impacted by Media Content that Elicits Self-Transcendent Emotions

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*Transcendence* is the dispositional trait to strive for and connect with purpose and meaning that is greater or higher than yourself. In their influential handbook *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Peterson and Seligman (2004) list transcendence as one of six core human virtues, presumed to be present in and highly valued by cultures around the world and, when practiced, leading to personal and social well-being. For individuals, transcendence is manifest through various behaviors, or what Peterson and Seligman term as *character strengths*. Transcendence-related character strengths include gratitude, an appreciation for (moral) beauty and excellence, hope, and spirituality. For example, when we acknowledge an appreciation for the moral beauty in another person's kindness, or when we participate in a meaningful discussion on spiritual matters, we are enacting, experiencing, and further developing the virtue transcendence.

Beyond performing specific behaviors, we also encounter transcendence when we experience the moral emotions of awe, elevation, and admiration. In fact, many scholars classify these three as *self-transcendent emotions* (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Frederickson, 2009; Haidt, 2003; Haidt & Morris, 2009; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe is the amazement elicited by vast stimuli, such as certain forms of beauty and perfection, that require a measure of accommodation because our capacity to understand and comprehend the experience is challenged. Elevation is experienced as a warmth and expansion when encountering moral beauty and humanity's better nature, while admiration is defined as the motivation and energy we feel when we encounter non-moral excellence, extraordinary skill, talent, or achievement. Although these emotional experiences differ slightly, they all share a common type of elicitor: goodness or virtue found outside of ourselves, often in other people and their actions. Accordingly, research has identified multiple situations and circumstances that can lead to the experience of self-transcendent emotions, like gathering with close friends and family or even being alone in nature. Ultimately, the experience of these "others-oriented," self-transcendent emotions draw us out of our usual state of (ego-

centric, self-) consciousness, motivating us to strive to better the self and all humanity. To put it another way, experiencing self-transcendent emotions will cultivate and foster *inspiration*.

Thrash and Elliot (2003) define inspiration as a motivational state that includes many of the concepts already discussed: (1) transcendence, or an orientation towards something more important than one's typical concerns, (2) evocation, or experiencing a prompting from beyond the self, and (3) a resulting desire and need to express thoughts and feelings and perform behaviors related to the experience. Research in positive psychology demonstrates that inspiration resulting from the experience of self-transcendent emotions can cultivate psychological and physical well-being. Specifically, the *broaden-and-build theory* (Frederickson, 2001; 2009) constitutes a framework from which we can understand how positive emotions lead to human flourishing. Scholars contend that all emotions carry actions tendencies with accompanying physiological changes which, from an evolutionary point of view, prepare humans to adapt in order to survive. Negative emotions, such as anxiety or anger, narrow a person's thought-action repertoire to act quickly and in a way that maximizes survival. In contrast, positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoire (Frederickson, 1998, 2001; Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). The broadening benefit in turn builds personal resources, which can be cognitive (e.g., mindfulness, increased spatial attention), psychological (e.g., resilience, mastery of environmental challenges), social (e.g., emotional support, trust, oneness, prosocial action) or physical (e.g., decreased likelihood in various illnesses) in nature (cf. Frederickson, 2001; Frederickson, et al., 2008; Kok, et al., 2013). In general, positive affect facilitates approach behavior, leading to greater exploration of and engagement with one's environment. As you become more open and receptive to your environment, you increase your chances of experiencing more positive emotions, leading to an upward spiral of human flourishing. To sum: From a broaden-and-build perspective, inspiration resulting from the experience of self-transcendent emotions can further develop our virtue and strengthen our character by drawing us out of ourselves, broadening our perspective, turning our attention to others, strengthening our ties to those around us, and promoting prosocial behaviors.

Although the scholarly record clearly and consistently illuminates the *potential* for developing the virtue of transcendence through moral emotions and inspiration, scientific research on how people *actually experience these emotions in their daily lives* is extremely limited. As noted above, studies have identified circumstances that might naturally promote self-transcendent emotional reactions. Other studies have experimentally created conditions in an attempt to trigger these emotions, quite often relying on some form of inspiring media content to do so (e.g., Lai, Haidt, & Nosek 2013; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012; Prestin, 2013; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010; Van Cappellen, et al., 2013). Thus, from this research—and in truth, from our own lived experiences—it seems that media content (though surely not all) offers ample opportunities for us to experience self-transcendent emotions on a daily basis. Examples of such content are numerous, including touching films like *The Blind Side*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Hotel Rwanda*; meaningful television series and programs like *Friday Night Lights*, *Touched by an Angel*, and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*; print and electronic reports of “good news”; inspiring stories and videos posted to websites like *UpWorthy* and *ViralNova* and shared through social media sites like *Facebook* and *Pinterest*, just to name a few. However, to date no systematic study exists of media's unique role in promoting self-transcendent emotions and inspiration, and, in turn, cultivating character, an “others-praising” perspective, and prosocial behavior. In this project, we will strive to do just this. The knowledge resulting from this research should better equip parents, medical professionals, clinicians, educators, clergy, politicians, and lay people alike with strategies to seek out inspiration and maximize the character-building potential in those experiences, while at the same time filling a gaping hole in the positive-, media-, and moral-psychology literatures.

To understand the complex relationships between media content, self-transcendent emotional experiences, inspiration, transcendence and broader character development, personal and social well-being, and prosocial behavior, we will interrogate several broad research questions across three domains: content, audience, and effects.

- Content: What forms of print and electronic media content inspire? Where and how are such messages encountered and shared? How are emerging and social media technologies being used to create, produce, and distribute inspirational messages? What are the characteristics of inspirational media messages that “go viral”?;
- Audience: Who is most likely to seek out and share inspiring media messages? What are the self-reported motivations for seeking out and benefits of consuming such content? What viewer and content characteristics best predict the experience of self-transcendence and inspiration with media?;
- Effects: What are the short- and long-term cognitive, emotional, psychological, and social effects of consuming inspiring media messages? How might people be motivated to seek out or share inspiring media messages more often? How can consuming such media lead to character development and in turn positive social change?

Over the three years of the project, multiple studies will be conducted within each domain, allowing for both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. In the broadest terms, the content domain will involve the tracking of shared and downloaded inspirational content in national newspaper, social media, and “good news” websites, as well as popular films and television series, with a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of content samples to better understand the prevalence of, nature of, and issue/character portrayals within inspirational media. The audience domain will involve annual, nationally representative, cross-sectional and panel surveys of inspirational media, through which we will seek to better understand what content users find inspirational, who accesses it, how, how often, why, and how those uses may change over time. The effects domain will involve a series of experimental studies into the short-term psychological impacts of consuming inspirational media, as well as the long-term behavioral effects of doing so. More specifically, these studies will examine the effect of exposure to inspirational media on ingroup-outgroup bias, reduction of stereotyping, gratitude, psychological well-being, prosocial behaviors, and social sharing (among other outcomes). Project findings and activities will be shared through inter/national academic conferences, top-tier journal publication submissions, a proposed edited volume, a two-day symposium, and an ongoing project website.

We aim to reach two audiences with this research: academics/professionals and non-academic laity. For academics, the work can motivate new streams of basic and applied inquiry on character development, self-transcendent emotions, inspiration, social connectedness, and prosocial behaviors. Therefore, the project will be valuable to persons interested in positive and media psychology working in the disciplines of communication, media studies, moral and positive psychology, experimental philosophy, sociology, religion, cultural anthropology, among others. Also, ideally, the work will impact clinical psychologists, equipping them with new insight into how media content might serve therapeutic purposes for their patients.

For the non-academic audience, the project should realistically uncover daily behaviors that can improve the self and perspectives on others; our aim will be to introduce those behaviors into the larger popular psychology/self-help/religious conversation through dissemination of the results through popular-press outlets (with assistance from our research partner Public Religion Research Institute).

Thus, anyone interested in such issues are potential audience members for this work, but particularly parents, medical professionals, clinicians, educators, politicians, and clergy.

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