

Mary Beth Oliver, Ryan RuiYang Tan, Olivia S. Reed

Meaningful Responses to Narrative Digital Media: Research from a Media Psychology Perspective

Abstract: Recent scholarship in media psychology has refocused its attention on digital entertainment narratives, from examinations of harmful effects to explorations of meaningful experiences. This chapter overviews the myriad of audience responses that reflect non-hedonic gratifications, including engagement and self-transcendent experiences, noting the host of digital media content that may facilitate these experiences. Challenges and future directions are discussed.

Introduction

The potential harms of electronic media have received a wealth of attention in both public discussion and in academic research. Be it on issues of gun violence, media and obesity, stereotyping of oppressed groups, or sexual objectification, digital media have often been linked to a series of social and individual harms. Although this focus is likely a reflection of the general tendency to look for causes of social problems in the attempts to remedy them, it also diverts attention from the benefits that media consumption may have. However, more recently, many researchers in entertainment psychology specifically have begun to turn their attention to the variety of ways that media can play a positive role for consumers and for society at large (Reinecke & Oliver, 2016). For example, the recent Nabi et al. (2017) article on media and stress argued that media use is a frequently used coping mechanism. Likewise, the Harrison et al. (2018) theory of media sensory curation pointed out that various aspects of digital technologies (e. g., the sounds of a device, its weight, etc.) may be effective at allowing people to balance the sensory inputs in their environments.

The potential of media use and narrative entertainment use specifically to serve beneficial outcomes undoubtedly can take many forms. However, entertainment has frequently been characterized in less-than-flattering ways, such as a hedonic pursuit, a guilty pleasure, or in terms of passive consumption (Postman, 1986). Indeed, foundational theories in entertainment psychology

have frequently assumed that entertainment use is driven by pleasure-seeking and is most gratifying to consumers when it provides them with narratives in which the “good” characters are portrayed as ultimately prevailing over evil forces that may have threatened their well-being (Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). Of course, pleasantries are but one aspect of media gratification, with more contemplative, complex, inspiring, and sometimes dark narratives holding both critical and popular acclaim. With this background in mind, many scholars have tried to reconceptualize how digital entertainment is understood, noting that, whereas it may serve hedonic needs at times, it can also serve “higher-order” needs, such as understanding the joys and sorrows of the human condition, increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of human life, and making sense of tragedy (Raney et al., 2019). In this chapter we provide an overview of the growing body of research in media psychology focused on narrative digital media and meaningfulness, first providing a discussion of different conceptualizations of the term “meaningful” that have been used by scholars in this area and then turning to how these concepts have typically been studied for different types of digital formats. We end our chapter by noting the considerable challenges that researchers face when studying meaningful media and the issues that scholars may consider in future research.

Conceptualizing Meaningful Media Experiences

The history of media psychology has frequently considered “enjoyment” to be the primary and desired outcome of entertainment consumption. Pleasure, mirth, and humor have been some of the primary motives and outcomes typically studied. As this area of scholarship has expanded to consider more meaningful experiences, a variety of concepts and explanations have been examined, many of which are related (see Hakemulder et al., 2017).

Transportation and Engagement

Transportation into narrative worlds refers to the deep engagement that individuals feel when consuming stories: being absorbed into the fictional world and losing sight of their immediate surroundings (Green & Brock, 2002). Similarly, narrative engagement is conceptualized as the process of building and evolving mental models of the story world inhabited by the characters, accepting the reality of it as presented, and following along with the narrative as it unfolds

(Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Early research on transportation tended to focus on written narratives and short stories, but since that time, it has been examined in a host of digital-media formats, including film, television, and even gaming (for a recent overview, see Green et al., 2019). Important to the topic of this chapter, transportation and engagement in narratives is thought to be gratifying to viewers/consumers, but this gratification is not necessarily only a reflection of the valance of the media content itself. In other words, narrative engagement, in and of itself, is understood to be a gratifying experience, even when the storyline may be dark, disturbing, or even frightening (Green et al., 2004). For example, Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) found that transportation predicted enjoyment of a film, regardless of whether the film was a romantic comedy, a science fiction film, or a thriller. Likewise, Owen and Riggs (2012) found that transportation predicted enjoyment of *Memento* – a film that is complex and violent.

The specific reasons why transportation may be enjoyable are not fully understood at this time, but some scholars have suggested that it allows individuals to experience worlds, emotions, and situations that may be highly distressing in real life (e.g., the death of a loved one) or that may be extremely dangerous (e.g., flying a damaged plane; Green et al., 2004). More recently, scholars have suggested that engagement with story *characters* may provide viewers with the opportunity to “try on” the identities of different personalities that may not be experienced in real life – a phenomenon labeled “The expanded boundaries of the self” (TEBOTS; Slater et al., 2014). Both of these explanations appear consistent with Menninghaus et al.’s (2017) Distancing-Embracing model. In brief, these authors argue that distancing mechanisms such as recognition of the text as fictional and awareness of control over text consumption allow the reader to more fully accept or even embrace negative emotions such as fear or sadness that the text may elicit. The experience of such negative emotions, in turn, serve to heighten perceptions of the profundity of the text.

Appreciation and Eudaimonia

Unlike conceptions of media engagement that are agnostic concerning the types of content or the nature of media portrayals in question, conceptions of appreciation and eudaimonic motivations and experiences are frequently focused on specific types of content – those that grapple with meaning-in-life questions, those that typically require cognitive effort, and those that frequently focus on human virtues such as courage, determination, and kindness.

As Media-use Motivations. In expanding research on motivations for media use beyond the hedonic considerations typically studied, Oliver and Raney (2011) drew from ancient writings regarding notions of happiness and fulfillment. Specifically, Aristotle (trans. 1961) wrote that, whereas hedonic happiness focuses on pleasure, eudaimonic happiness focuses on human flourishing and well-being that comes from greater introspection, value, and leading a life that is worth living. In terms of media-use motivations, Oliver and Raney (2011) reasoned that just as individuals may select media for purposes of pleasure and fun, they may also select entertainment for purposes of gaining greater insight into the human condition and for grappling with deeper meaning-in-life questions. Their initial research conceptualized hedonic and eudaimonic preferences in trait-like terms, with their operationalizations reflecting more enduring preferences. Consistent with their hypotheses, these preferences were significant predictors of liking different genres of entertainment (e. g., hedonic motivations predicting liking of comedy and action films; eudaimonic motivations predicting liking of drama and tragedy). They were also associated with a host of additional dispositional and personality traits. For example, individuals who scored higher on hedonic motivations tended to report greater levels of playfulness, whereas individuals who scored higher on eudaimonic motivations reported higher levels of need for cognition, empathy, and searching for meaning in life. Since this initial measure was developed, it has been employed in different countries (Igartua & Barrios, 2013) and has been applied to a variety of different entertainment formats (e. g., games). However, additional scholarship could broaden this research in important ways. For example, although Oliver and Raney (2011) treated these motivations as stable traits or dispositions, it seems evident that *within* individuals, there are times when one motivation is more salient than another. In other words, a person may prefer to watch a comedy or romance at one time, but may prefer a somber or contemplative film at another. The list of reasons for these variations is undoubtedly long, but among them may be mood states, co-viewing situations, and life events that make some narratives more relevant or salient.

As Experiences. To this point eudaimonia has been discussed in terms of motivations for media selection, but the *experience* while viewing or consuming media also forms a large and growing body of research. Noting that foundational entertainment research had tended to focus on enjoyment, Oliver and Bartsch (2010) attempted to broaden the study of audience reactions to tap into the gratifications that viewers feel when consuming narratives that they perceive as particularly meaningful. In so doing, they used the term “appreciation” to signify audience reactions that reflected feeling moved, touched, and contemplative. Feelings of appreciation were predictably higher after viewing dramas, whereas

feelings of enjoyment were more commonly associated with lighter fare such as comedies and romance. Subsequently, Wirth et al. (2012) developed a similar measure of eudaimonic experiences while viewing. Their measure was multidimensional, including five factors: purpose in life/self-acceptance, autonomy, competence/personal growth, relatedness, and activation of central values.

The concept of appreciation overlaps with numerous similar terms employed by scholars of audience receptions. For example, in developing a scale of aesthetic emotions (AESTHEMOS), Schindler et al. (2017) noted first that the concept was admittedly “fuzzy.” However, similar to our concept of appreciation, these authors argued that feelings such as awe, wonder, or feeling moved are “prototypical” aesthetic emotions (as discussed further below). Nevertheless, their conceptualization and resultant scale were much broader in scope. Namely, the AESTHEMOS measure includes 21 subscales ranging from interest, joy, humor, and relaxation, to ugliness, awe, anger, and unease.

In their overview of the conceptualization of aesthetic emotions, Menninghaus et al. (2019) focused on the boundary conditions of what is meant by this concept, including the idea that it involves appreciation or evaluation of the elicitor (e.g., a painting, a film); that it is focused on specific aspects of aesthetic appeal (e.g., moving, surprising); that it involves subjective feeling states; and that it ultimately results in liking or disliking the elicitor. Important to the present discussion, Menninghaus et al. further identified “being moved” as an “exemplary aesthetic emotion” (p. 177). Further, in line with much ongoing research in media psychology, these authors argued that feeling moved by some object such as art or literature can result in heightened feelings of connectedness and altruistic motivations.

Ultimately, there are numerous ways of identifying how audiences derive meaning from media offerings. We use the term “appreciation” as a means of contrasting foundational theories of media psychology that have focused on enjoyment as the primary intended response. Further, like aesthetic emotions, appreciation frequently entails feelings of being moved or touched. Indeed, in their recent overview of the use of the phrase “being moved,” Zickfeld et al. (2019b) identified a large array of similar affects (e.g., nostalgia, compassion, empathic concern) as well as a large number of elicitors (e.g., critical life moments, moral beauty, overcoming adversity). These authors note that, at present, the phrase “being moved” is used in so many ways that it is conceptually unclear, highlighting the need for greater specificity in our use of the term. As these authors noted, “There is an emotion that English speakers may label being moved – but there is no consensus on what causes it, what its valence is, or how to measure it” (p. 12).

Ultimately, our use of the term “appreciation” to signify meaningful media experiences shares much with similar responses such as aesthetic emotions. However, our notion of appreciation in the context of research in media psychology and entertainment psychology focuses both on any aesthetic virtue that the media may have (e. g., camera lighting) and on narrative content. Indeed, narrative content has arguably consumed most of the research in this area, and even media that are largely devoid of aesthetic appeal may be perceived as meaningful (and hence appreciated) insofar as they arouse feelings of greater insight into the human condition and the contemplation of human poignancies. This focus may reflect not only the typically plot-driven or content-focused nature of many contemporary media offerings, but it may also reflect a motivation to explore how media entertainment may be harnessed for purposes of greater social good. With this in mind, then, we now turn to the specific types of audience responses that have been examined, with an eye on exploring how digital media may help us rise to our higher or better selves.

Self-Transcendent Emotions

In trying to differentiate the different shades of meaningful experiences that individuals may have when consuming media, Oliver et al. (2018) recently argued that self-*transcendent* experiences form a unique and important form of meaningful responses. Namely, whereas responses such as appreciation or eudaimonic experiences may involve a focus on the self (e. g., looking for one’s own life meaning), self-transcendent experiences are outwardly focused and recognize the interconnectedness of the self with others and often with the universe at large. Indeed, Wong (2011) used the term “chaironic happiness” to refer to “[f]eeling blessed and fortunate because of a sense of awe, gratitude, and oneness with nature or God” (p. 70). Likewise, Oliver et al. (2019) drew from a review of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, characterizing self-transcendent emotions as reflecting “(...) something beyond personal benefit, for example, the furtherance of some greater cause, union with a power beyond the self, and/or service to others as an expression of identification beyond the personal ego” (Koltko-Rivera, 2006, p. 305, note 3). In short, self-transcendent emotions go beyond egoistic concerns to involve some or all elements related to interconnectedness with others, nature, or the universe; human virtue and altruistic motivations that accompany it; and spirituality (Oliver et al., 2019). Similar to research on appreciation, self-transcendent media experiences can take many forms and, therefore, have been studied from a variety of perspectives.

Elevation. Haight's (2003) research on moral emotions has outlined numerous other-praising feelings (e. g., admiration), but the concept of "elevation" is one that has garnered a wealth of scholarship among media psychologists. In brief, elevation is conceptualized as the feeling that one experiences when witnessing exemplary displays of moral virtue, including generosity, kindness, compassion, and altruism (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Elevation is thought to be associated with mixed affective states, with unique physiological responses (e. g., lump in the throat, crying), and with heightened motivation to be a better person.

Kama muta. Kama muta is a more recently identified concept that shares many similarities with elevation. In brief, kama muta ("moved by love" in Sanskrit) refers to the "...social relational emotion that is evoked by experiencing or observing a sudden intensification of communal sharing" (Zickfeld et al., 2019a, p. 402). Further, communal sharing may involve witnessing others engaged in sharing (e. g., watching a parent and child), or it may involve the self as a participant (e. g., reuniting with family after a long time apart). Kama muta is associated with many of the same indicators of elevation previously discussed, including physiological reactions and pro-social motivations to strengthen communal relationships. However, unlike elevation, kama-muta is conceptualized as a decidedly positive experience. Although the authors acknowledge that witnessing the events leading to the communal event or subsequent to it may involve some negative valence, kama muta specifically is understood to be positive. Finally, although researchers writing about kama muta are careful to note that the elicitors of this emotion are culturally variable and sometimes distinct, they also argue that kama muta is a universally shared experience, serving to strengthen our bonds with others (Zickfeld et al., 2019a).

Gratitude. Gratitude is an additional self-transcendent emotion reflecting feeling thankfulness for one's fortunes, be they ones that reflect others' generosity or ones that reflect luck or simple happenstance (e. g., gratitude for clean drinking water). Gratitude is associated with a host of positive outcomes, including lessening death anxiety (Lau & Cheng, 2011), increasing prosocial behavior (Tsang & Martin, 2017), decreasing anti-social behavior (Bono et al., 2017), and enhancing relational closeness (Algoe, 2019). Compared to scholarship on media narratives and elevation, research on gratitude is only beginning to garner attention among media psychologists. Perhaps this scarcity of attention reflects an assumption that we feel gratitude only when we are the direct beneficiary of some generous act (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Yet we believe that gratitude can be conceptualized much more broadly and without reference to a specific person who bestows some favor. For example, being grateful for breathing clean air, for seeing one's children play on the beach, or for overcoming ill-

ness is much more amorphous, with the recipient feeling gratitude for life, for some higher being, or for the beauty in the world. Further, observing stimuli that evokes gratitude or reminds one of life's blessings implies that media portrayals may play an important role in evoking this self-transcendent affect (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2012).

Awe. Whereas the aforementioned types of transcendent affect are thought to be primarily positive in valence, awe has the potential to produce both positive and negative affect. For example, an underwater scene framing a pod of whales gracefully suspended in the endless blue depths of the ocean has the ability to draw both senses of wonder and fear at the scale of the marvelous looming creatures as well as the inspiring yet disconcerting vastness of their underwater habitat. Keltner and Haidt's (2003) seminal paper on awe proposed two key components to an experience of awe: an encounter with *vastness* and a need for *accommodation*. Vastness can be either a perceptual or conceptual encounter, with an individual physically experiencing a scene, structure, or creature much larger than themselves, or cognitively engaging with a concept beyond their personal frame of reference – for example, contemplating eternity (Yaden et al., 2019). Accommodation refers to an adjustment of mental structures to cope with an encounter with something beyond the frame of one's self-reference (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Piff et al., 2015; Shiota et al., 2006). This process of accommodation may often be difficult or even unsuccessful as an individual attempts to come to terms with their encounter with something vast and, as such, an awe-inspiring encounter holds the potential for both positive and negative affect (Gottlieb et al., 2018). However, unsuccessful attempts at accommodation do not necessarily result in purely negative outcomes. For example, inability to accommodate vastness may be associated with turning toward spirituality or religion, resulting in a greater interest in science and scientific investigation (Gottlieb et al., 2018). Importantly, the destabilizing effect of encounters with things beyond an individual's conceptualization is an opportunity for the development of prosocial perspectives and behaviors. Further, awe has been approached as a collective emotion – with the accommodative qualities of the experience allowing individuals to better engage in collective action and shift perspective away from the self towards larger social entities (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Piff et al., 2015). Hence, although awe may not be an exclusively positive emotion, it appears capable of facilitating positive outcomes in not only intellectual but social arenas.

Summary

The variety of meaningful responses to media is vast, ranging from self-focused experiences to self-transcendent, other-focused experiences. These responses are much more complex than basic emotions (e.g., joy, sadness), and they frequently involve a heavy emphasis on cognition. Importantly, they also seem to share some beneficial or pro-social outcomes, be they focused on the individual's transportation into the narrative, a heightened inclination to engage in pro-social or altruistic behaviors, or a greater appreciation of unity with people, nature, or the universe. Not surprisingly, as research in this area continues to evolve, additional perspectives and nuance will be forthcoming (see, for example, Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019), providing a more complete picture of these audience gratifications.

Studying Meaningful Experiences with Digital Media

Our overview of the various meaningful responses to digital media sets the stage for the types of issues and outcomes studied by media psychologists. In general, media scholars tend to employ experimental methodologies to examine users'/viewers' responses, sometimes treating meaningful responses as the primary dependent variable, and other times treating meaningful affect as a mediator between exposure and a variety of outcomes associated with indicators of heightened well-being or pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Additional research has employed correlational surveys and content analytic techniques.

Digital media include a wide array of formats and, with rapid technological changes, continues to add to the list of means by which media exposure may result in meaningful experiences. Raney et al.'s (2018) recent nationally representative survey of 3006 respondents in the U.S. asked participants if they had ever been "touched, moved, or inspired" by eight different types of media, including seven types of digital media. Self-transcendent experiences were extraordinarily common across digital-media formats, including from music (90.5%), film (86.9%), television (80.2%), news (77.6%), online video (62.7%), radio/podcasts (58.9%), and social media (53.0%). With this background in mind, we will now review the types of research and their findings for different types or formats digital media.

Film

Studies of meaningful digital narratives have frequently focused their attention on cinematic entertainment. This focus likely reflects the longer format of narratives (compared to other types of digital media), and also the specific genres (e.g., sad films, dramas, etc.) that are particularly likely to motivate reflection on the human condition and meaning-in-life. This body of research shows strong evidence that film has great power to move and touch individuals and that numerous themes commonly portrayed in movies are perceived as particularly meaningful. For example, viewers asked to describe the themes and lessons in meaningful films note themes such as: insight into life meanings; the importance of caring for others; the centrality of connection to others; and the stark reality that life is fleeting (Oliver & Hartmann, 2010). Likewise, subsequent analysis of these data suggest that many meaningful films can be characterized in terms of elevation. That is, portrayals of moral virtue in films give rise to feeling moved and touched, including related physiological reactions (e.g., feeling warm-hearted) and a heightened desire for altruistic behaviors (Oliver et al., 2012).

Additional aspects of the viewing experience for meaningful films differs from viewing alternative genres. Specifically, Bartsch and Hartmann (2016) assessed the cognitive and emotional challenges experienced by viewers in response to different films pre-rated as fun, suspenseful, or moving. Whereas fun films were low on both cognitive and emotional challenge and suspenseful films were rated as high on only emotional challenge, moving/touching films were rated high on both. Consistent with these findings, additional research has shown that feeling moved by films leads to greater reflection and cognitive elaboration (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014b). Importantly, feeling contemplative and emotionally challenged does not appear to detract from audience gratification. Oliver et al. (2014) examined movie descriptors commonly appearing on film-related websites (e.g., Internet Movie Database) for films spanning three decades. Films described as “exciting” enjoyed greater box-office revenues, while films described as dark, contemplative, and emotional enjoyed greater popular and critical acclaim in terms of awards and viewer ratings.

Research on the outcomes of consuming meaningful films generally reflect benefits in terms of well-being. For example, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2012) found that viewing a tragic film led to heightened feelings of gratitude for one’s relationship with others, with such feelings of gratitude ultimately associated with higher self-reported feelings of happiness. Additional research has shown

that viewing meaningful (and tragic) films can help viewers cope with mortality salience (Rieger & Hofer, 2017) and with past trauma (Khoo & Oliver, 2013).

Of course, studying the effects of film on individuals' responses is a fruitful area because of the strong development of characters and the opportunity for immersion that films can provide. However, studying cinema also presents methodological challenges. Namely, watching a full film takes time; so recruiting participant samples can be arduous. Because shorter films or videos present fewer challenges in this regard, and because short videos are now widely popular on streaming sites, a growing body of research has begun to explore this type of digital media more deeply.

Short Videos

Numerous studies now demonstrate that shorter films and videos such as those found on the popular video hosting site, YouTube, can serve as a source of self-transcendent emotional experiences (Dale et al., 2017; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019; Myrick & Oliver, 2015). In the aforementioned recent national survey, 62.7% of respondents were exposed to self-transcendent content through online video, with 68.1% of respondents reporting that exposure to this content was by chance rather than the result of a direct internet search (Raney et al., 2018). Dale et al. (2017) took a closer look at what popular “inspirational” YouTube videos contained, and how self-transcendent emotions were evoked by the content. Of the four self-transcendent emotional elicitors identified in the study (appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope, gratitude, and religiousness/spirituality), hope was the most common elicitor found in viral inspiring videos (Dale et al., 2017).

Dale et al. (2017) also looked at direct vs. modeled elicitors of self-transcendent emotions. An emotional elicitor was considered direct if the viewers themselves were clearly exposed to the inspiring stimulus, whereas modeled elicitors required that viewers see *someone else* react to a self-transcendent elicitor (i. e., watching a character in the video react). Once again, hope was found to be the most commonly *modeled* elicitor found in the data set and the most likely of the four elicitors to be paired with a direct elicitor (Dale et al., 2017). Hence, the researchers noted that self-transcendent emotions can be directly elicited, modeled, or both.

Following their content analysis, Dale et al. (2017) conducted an experiment to examine how these variables were causally related. Feelings of self-transcendent emotions were measured via continuous dial while participants viewed inspiring media content. The researchers found that feelings of self-transcendent

emotions significantly increased following exposure to inspiring content as compared to the control condition. Not surprisingly, additional research has shown that these self-transcendent emotions effectively predict feelings of connectedness with others, including a desire to engage in pro-social behavior and greater acceptance of out-group members (Oliver et al., 2015). Finally, because many short films on streaming media are user-generated, Oliver et al. (2016b) approached this topic from another perspective, finding a link between the *creation* of YouTube videos and the creator's subsequent feelings of self-transcendent emotions. As user-generated content continues to proliferate on a variety of media platforms, the motivations to create and share inspiring media stand to form an important part of this literature.

Videogames

Videogames have quickly risen to be one of the most popular and widespread media productions. Ever since their public emergence in the 1970s, videogames have captured the imaginations of players worldwide. Modern videogames have progressed far from their early arcade origins. As the supporting technology driving videogame play developed, so did the complexity and range of affordances they provide. From simple abstract representations of tennis in *Pong* (1972) or interstellar combat in *SpaceWar!* (1962) with simple directional controls and rudimentary mechanics, videogames now allow players to become immersed in visually stunning virtual environments (Jennett et al., 2008; McMahan, 2013), interact extensively with these environments (Deterding, 2011; Sharritt, 2010), and share these virtual spaces with numerous fellow players (Klimmt, 2009; Klimmt et al., 2007). While these three dimensions of gameplay alone do not adequately encompass the diversity of resulting player experiences, they do serve as important avenues for inspirational and positive emotional impact.

A wide base of early research into videogames focused on highlighting their possible negative effects on players based on portrayals of violence (e. g., Ballard & Wiest, 1996; Wei, 2007). These fail, however, to account for the numerous opportunities the videogame platform provides for players to experience positive emotional and psychological outcomes. Although entertainment may often be the primary designed outcome of gameplay, the enjoyable nature of videogames allows them to serve as interactive platforms on which meaningful narratives, characters, and moral decisions can be explored. For example, Oliver et al. (2016a) suggested that video games potentially satisfied intrinsic needs for relatedness and insight. In a study by Bowman et al. (2016), character attachment in gameplay experiences was found not only to enhance player enjoyment

but also to positively influence appreciation. Players who identified with game characters and took responsibility for the actions of their avatar experienced a greater degree of appreciation. Additionally, Weaver and Lewis (2012) suggested that the moral choices players make for their player characters in relation to non-player characters within videogame worlds mirrors real world interpersonal interaction. This allows video games to serve as an important simulation for exploring and engaging with real world moral issues (Schulzke, 2009). In other words, video games serve as virtual sandboxes in which players not only find enjoyment but also actively participate in social, moral, and educational scenarios that potentially translate into awareness and understanding in real life.

Music

From church services to rock concerts, music has been linked to feelings of self-transcendence, including awe and oneness with others (Eurich, 2003; Van Cappellen, 2017; Yaden et al., 2017). Raney et al.'s national survey (2018) found that, when asked when they last experienced a media situation that elicited self-transcendent emotions, 90.5% of respondents reported that they felt moved when listening to music. The affective power of music not only influences perception of its form, but also creates a shared emotional experience for group listeners. Cotter et al. (2018), for example, not only found that respondents rated awe-inspiring music as more “complex and beautiful” (p. 131), but also that respondents more commonly felt the urge to cry from this influx of awe when experiencing the music in a social setting as opposed to listening alone. Additionally, musicians themselves can feel moved through the *act* of performing (Lamont, 2012). Artists and musicians have reported a sense of connection to their bandmates and the audience, adding layers of emotional and social depth to their experience of music and fueling the motivation to continue practicing and producing music (Lamont, 2012).

Numerous structural elements that comprise music have been found to play an important role in determining the affective outcome of musical pieces on audiences. Liu et al. (2015) investigated the specific attributes of musical pieces that affect emotional reactions, identifying rhythm, frequency of pitch changes, and loudness of the music as key elements to inducing emotions through music. Tempo – the speed of music, generally measured in beats per minute (bpm) – similarly has been identified as facilitating varying levels of arousal with fast and slow tempos (Hargreaves & North, 1999; Husain et al., 2002). In addition, extensive evidence exists for the influence of mode – patterns of note progressions associated with specific melodic qualities – on audiences’ emotional re-

sponses to music. Major modes are commonly associated with positive emotions such as happiness or elation, while minor modes are “almost without exception” associated with negative emotions such as sadness and trepidation (Webster & Weir, 2005, p. 20). Together, however, these components create experiences with the potential to be greater than the sum of their parts, moving and influencing audiences in dynamic and complex ways.

Summary

Researchers are only beginning to scratch the surface of the variety of media formats that serve to inspire viewers/listeners/individuals and that ultimately may heighten well-being and pro-social outcomes. Additional formats that are garnering increased attention include media apps (e.g., Ghandeharioun et al., 2016), advertising (including political advertising; Seibt et al., 2019), and virtual reality (Kalyanaraman & Bailenson, 2019; Quesnel & Riecke, 2018).

Challenges and Future Direction

The growing body of research on meaningful experiences and digital media leave little doubt of the potential for media to inspire, increase well-being, and heighten pro-social motivations. However, because this research is just beginning to gain traction, there are still numerous questions that need to be explored and numerous challenges that require attention.

One challenge for media scholars concerns the lack of comprehensive theories of meaningful media. As is likely evident from the present overview, scholars of meaningful-media experiences draw from a variety of sources across diverse disciplines. Although this state-of-affairs is not a liability in and of itself, theories that focus specifically on media-related issues are needed to more fully allow for testing predictions, assessing the mediators and moderators at work, and examining the boundary conditions of when media consumption successfully elicits meaningful responses and when it fails to do so.

At present, perhaps the most widely cited theoretical lenses used to study media and appreciation are dual-processing approaches (Bartsch & Beth Oliver, 2011; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014a; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014b; Vorderer & Reincke, 2015). For example, Tamborini’s (2012) model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME) argues that audience responses to entertainment are reflective of the ways that moral questions and their resolutions are presented. When

narratives depict a simple moral question (e. g., a question of fairness) and the question is resolved, enjoyment is the typical response. In contrast, when narratives depict moral domains that may be in conflict (e. g., a person must be disloyal to be fair), then audiences engage in deeper processing and are more likely to experience responses akin to appreciation. Of course, conflicting moral domains are but one type of content that may be appreciated or inspiring. Portrayals of nature, love, or generosity may also inspire many viewers – without necessarily depicting moral domains that are at odds. Hence, as research in this area continues to evolve, the identification of additional theoretical mechanisms will be fruitful additions to this literature.

In addition to theory development, research will also benefit from the refinement and expansion of its toolbox of measures. A variety of measures have been developed for many of the meaningful responses outlined earlier. However, as Zickfeld et al. (2019b) point out in their overview, a host of different names are frequently used in reference to feelings such as “being moved,” and, likewise, scholars often use the same terms (e. g., “moving”) to refer to different phenomena or reactions to different elicitors. An additional challenge is that many existing measures rely on self-report. Further, audience response is typically assessed after viewing is completed. However, individuals frequently experience a host of emotions during viewing that may change widely during the course of a narrative; a viewer may experience moral outrage at the beginning of a story, then fear for the protagonist, and ultimately elevation when the protagonist triumphs. As a result, changes in affective responses may be an important component of inspiring media (see Nabi & Green, 2014, for a discussion of emotional flow). However, measuring affective responses during the course of the narrative may affect how the narrative is perceived and, hence, the types of responses that the viewer may experience, although recent research provides initial evidence that this testing artifact may not be as consequential as many researchers fear (Isik & Vessel, 2019). As technologies develop and less intrusive measures become possible (e. g., facial-affect reading, physiological recordings, etc.), we will undoubtedly gain greater insight into the narrative experience that gives rise to feelings of self-transcendence and inspiration (Dale et al., 2019; Piper et al., 2015; Schubert, Zickfeld et al., 2018)

Finally, there are numerous variables that may serve to dampen or diminish meaningful media experiences. For example, advertisers’ use of “inspirational” messages may be perceived as manipulative or insincere. Formulaic approaches to creating engaging gameplay experiences similarly often foster perfidious perceptions of game-engendered influences. Likewise, the proliferation of touching videos on YouTube and other social media may become tiresome or tedious. Further, there are undoubtedly a host of individual differences that moderate

how viewers respond, including callousness or psychopathy (Appel et al., 2018). Hence, in addition to looking for elements that may give rise to meaningful experiences, scholars would also benefit from exploring the variables that may cause some individuals to perceive such messages as corny, sappy, or overly sentimental.

Concluding Thoughts

Entertainment in general, and *media* entertainment in particular, is often characterized in terms of the harms that it may cause. However, we hope that this chapter convincingly argues that digital media also provide inspiration and insight. The potential for such experiences has been there from the beginning and is quickly expanding along with technological developments. Looking for the “good” in media entertainment may enable us to harness the myriad ways that media motivate and equip individuals to strive for their higher, better selves.

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