

Editorial

The Promises and Pitfalls of Inspirational Media: What do We Know, and Where do We Go from Here?

Lena Frischlich^{1,2,*}, Lindsay Hahn³ and Diana Rieger²¹ Department of Communication, Westphalian Wilhelms-University, 48143 Münster, Germany;

E-Mail: lena.frischlich@uni-muenster.de

² Department of Media and Communication, LMU Munich, 80538 Munich, Germany, E-Mail: diana.rieger@ifkw.lmu.de³ Department of Communication, University at Buffalo–State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA;

E-Mail: lhahn2@buffalo.edu

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 15 March 2021 | Published: 6 May 2021

Abstract

This editorial introduces the thematic issue on inspirational media; including its role in the elicitation of meaning and self-transcendence, audience responses to inspirational narratives, and the potential for inspirational media to be used for manipulative purposes. We first set the stage for the thematic issue by describing an organizing framework by Thrash and Elliot (2003) to study inspiration. We then situate the seven articles published in this thematic issue along the logic of different components of this framework, namely media *content* capable of invoking *transcendence* through emotions and excitatory responses, and a *motivational* impulse to act upon the ideas acquired from content. This thematic issue thereby highlights unique perspectives for understanding media’s ability to serve as the source of inspiration—be it for social benefit or detriment. Finally, we consider directions for future research on inspirational media.

Keywords

eudaimonic entertainment; inspiration; inspirational media; narratives; manipulation; media; motivation

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Inspirational Media between Meaning, Narration, and Manipulation” edited by Lena Frischlich (University of Muenster, Germany), Diana Rieger (LMU Munich, Germany) and Lindsay Hahn (University at Buffalo–State University of New York, USA).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This editorial is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Media can inspire us. Watching an elevating movie, reading a moving story, or playing the right game at the time can affect how we view our place in the world and motivate us to change our behavior accordingly. The word *inspiration* connotes positive, socially beneficial outcomes, and indeed a growing body of research in media and communication science provides evidence for inspirational media’s ability to evoke normatively positive outcomes. However, media’s ability to inspire can also be leveraged for manipulation, giving rise to outcomes potentially deemed socially deviant. To provide a more nuanced view of inspirational media, this thematic

issue was thus designed to shed light on the role of inspirational media across a wide range of contexts including meaningfulness, narration, and manipulation.

Following Thrash and Elliot (2003), inspiration is a psychological process with three core components: (a) ‘evocation’ (‘inspiration by’), or the capacity for an internal or external stimulus (such as a media content) to invoke (b) a response to this stimulus that is characterized by the ‘transcendence’ of “ordinary preoccupations and limitations” of the human existence (p. 871), and which is reflected, for instance, in self-transcending emotions such as elevation, hope or gratitude (‘being inspired’), and (c) a ‘motivational’ impulse to act (‘inspiration to’) and transmit the ‘newly apprehended source

of internal value' (Belzak, Thrash, Sim, & Wadsworth, 2017, p. 6). Although dissociable, all three components tend to co-occur (Thrash, 2020, p. 7) and their covariance allows for distinguishing inspiration from related constructs such as 'mere' self-transcending emotions (Belzak et al., 2017, p. 6) or more general appetitive motivational states that might accompany positive affect. Put another way, inspiration as a higher order construct differs from more general motivational states as it is uniquely characterized by lesser feelings of responsibility (indicated by evocation) and the presence of at least one of the discrete emotions listed above (indicated by transcendence).

In communication scholarship, inspirational media are often referred to synonymously with eudaimonic, or meaningful, narrative entertainment (e.g., Janicke-Bowles, Narayan, & Seng, 2018; Ji et al., 2019; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019). Eudaimonic entertainment is distinguished from *hedonic* entertainment (characterized by audience motivations and outcomes associated with pleasure) by its focus on audiences' motivations to consume content in search of meaningfulness, and by its accordant outcomes associated with uplifting feelings such as appreciation or elevation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012) that can be self-transcending (Oliver et al., 2018). Investigations into eudaimonic entertainment are rooted in positive psychology (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) and typically studied in terms of their capacity to induce prosocial behavior (Bailey & Wojdyski, 2015) and other normatively positive outcomes such as well-being (Janicke-Bowles, Rieger, & Connor, 2019).

Although the bulk of research on inspirational media has examined narratives' ability to evoke a sense of meaningfulness and normatively positive outcomes in audiences, inspiration can also be used as a manipulation tactic. For instance, marketing scholars attempt to leverage inspirational processes for product persuasion (Barry & Gironde, 2018), extremist groups rely on eudaimonic entertainment cues to cover calls for violence (Bouko, Naderer, Rieger, Van Ostaeyen, & Voué, 2021; Frischlich, 2021), and terrorist organizations justify their atrocities with meaning-promising morality (Hahn, Tamborini, Novotny, Grall, & Klebig, 2019). As such, the communication field's idealizations of inspirational media as socially beneficial stands in stark contrast to the use of inspiration and related constructs in explaining outcomes that may be normatively deemed socially detrimental. At the same time, bodies of research exist on concepts that seem to fall under the umbrella of inspirational processes, yet they are not referred to as inspiration. For instance, in research on terrorism, the concept 'social motivation' is defined as the directing of collective action as a result of a communal object and is often characterized by accompanying feelings of diminished personal responsibility (Bandura, 1990; McClintock, 1972)—characteristics that share great similarity with definitions of inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

Given the definitional ambiguity surrounding what does or does not constitute 'inspiration', and shared terms describing similar processes that might be broadly deemed inspiration, how should we as scholars understand inspirational media? The current thematic issue aims at providing an initial step in addressing this question, connecting scattered research about inspiration and overlapping constructs from different subfields using the tripartite framework of Thrash and Elliot (2003) as an organizing framework. Consequently, we focus on inspiration in the context of media and communication as a process in which (a) a communication object of any modality (b) evokes an idiosyncratic response characterized by cognitions, emotions, or excitatory responses reflecting (self-)transcendence, and (c) motivates the transmission of ideas gleaned from the communication—be it for social benefit or detriment.

2. An Overview of the Thematic Issue

The seven contributions to this thematic issue tackle the different components of the inspiration process, including: evocative content, individuals' emotional and excitatory responses to provoking content, and the motivational consequences of both.

Examining the first step of this process (media as an elicitor of inspiration), Ruotsalainen and Villi (2021) demonstrate that 'live journalism' (i.e., the presentation of news stories to a live audience) can enable self-transcendence and satisfy audiences' intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—thereby potentially inspiring public participation in the democratic process.

Next, this thematic issue features several articles investigating the second step of the inspiration process: emotional and excitatory responses. Echoing the operational definitional ambiguity surrounding parts of the inspiration process, Martela and Sheldon (2019) recently identified at least 45 different measures for eudaimonic well-being. In an effort to help address such ambiguity in the context of 'eudaimonic entertainment experiences,' Daneels, Bowman, Possler, and Mekler (2021) present a scoping review to delineate eudaimonia's associated concepts in research on digital games. In their article they identify four response patterns of interest: (1) Appreciation; (2) meaningful, moving, and self-reflective experiences; (3) social connectedness; and (4) other concepts (including nostalgia, well-being, and elevation). The theoretical value of the article has also been honored by a top article award from the International Communication Associations' Games Division in 2021. In a related vein, Landmann's (2021) theoretical contribution, in which she focuses more narrowly on eudaimonic emotions, offers a groundwork for conceptual distinction between 'elicitor-specific' eudaimonic emotions (such as nostalgia, hope, or gratitude) and 'feeling specific' eudaimonic emotions (such as elevation, being moved, or awe) showing that these emotions

can have general- but also value-specific effects, explaining why they might have a 'good' or 'bad' side (defined as potentially working for or against the well-being of others). Taken together, these two articles offer insight into what characterizes responses to eudaimonic content and begin to identify the conceptual bounds of eudaimonic-specific responses from other, similar responses.

These bounds are examined experimentally by Baldwin and Bente (2021), who use psychophysiological measures to differentiate the effects of hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment narratives about sports (*Rocky* and *Rocky II*). In line with the assumption that eudaimonic entertainment motivates deliberative processing (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014), the authors found that participants who viewed a eudaimonic narrative exhibited slower, more gradual increases in arousal and positive affect during exposure compared to participants who viewed a hedonic narrative. They also demonstrated the third step of the inspirational process, motivational consequences, as viewers of the eudaimonic narrative were more likely to indicate intentions to exercise following exposure.

Also investigating the third component of the inspiration process, Kryston and Fitzgerald (2021) examined the effects and interaction between inspirational media and social norms for prosocial behavior, namely the intention to adopt a dog. Their study showed that social norms were the crucial variable here, raising questions for the context and norm-sensitivity of inspirational media content.

This context sensitivity also matters when less innocuous effects of inspirational and transcending experiences are considered. Two articles in this thematic issue address the potentially 'dark' sides of inspirational media. First, Moore, Green, Fitzgerald, and Paravati (2021) highlight the unintentional side-effects of inspirational stories. In their experiment, participants watched either an inspirational narrative about a boy saving money to buy a wheelchair for his friend without accounting for the systemic failure forcing the boy to do so, an inspirational narrative accounting for this systemic failure, or a control video. Notably, participants who viewed the story denying the systemic component attributed the boy in the wheelchair more personal responsibility for his situation—making it unlikely that they would advocate for social change to improve the life conditions for disabled individuals.

Similarly, but tackling a more strategic aspect, Menke and Wulf (2021) show how inspiration can be abused by political demagogues. Focusing on the emotion of nostalgia, they demonstrate how the German right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany has strategically used nostalgia in its communication and how this type of nostalgic rhetoric can effectively persuade people to support populist claims.

3. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Taken together, the contributions in this thematic issue paint a rich, nuanced picture of the good, the bad, and

the ugly sides of inspiration in the context of media and communication. From including inspirational stimuli beyond the entertainment realm, to the nuanced and detailed mapping of the emotional and excitatory processes triggered by inspirational media, to the side-effects, and the manipulation potential of inspirational media, each article provides meaningful insights into so-far seldom addressed facets of inspirational media. Each article additionally highlights important next steps for future work, aiming to offer a more complete understanding of inspirational processes beyond the academic idealizations of inspirational media. And when it comes to achieving a more complete understanding of inspirational media and accordant outcomes from exposure to such media, much work remains to be done.

Among other opportunities for increasing our understanding of inspirational media, we highlight four open areas we think are necessary for future researchers to contend with. First, despite its increasing popularity in scholarship from communication and other fields, inspiration as it is currently considered suffers from conceptual and operational ambiguity. Even the excellent conceptual efforts made by Thrash and Elliot (2003) seem limited by a lack of primitive terms to define the essential features of evocation and transcendence. Although we think inspiration describes a process distinct from other similar processes, questions remain regarding the precise conceptual and operational bounds of inspirational media and its effects. For instance, future researchers in this area might work to specifically distinguish inspirational media's content features and outcomes from eudaimonic media and outcomes. Open questions in this area remain regarding whether inspirational content and eudaimonic content are one in the same, or whether one might be a sub-category of the other.

Second, and relatedly, inspirational processes do not currently seem to be inherently defined by their ability to elicit normatively positive outcomes such as well-being and prosocial behavior, yet the bulk of research into inspirational media's effects have been restricted to outcomes rooted in social benefit. In line with our logic for curating this thematic issue, future work on inspirational media should continue to investigate inspirational processes as they might also govern media's ability to inspire socially detrimental outcomes. In pursuit of a solution to both of our suggestions for future research so far, we might recommend that future scholars work to further clarify inspirational media according to the content features that distinguish it, rather than the types of outcomes it is thought to elicit.

Third, the explicitly processual nature of inspiration as defined by Thrash and Elliot (2003) suggests that research embracing the different components of the inspiration process—from evocation to motivation—should provide rich insights into inspirational media's effects. Yet studies focusing on more than one component of this process in response to inspirational media exposure are rare (e.g., examining content's

ability to elicit both self-transcending emotions and user-responses together; but see Dale, Raney, Janicke, Sanders, & Oliver, 2017; Dale et al., 2020) and studies depicting the entire process are even more scarce. We hope that future work in this area will attempt to examine media's role in the entire inspiration process.

Finally, critics might wonder what scientific benefit the elucidation and adoption of inspirational media as a construct can offer communication and media psychology scholarship. What do we learn from examining inspirational processes that we might not learn if we examined each component of inspiration by itself? Although understanding in this area warrants future clarification, we cannot help but look to the present thematic issue for indication of the term's value. Indeed, the ability of media to evoke so-called (self-)transcendence and motivate action characterized by lesser feelings of responsibility seems to offer explanatory value for media effects across a wide variety of contexts and research silos. Nevertheless, demonstrating the benefit of adopting yet another term into communication science remains a task to be grappled with by future scholars. Thus, we hope that the collection of articles in this thematic issue provide valuable starting points for future research on inspirational media's good but also bad and ugly sides.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ron Tamborini for his constructive comments related to this thematic issue's focus. His comments ultimately motivated us (but not inspired us; because despite feelings of gratitude and many other emotions, our response was characterized by *greater* feelings of personal responsibility) to clarify both the issue's focus and our own considerations of inspirational media's value.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Bailey, E., & Wojdyski, B. W. (2015). Effects of "meaningful" entertainment on altruistic behavior: Investigating potential mediators. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(4), 603–619. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1093484#>
- Baldwin, J., & Bente, G. (2021). The winner doesn't take it all: Analyzing audience responses to an inspirational sports narrative. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 202–214.
- Bandura, A. (1990). Mechanisms of moral disengagement. In W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind* (pp. 161–191). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barry, J. M., & Girona, J. (2018). A dyadic examination of inspirational factors driving b2b social media influence. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 26(1/2), 117–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2017.1389244>
- Bartsch, A., & Schneider, F. M. (2014). Entertainment and politics revisited: How non-escapist forms of entertainment can stimulate political interest and information seeking—Entertainment and politics revisited. *Journal of Communication*, 64(3), 369–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1879185>
- Belzak, W. C. M., Thrash, T. M., Sim, Y. Y., & Wadsworth, L. M. (2017). Beyond hedonic and eudaimonic well-being: Inspiration and the self-transcendence tradition. In M. D. Robinson & M. Eid (Eds.), *The happy mind: cognitive contributions to well-being* (pp. 117–138). Basel: Springer International. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58763-9_7
- Bouko, C., Naderer, B., Rieger, D., Van Ostaeyen, P., & Voué, P. (2021). Discourse patterns used by extremist Salafists on Facebook: Identifying potential triggers to cognitive biases in radicalized content. *Critical Discourse Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1879185>
- Dale, K. R., Raney, A. A., Janicke, S. H., Sanders, M. S., & Oliver, M. B. (2017). YouTube for good: A content analysis and examination of elicitors of self-transcendent media. *Journal of Communication*, 67(6), 897–919. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12333>
- Dale, K. R., Raney, A. A., Ji, Q., Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Baldwin, J., Rowlett, J. T., . . . Oliver, M. B. (2020). Self-transcendent emotions and social media: Exploring the content and consumers of inspirational Facebook posts. *New Media & Society*, 22(3), 507–527. <https://doi.org/10/gf8pnx>
- Daneels, R., Bowman, N. D., Possler, D., & Mekler, E. D. (2021). The 'eudaimonic experience': A scoping review of the concept in digital games research. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 178–190.
- Frischlich, L. (2021). #Dark inspiration: Eudaimonic entertainment in extremist Instagram posts. *New Media & Society*, 23(3), 554–577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819899625>
- Hahn, L., Tamborini, R., Novotny, E., Grall, C., & Klebig, B. (2019). Applying moral foundations theory to identify terrorist group motivations. *Political Psychology*, 40(3), 507–522. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12525>
- Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Narayan, A., & Seng, A. (2018). Social media for good? A survey on millennials' inspirational social media use. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 7(2). Retrieved from <https://thejsms.org/index.php/TSMRI/article/view/381/0>
- Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Rieger, D., & Connor, W. (2019). Finding meaning at work: The role of inspiring and funny YouTube videos on work-related well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 20(2), 619–640. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-9959-1>
- Ji, Q., Raney, A. A., Janicke-Bowles, S. H., Dale, K. R.,

- Oliver, M. B., Reed, A., . . . Raney, A. A. (2019). Spreading the good news: Analyzing socially shared inspirational news content. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(3), 872–893. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018813096>
- Kryston, K., & Fitzgerald, K. (2021). Inspired to adopt: The role of social norms in media inspiration. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 215–225.
- Landmann, H. (2021). The bright and dark side of eudaimonic emotions: A conceptual framework. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 191–201.
- Martela, F., & Sheldon, K. M. (2019). Clarifying the concept of well-being: Psychological need satisfaction as the common core connecting eudaimonic and subjective well-being. *Review of General Psychology*, 23(4), 458–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1089268019880886>
- McClintock, C. G. (1972). Social motivation: A set of propositions. *Behavioral Science*, 17(5), 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830170505>
- Menke, M., & Wulf, T. (2021). The dark side of inspirational posts: An investigation of nostalgia in right-wing populist communication. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 237–249.
- Moore, M. M., Green, M. C., Fitzgerald, K., & Paravati, E. (2021). Framing inspirational content: Narrative effects on attributions and helping. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 226–236.
- Oliver, M. B., & Bartsch, A. (2010). Appreciation as audience response: Exploring entertainment gratifications beyond hedonism. *Human Communication Research*, 36(1), 53–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01368.x>
- Oliver, M. B., Hartmann, T., & Woolley, J. K. (2012). Elevation in response to entertainment portrayals of moral virtue. *Human Communication Research*, 38(3), 360–378. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2012.01427.x>
- Oliver, M. B., Raney, A. A., Slater, M. D., Appel, M., Hartmann, T., Bartsch, A., . . . Das, E. (2018). Self-transcendent media experiences: Taking meaningful media to a higher level. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 380–389. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqxx020>
- Rieger, D., & Klimmt, C. (2019). The daily dose of digital inspiration: A multi-method exploration of meaningful communication in social media. *New Media and Society*, 21(1), 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818788323>
- Ruotsalainen, J., & Villi, M. (2021). ‘A shared reality between a journalist and the audience’: How live journalism reimagines news stories. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 167–177.
- Thrash, T. M. (2020). The creation and curation of all things worthy: Inspiration as vital force in persons and cultures. *Advances in Motivation Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2020.01.002>
- Thrash, T. M., & Elliot, A. J. (2003). Inspiration as a psychological construct. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 871–889. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.871>
- Wirth, W., Hofer, M., & Schramm, H. (2012). Beyond pleasure: Exploring the eudaimonic entertainment experience. *Human Communication Research*, 38(4), 406–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2012.01434.x>

About the Authors



Lena Frischlich (PhD) is a Junior Research Group Leader at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research focuses on online communication and the changing digital landscape. In particular, she studies the staging and effects of online propaganda and related phenomena (e.g., disinformation) as well as strategies for empowering media users against such manipulative attempts using quantitative, qualitative, and computational measures. Besides that, she is also interested in positive media effects more generally.



Lindsay Hahn (PhD, Michigan State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University at Buffalo–State University of New York. Her research investigates the cognitive processes surrounding media use and effects in audiences across the lifespan. More specifically, she concentrates on entertainment media’s effects on children’s moral proclivities—and separately, ideological extremists’ use of morality in media as a tool for radicalization.



Diana Rieger (PhD, University of Cologne) is an Associate Professor at the Department of Media and Communication at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich (LMU Munich), Germany. Her current work addresses characteristics and effects of hate speech, extremist online communication and counter voices as prevention against radicalization. Furthermore, she focuses on entertainment research, investigating meaningful media content, e.g., how meaning is portrayed in movies or in online content, e.g., memes.