

Inspirational Reality TV: The Prosocial Effects of Lifestyle Transforming Reality Programs on Elevation and Altruism

Mina Tsay-Vogel and K. Maja Krakowiak

In light of recent theories of meaningful media that suggest a host of psychological benefits, the present study uniquely extends the boundaries of the effects of reality TV from simply offering pleasure, diversion, and amusement to its viewers to also providing deep insight and meaning. In particular, a between-subjects experiment (N = 143) examined differences in affective, cognitive, and motivational responses to lifestyle transforming versus game based reality programs. Findings indicate that lifestyle transforming reality TV produced stronger feelings of elevation and perceptions of the program as moving and thought-provoking than game reality TV, which in turn increased motivations for altruism. Avenues for future research and theoretical implications of meaningful and inspiring reality TV for positive psychology are discussed.

The proliferation and dominance of reality-based programs on television continues to generate considerable scholarly attention. The term, “reality TV,” has commonly encompassed programs that showcase real people or non-actors in unscripted scenarios (Hill, 2005; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003) and claim to portray reality (Cavendar & Fishman, 1998). Such programs (e.g., *The Bachelor*, *Survivor*, and *The Real World*) have generally been attributed under a single or collective genre. However, in recent years, the emergence of reality TV subgenres based on distinct narrative premises has made the reality TV genre theoretically more complex (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2015). Some of the commonly identified subgenres include game/competition or gamedocs (e.g., *Fear Factor*), lifestyle or makeover (e.g., *Extreme Makeover*), docusoaps or reality dramas (e.g., *The Real World*), court (e.g., *Judge Judy*), dating or romance (e.g., *The Bachelor*), reality sitcoms (e.g., *The Osbournes*), crime (e.g., *Cops*), informational (e.g., *Trading Spaces*), and talent (e.g., *American Idol*) (Murray & Ouellette, 2004; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006).

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To date, reality TV research generally focuses on the genre's entertainment value and the fulfillment of a host of psychological and social gratifications associated with pleasure or fun (Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2015). However, minimal attention has been given to investigate the prosocial effects of reality TV beyond sheer enjoyment. Earlier conceptualizations of entertainment have predominantly focused on the motivation to seek media for hedonic purposes (Zillmann, 1988). However, growing support points to the prevalence of counter-hedonic media experiences (Knobloch, 2003; Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) in which the blend of positive and negative affective states can also be deemed gratifying and result in eudaimonic outcomes (e.g., gaining deeper insight into human conditions). Specifically, portrayals of meaningful media foster feelings of elevation or inspiration which give rise to motivations to embrace moral virtues (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). These theoretical relationships through a positive psychological perspective have yet to be explored with reality-based programs.

With particular interest in the investigation of meaningful entertainment, this research extends the boundaries of the impact of reality TV from simply offering pleasure, diversion, and amusement to its viewers to also providing deep insight and meaning. Considering the host of reality TV subgenres that currently pervade the entertainment landscape, programs such as *Supernanny*, *Undercover Boss*, and *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* are among the most prominent examples of reality-based programs that portray profound lifestyle transformations as a result of humanitarian and philanthropic efforts (e.g., helping individuals in need), unlike more commonly conceived reality-based programs centering on themes of game, strategy, and competition (e.g., *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Big Brother*). In light of recent theoretical developments that support the positive psychology of meaningful media (Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Rieger et al., 2015), this study suggests that lifestyle transforming reality TV that portrays acts of moral goodness will produce stronger elevating feelings and moving and thought-provoking program perceptions than game reality TV; furthermore, these audience responses will, in turn, enhance motivations for altruism.

Meaningful Entertainment

Initial efforts to understand the appeal of entertainment emphasizes the role of pleasure in guiding media consumption. Specifically, mood management theory proposes that people seek media to either enhance or preserve positive moods or to alleviate negative moods (Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). Yet, when accounting for the appeal of sad or tragic entertainment, explanations related to downward social comparison (e.g., Mares & Cantor, 1992), catharsis (e.g., Cornelius, 1997), and the pleasure of simply wallowing in sadness (e.g., Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008) have been offered. Nevertheless, more recent efforts to advance theories of non-hedonic entertainment alternatively considers the concept of meaningful entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Specifically, entertainment featuring sad or tragic

events may also exemplify moral insight and emphasize fundamental human values and vulnerabilities such as compassion, wisdom, dignity, gratitude, courage, strength, and sacrifice. These moral lessons represented in media content have the potential to foster a deeper understanding of life's meaning and purpose among viewers (Oliver, 2008).

Examining the impact of meaningful entertainment, Oliver and colleagues (2012) found that the consumption of entertainment involving acts of moral beauty produces a host of mixed-affective responses, which they term "elevation." Elevation occurs when one observes morally virtuous deeds of others that subsequently facilitate the desire to possess honorable qualities (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). Although one may feel content and satisfied when witnessing acts of moral righteousness, elevation may also simultaneously be associated with emotions such as sadness, anxiety, or awe (Silver & Haidt, 2008). Hence, the blend of positive and negative emotions derived from meaningful entertainment is characteristic of individuals undergoing elevating affect or feelings of being inspired, moved, or touched.

Affective and Cognitive Responses to Lifestyle Transforming Reality TV

In light of the potential of meaningful entertainment to generate elevation, the present research examines a specific genre of reality TV that certainly embodies moral insight through the presentation of enriching and inspirational personal stories. Contrary to reality-based programs that predominantly focus on themes of game, strategy, and competition, lifestyle transforming reality TV uniquely offers narratives of the self that are less about leisure pursuits, but more about life in general (Brundson, 2003; Brundson, Johnson, Moseley, & Wheatley, 2001; Hill, 2005). Programs characterized as lifestyle transforming contain narratives that portray ordinary people responding to practical ideas from experts on ways to improve their lives (e.g., *Supernanny*, *The Reality of Anger Management*, and *Changing Rooms*) or individuals providing resources to others who are less fortunate to enhance life conditions or to pay tribute for hard work and sacrifice (e.g., *Undercover Boss*, *Secret Millionaire*, and *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*). These programs tend to emphasize participants' personal qualities, and their way of life as moral and social beings become the criteria for success (Palmer, 2012). It is important to conceptually discriminate lifestyle transforming reality-based programs from cosmetic makeover reality-based programs (e.g., *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*) in which the latter programs present individuals undergoing extensive surgical procedures to solely enhance physical appearance. Such makeover reality programs have been found to negatively impact self-esteem and increase unhealthy pressures for thinness (Mazzeo, Trace, Mitchell, & Gow, 2008). Instead, our research focuses on the prosocial impact of a subgenre of reality TV that centers on lifestyle transformations—narratives that resonate moral awareness and understanding of human conditions and excellence that we suggest serve as a form of meaningful entertainment.

Whereas much of entertainment scholarship has focused on meaningfulness in the context of cinematic presentations that offer insight into general life lessons (e.g., value of human sensitivity, importance of human relationships, and notion that human fortitude prevails; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010), no existing scholarship has considered reality TV potentially offering comparable benefits. Taking into consideration the work of Oliver and colleagues (2012) that theoretically links meaningful entertainment consumption and affective responses indicative of elevation (e.g., feeling moved, touched, and inspired), we expect that moral presentations of human compassion, generosity, and sacrifice in lifestyle transforming reality programs should likely produce greater elevation as compared to reality programs principally grounded on themes of competition, strategy, and manipulation (i.e., those lacking representations of moral virtue). Since these two reality TV subgenres reflect fundamentally opposite moral portrayals, they serve as useful comparison groups for this study. Therefore, the following hypothesis is drawn:

H₁: Lifestyle transforming reality TV will elicit stronger elevating affect than game reality TV.

While literature aptly points to the theoretical connection between meaningful content and mixed affective responses (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver et al., 2012), we are also interested in how lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV compare in generating positive and negative emotions separately. Therefore, the following research question is addressed:

RQ₁: Are there differences in a) happy affect and b) sad affect after viewing lifestyle transforming reality TV as compared to game reality TV?

In addition to emotional responses, perceptions with regard to the nature and value of meaningful content also contribute to one's entertainment experience. To explore media gratifications beyond hedonism, Oliver and Bartsch (2010) found that perceptions of cinematic entertainment as fun and suspenseful (commonly related to the experience of enjoyment) are qualitatively distinct from those perceived as moving/thought-provoking (commonly related to the experience of appreciation). Appreciation accounts for the experiential domains of more tender, serious, and pensive media gratifications. The distinctions between pleasure and meaningfulness have been informed by conceptualizing responses associated with thrill and arousal as more reactive and immediate and those associated with reflection as more deliberative and interpretive (Cupchik, 1994; Vorderer & Ritterfeld, 2009). Specifically, individuals generally report greater enjoyment for lighter media fare (e.g., comedy and romance) and greater appreciation for more serious media fare (e.g., drama and documentary; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Since sad or tragic media commonly feature portrayals of human virtue (Oliver, 2008), it is not surprising that such content provokes deeper cognitive appraisal and introspection among viewers. Given these theoretical considerations, due to meaningful portrayals of the human

condition documented in lifestyle transforming reality TV as compared to the competitive and thrilling nature of game reality TV, we expect similar perceptual differences as revealed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₂: Lifestyle transforming reality TV will be perceived as more moving/thought-provoking than game reality TV.

H₃: Game reality TV will be perceived as more a) fun and b) suspenseful than lifestyle transforming reality TV.

Altruistic Motivations

While the present research suggests that lifestyle transforming reality TV should stimulate stronger feelings of elevation and moving/thought-provoking perceptions compared to game reality TV, we also anticipate that these aforementioned responses lead to positive motivational outcomes. Relevant to our investigation, motivations for altruism or the desire to be a better person may be linked to the consumption of lifestyle transforming reality programs. Research in positive psychology has shown that witnessing heroic actions and empathizing with those who exemplify prosocial behaviors can invoke interest in helping others (Batson et al., 1997). In a series of experiments, Schnall and colleagues (2010) found that those who experienced elevation after watching a film scene were more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors such as volunteering for an unpaid study (an action that was not semantically related to the observed prosocial behavior). Similar findings were also revealed when nursing mothers were more nurturing toward their infants after watching an elevating talk show clip of musicians showing gratitude toward their teachers for their mentoring efforts (Silvers & Haidt, 2008). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Viewing lifestyle transforming reality TV will be more positively associated with altruistic motivations than will viewing game reality TV.

Given that lifestyle transforming reality programs represent themes of exemplary moral actions, it is possible that the experience of elevation and perceptions of these programs as moving/thought-provoking can also motivate altruism. Specifically, the affective and cognitive experiences generated by viewing acts of human generosity, compassion, and sacrifice are expected to promote prosocial outcomes (i.e., the desire to improve the welfare of others and lead a more meaningful life). For example, mediated experiences of being moved and uplifted inspired people to donate to a charity (Freeman, Aquino, & McFerran, 2009). In a similar vein, Oliver and colleagues (2012) found that elevation indicative of mixed affective responses to meaningful films was positively associated with the general desire to embody or

enact moral virtues. Therefore, in line with extant research that supports the unique motivational benefits of meaningful mediated experiences (Oliver et al., 2012; Schnall et al., 2010; Silvers & Haidt, 2008), the following hypotheses are drawn:

H₅: Elevating affect will be more positively associated with altruistic motivations than will happy affect and sad affect.

H₆: Perceptions of reality TV as moving/thought-provoking will be more positively associated with altruistic motivations than will perceptions of reality TV as fun and suspenseful.

Proposed Model

In addition to our expected relationships, we introduce a model that further delineates the associations among the variables of interest (see [Figure 1](#)). Specifically, the model proposes that lifestyle transforming reality TV as compared to game reality TV will result in higher levels of elevating affect (H₁), perceptions of the reality TV program as moving/thought-provoking (H₂), and altruistic motivations (H₄). In contrast, game reality TV as compared to lifestyle transforming reality TV will result in stronger perceptions of the reality TV program as fun (H_{3a}) and suspenseful (H_{3b}). Subsequently, elevating affect (H₅) and perceptions of the reality TV program as moving/thought-provoking (H₆) will lead to greater altruistic motivations. This model also implies two indirect effects. Specifically, reality TV will lead to altruistic motivations through elevating affect and perceptions of the reality TV program as moving/thought-provoking.

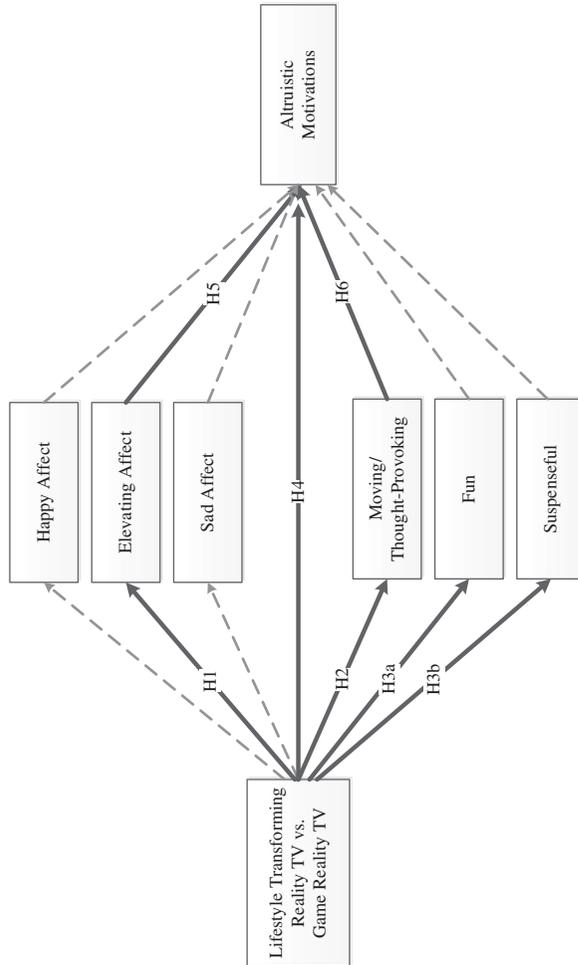
Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred forty-three undergraduate students (80.4% females, 19.6% males) participated in an experiment for extra credit. Participants were recruited from communication courses at two large universities, one in the Western region and the other in the Northeastern region of the United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years ($M = 21.22$, $SD = 1.87$). The sample consisted of 76.2% Caucasian, 18.9% Asian/Asian American, 0.7% American Indian, 6.3% Latino, 2.8% Native American, 2.8% African American, and 0.7% with no indication of race.

After reading an informed consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of two reality TV conditions in which they watched a video segment (approximately 6–8 minutes) of either a game reality TV program or a lifestyle transforming reality TV program. Following the video segment, participants responded to a series

Figure 1
Proposed Model



of manipulation check items and questions assessing the dependent variables. These items were counterbalanced to avoid order and demand characteristics effects. Lastly, participants responded to demographic items at the end of the questionnaire.

Stimulus

Within each experimental condition, participants were randomly assigned to view one of two reality TV segments that represented the reality TV genre of interest. The segments were edited to maintain the narrative structures of the programs while providing viewers with an understanding of the general themes presented in the programs.

Game Reality TV. For the game reality TV genre, video segments were taken from CBS's *Survivor* or CBS's *The Amazing Race* to represent narratives predicated on themes of competition. In *Survivor*, contestants are isolated on an island, and through various mental and physical challenges, players vote off other tribe members until one final contestant remains as the sole survivor who wins one million dollars. The selected segment shows contestants performing a challenge in which they must balance a bowl of rice on their heads while walking through an obstacle course. The winner earns immunity from being eliminated at the next tribal council.

The Amazing Race features teams of two people racing around the world in competition with other teams. Teams are progressively eliminated, and the team that arrives first in the final leg is awarded the grand prize of one million dollars. The selected segment shows the host describing the rules of the game and the teams running to a field to find clues hidden in balloons. The teams then drive to the Los Angeles airport to pick up tickets to fly to Argentina.

Lifestyle Transforming Reality TV. For the lifestyle transforming reality TV genre, video segments were taken from ABC's *Supernanny* or CBS's *Undercover Boss* to represent narratives centered on themes of personal and lifestyle improvement. *Supernanny* portrays a professional nanny devoted to helping families in which the parents are struggling with their child rearing. Through instruction and observation, she shows the parents alternative ways to discipline their children and regain order in the household. The particular segment introduced a mother struggling to connect with her teenage daughters. The clip then showed an intervention by the supernanny, in which she asks the daughters to write down what they are feeling. The mother apologizes for not speaking more to her daughters, and they all write down some future goals. The segment ends with the family getting along and making a family crest.

Undercover Boss introduces a high-positioned executive of a corporation going undercover as an entry-level employee. The boss invariably spends time getting to know selected company employees, and at the end of the undercover week, the boss returns to his or her true identity and rewards hardworking employees through campaign, promotion, or financial rewards. The selected segment shows the

undercover CEO of KOA arriving at a campground and watching a store manager handle a difficult customer. The segment then shows the CEO talking to the manager in a different setting. He tells her that he will pay for her and her family to go on vacation and for her to go to school to continue her education.

Manipulation Check. A manipulation check was employed to ascertain that the reality TV genre manipulations were successful. Five items served as manipulation checks to ensure that the reality TV program (*Survivor* or *The Amazing Race*) which represented the reality TV genre of interest—game, was perceived as competitive ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.80$). Items included: “This reality TV program is based on competition, centers on the theme of winning, involves strategy, focuses on game play, and emphasizes the importance of competition.” Five items served as manipulation checks to confirm that the reality TV program (*Supernanny* or *Undercover Boss*) which represented the reality TV genre of interest—lifestyle transforming, was perceived as lifestyle transforming ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.48$). Items included: “This reality TV program is based on lifestyle transformation, centers on the theme of personal/lifestyle makeovers, involves personal/lifestyle changes, focuses on life reflection,” and “emphasizes the importance of being a better person.”

Scores for perception of competition were subjected to a one-way ANOVA indicating that participants who viewed either *Survivor* ($M = 6.12$, $SE = .18$) or *The Amazing Race* ($M = 6.02$, $SE = .18$) perceived the program as significantly more competitive than those who viewed either *Supernanny* ($M = 3.00$, $SE = .17$) or *Undercover Boss* ($M = 3.27$, $SE = .17$), $F(3, 139) = 98.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .68$. Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA for perception of lifestyle transformation revealed that participants who viewed either *Supernanny* ($M = 5.55$, $SE = .19$) or *Undercover Boss* ($M = 5.13$, $SE = .19$) perceived the program as significantly more lifestyle transforming than those who viewed either *Survivor* ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .20$) or *The Amazing Race* ($M = 3.51$, $SE = .20$), $F(3, 139) = 30.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$. Therefore, the analyses support the efficacy of the manipulation in creating the two reality TV genre conditions—game and lifestyle transforming.

Dependent Measures

Affective States. Following exposure to the reality TV segment, participants rated their affective states on 23 adjectives anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*). These items reflect a range of positive, negative, and meaningful emotions and were adapted from Oliver and colleagues (2012). A factor analysis using principal components extraction and varimax rotation revealed three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 that explained 74.81% of the variance. Items loading highly on a given factor were employed to create three scales: happy affect, elevating affect, and sad affect. Happy affect was comprised of 9 items (amused, entertained, upbeat, excited, humored, pleasant, cheerful, happy, and joyful: $\alpha = .95$, $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.55$). Elevating affect was comprised of 10 items (moved, touched,

meaningful, compassionate, emotional, inspired, tender, introspective, poignant, and contemplative: $\alpha = .95$, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.60$). Sad affect was comprised of 4 items (gloomy, depressed, sad, and melancholy: $\alpha = .91$, $M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.29$).

Perceptions of Reality TV. Impressions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking, fun, and suspenseful were assessed using scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Perceptions of the video segment as moving/thought-provoking ($\alpha = .96$, $M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.50$) were measured by 10 items (e.g., "Watching this video clip has enriched my life in some way" and "I was moved by this video clip"). Perceptions of the video segment as fun ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.67$) were measured by 6 items (e.g., "This video clip was entertaining" and "It was fun for me to watch this video clip"). Perceptions of the video segment as suspenseful ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.53$) were measured by 3 items (e.g., "I was at the edge of my seat while watching this video clip" and "This video clip was suspenseful").

Altruistic Motivations. To measure the desire to be altruistic, participants responded to a series of 23 items anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*) informed by Algoe and Haidt (2009) and Oliver and colleagues (2012). These items reflect one's intention to live a more fulfilling life and do good deeds for others ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.58$). Example items include: "Watching this video clip made me want to be a better person, help others in need, devote my time serving the community, donate money to a charity, develop my relationships with others, and have a more meaningful life."

Results

Affective Responses to Lifestyle Transforming versus Game Reality TV

A MANOVA was employed to examine how the reality TV genre conditions differed on happy, elevating, and sad affective responses. The analysis revealed significant differences in affective responses between the lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV conditions, Multivariate $F(3, 139) = 31.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$. H_1 predicted that lifestyle transforming reality TV would elicit stronger elevating affect (more so than game reality TV), and RQ_1 inquired about differences in happy and sad affective responses between the two reality TV conditions. As expected, participants who viewed the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 4.05$, $SE = .16$) reported stronger feelings of elevation than those who viewed the game reality TV segment ($M = 2.49$, $SE = .17$), $F(1, 141) = 44.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$. Therefore, H_1 was supported. To address RQ_1 , the analysis yielded no difference in happy affect after exposure to lifestyle transforming reality TV ($M = 3.75$, $SE = .18$) and to game reality TV ($M = 3.82$, $SE = .19$), $F(1, 141) = .07$, $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .001$. However, sad affect was

stronger following the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 2.45$, $SE = .14$) as compared to the game reality TV segment ($M = 1.72$, $SE = .15$), $F(1, 141) = 12.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$.

Cognitive Responses to Lifestyle Transforming versus Game Reality TV

A MANOVA was performed to test the next two hypotheses (H_2 and H_3) which pertain to perceptual differences between lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV. The analysis yielded a significant multivariate effect of reality TV genre condition, Multivariate $F(3, 139) = 303.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .87$. H_2 predicted that lifestyle transforming reality TV would be perceived as more moving/thought-provoking as compared to game reality TV. As expected, the analysis indicated that the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 3.37$, $SE = .16$) was rated as more moving/thought-provoking than the game reality TV segment ($M = 2.40$, $SE = .17$), $F(1, 141) = 16.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Therefore, H_2 was supported. H_3 predicted that game reality TV would be perceived as more fun and suspenseful as compared to lifestyle transforming reality TV. The analysis revealed that while there was no difference in ratings of fun between the game reality TV segment ($M = 4.12$, $SE = .20$) and the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 4.05$, $SE = .19$), $F(1, 141) = .05$, $p = .82$, $\eta^2 = .001$, the game reality TV segment ($M = 3.44$, $SE = .18$) was rated as more suspenseful than the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 2.72$, $SE = .17$), $F(1, 141) = 8.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Therefore, H_3 was partially supported.

Reality TV Subgenre Predicting Altruistic Motivations

An ANOVA was employed to examine how the reality TV genre conditions affected altruistic motivations. The analysis revealed significant differences in altruistic motivations between the lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV conditions, $F(1, 141) = 14.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. H_4 predicted that lifestyle transforming reality TV would elicit stronger altruistic motivations (more so than game reality TV). As expected, participants who viewed the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment ($M = 4.06$, $SE = .17$) reported stronger altruistic motivations than those who viewed the game reality TV segment ($M = 3.11$, $SE = .18$). Therefore, H_4 was supported.

Affective Responses Predicting Altruistic Motivations

A multiple regression was conducted to examine affective predictors of altruistic motivations. H_5 predicted that elevating affect would be positively related to altruistic motivations (more so than happy affect and sad affect). The analysis showed that whereas happy affect ($\beta = .11$, $p = .17$) and sad affect ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .49$) did not

predict altruistic motivations, elevating affect ($\beta = .64, p < .001$) did. Specifically, elevation increased altruistic motivations. Therefore, H_5 was supported.

Cognitive Responses Predicting Altruistic Motivations

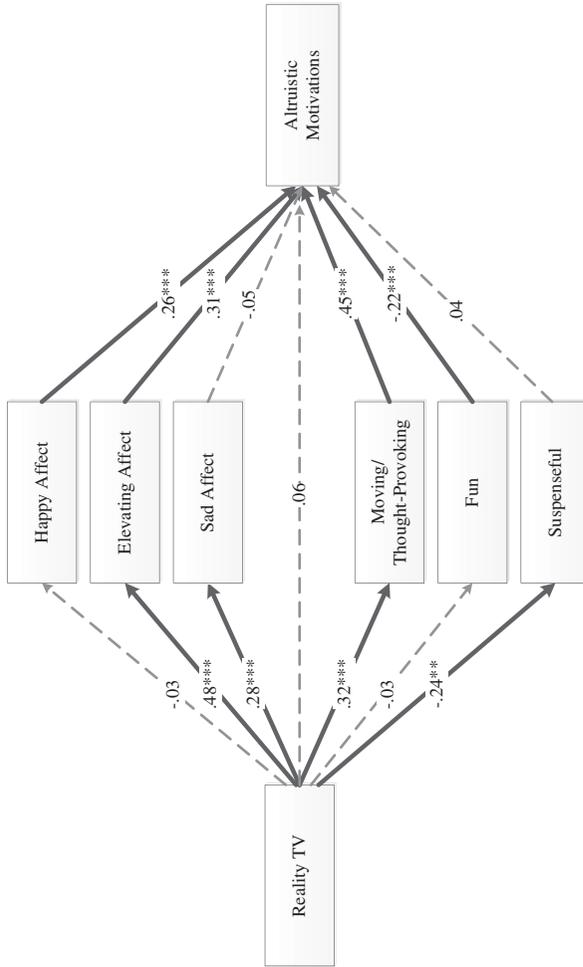
A multiple regression was performed to determine whether perceptions of the reality TV segment predict altruistic motivations. H_6 predicted that perceptions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking would be positively related to altruistic motivations (more so than perceptions of it as fun and suspenseful). The analysis indicated that although perceptions of the reality TV segment as fun ($\beta = -.02, p = .84$) and suspenseful ($\beta = -.04, p = .60$) did not predict altruistic motivations, perceptions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking ($\beta = .69, p < .001$) did. In particular, stronger impressions of the reality TV clip as moving/thought-provoking facilitated altruistic motivations. Therefore, H_6 was supported.

Model Testing

In light of the differences in affective and cognitive responses that emerged following exposure to lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV, a path analysis was performed to examine the hypothesized relationships between the variables of interest. The initial model (Figure 1) was tested using AMOS with reality TV condition coded as 0 = game reality TV and 1 = lifestyle transforming reality TV. Except for reality TV condition, all of the variables were modeled as single indicator latent constructs with errors estimated as $(1-\alpha)\sigma^2$. Figure 2 shows the initial test of the model indicating that lifestyle transforming reality TV produced greater elevating affect ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) and sad affect ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) as compared to game reality TV. Furthermore, whereas the lifestyle transforming reality TV segment was perceived as more moving/thought-provoking ($\beta = .32, p < .001$), it was also perceived to be less suspenseful ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$) than the game reality TV segment. Additionally, although happy affect ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), elevating affect ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), and perceptions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking ($\beta = .45, p < .001$) increased altruistic motivations, perceptions of the reality TV segment as fun decreased altruistic motivations ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$). While these significant relationships emerged, the overall fit of the model could be improved, $\chi^2(15) = 94.67, p < .001, CFI = .87, RMSEA = .15$.

Given that our goal was to examine how reality TV (specifically lifestyle transforming reality TV as compared to game reality TV) would impact altruistic motivations through affective and cognitive responses, we removed happy and sad affect and perceptions of the reality TV segment as fun and suspenseful in the final model as these variables were not significantly associated with both reality TV genre exposure and altruistic motivations. Furthermore, the direct link between reality TV and altruistic motivations was removed as this relationship was not significant in the

Figure 2
Initial Model



Note. Reality TV condition was coded as 0 = game reality TV; 1 = lifestyle transforming reality TV. $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

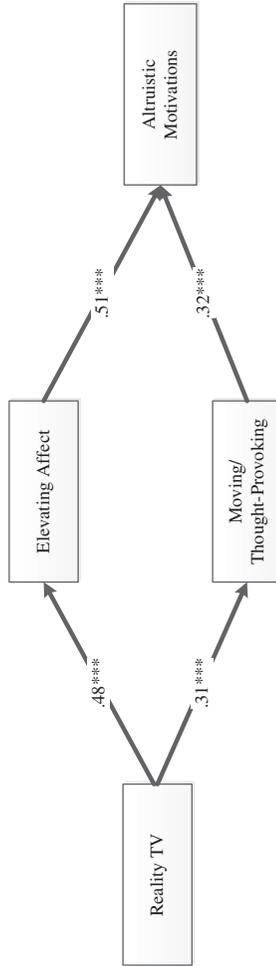
initial model test. This revised model was tested and yielded an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(5) = 7.56$, $p = .14$, CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .05. Figure 3 shows the paths associated with the resultant model. Consistent with our hypotheses, lifestyle transforming reality TV was associated with stronger elevating affect ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and perceptions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) as compared to game reality TV. Both of these affective and cognitive responses, in turn, predicted heightened altruistic motivations respectively ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). Moreover, bootstrapping procedures using 2,000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals revealed that elevating affect ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) and perceptions of the reality TV segment as moving/thought-provoking ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) mediated the indirect paths between reality TV genre and altruistic motivations.

Discussion

Can watching reality TV motivate you to be more altruistic? Our research uniquely points to the prosocial benefits underlying lifestyle transforming reality TV. In particular, reality programs that present narratives of personal lifestyle transformations which embody exemplary moral lessons were deemed as more elevating, moving, and thought-provoking (when compared to reality programs predicated fundamentally on themes of game, competition, and strategy). In turn, such responses generated stronger altruistic motivations among viewers. Whereas empirical investigations of the appeal of reality TV have focused predominantly on its entertainment and hedonic appeal (e.g., Lundy et al., 2008; Nabi et al., 2003; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2015), this study alternatively supports the educational value of reality-based programs that center on themes of human virtue. Specifically, such programs (e.g., *Supernanny* and *Undercover Boss*) have the potential to foster introspective experiences for viewers (e.g., inspiration, gratitude, and reflection) and further encourage behavioral motivations associated with helping others and leading a more fulfilling life—prosocial responses which prior research on reality TV has not yet identified. Therefore, our findings invaluablely contribute to both reality TV and positive psychology literature by confirming the meaningful merit of reality-based programs.

Consistent with recent scholarship on meaningful entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver et al., 2012), this research demonstrates that portrayals of moral beauty in reality-based programs lead to mixed affective responses. While there was no difference in happy affect between lifestyle transforming and game reality TV, elevating affect (to a larger extent) and sad affect were more pronounced for lifestyle transforming reality programs. Our data suggest that although entertainment featuring human connection, vulnerabilities, and virtue elicits feelings of sorrow, it more strongly produces feelings of warmth, tenderness, sympathy, understanding, and compassion which correspond to existing work on the nature of inspiring and meaningful mediated experiences.

Figure 3
Resultant Model



Note. Reality TV condition was coded as 0 = game reality TV; 1 = lifestyle transforming reality TV. *** $p < .001$.

As expected, and similar to the findings of Oliver and Bartsch (2010), more serious media fare (i.e., lifestyle transforming reality TV) resulted in stronger moving/thought-provoking program perceptions, whereas lighter media fare (i.e., game reality TV) evoked stronger suspenseful program perceptions. These results confirm the eudaimonic potential of reality-based narratives centered on lifestyle transformations and support the idea that entertainment can be hedonically and eudaimonically driven (Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). Whereas reality TV programs that are game and competition focused provide experiences of suspense and thrill (generally associated with media enjoyment), those that project moral lessons offer cognitive insight into life's meaning and purpose (generally associated with media appreciation). Therefore, future research should consider how reality-based programs may foster qualitatively distinct affective and cognitive responses among viewers depending on the hedonic and eudaimonic nature of the entertainment experience.

In addition to anticipated differences in affective and cognitive responses between lifestyle transforming and game reality programs, our research revealed that only feelings of elevation and perceptions of the program as moving/thought-provoking predicted greater altruistic motivations. Supporting the notion that elevating and provocative media experiences encourage the desire to perform moral actions (Freeman et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2012; Schnall et al., 2010; Silvers & Haidt, 2008), this study certainly points to the value of lifestyle transforming reality TV in inspiring personal and social good. Although much of reality TV scholarship emphasizes viewers' gratifications pertaining to relaxation, habit, escapism, diversion, and enjoyment (e.g., Lundy et al., 2008; Nabi et al., 2006; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Reiss & Wiltz, 2004), this investigation offers an alternative perspective to the impact of reality programs by highlighting their prosocial significance. In other words, our data suggest that the consumption of lifestyle transforming reality TV has implications for improving the welfare of others.

As another theoretical contribution to the literature, the current research further demonstrates the distinct effects of reality TV subgenres. In particular, programs that portray real people or non-actors in unscripted situations (Hill, 2005; Nabi et al., 2003) produce different emotional, cognitive, and motivational outcomes based on distinct narrative and thematic premises (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2015). As previously noted, the theoretical complexity of the reality TV genre is largely due to the proliferation of subgenres that have popularized over the years (Nabi et al., 2006; Murray & Ouellette, 2004). Given that our study focused on establishing lifestyle transforming reality TV as a form of meaningful entertainment with the potential to provide unique prosocial benefits for viewers, we chose to examine programs within this subgenre in comparison to those within the game based reality subgenre as they reflect fundamentally opposite moral portrayals. Whereas lifestyle transforming reality programs feature themes predominantly associated with human compassion, integrity, diligence, generosity, and sacrifice, displaying acts of moral virtue, game reality programs on the contrary feature themes of competition, strategy, and manipulation (displaying acts of moral vice). Hence, these two reality TV subgenres served as useful comparisons to explore differences in affective, cognitive, and motivational

program responses. However, future scholarship should certainly consider the complexity of moral presentations in reality-based programs as they may not entirely be defined across subgenres. In particular, some programs (e.g., *The Biggest Loser*) represent a hybrid between lifestyle transforming reality TV and game reality TV as they showcase personal stories of inspiring lifestyle or health alterations in the form of a competition. Therefore, the amalgam of such moral presentations offers insight into reality TV's potential to simultaneously offer both pleasure and meaning to its audiences.

Other theoretical considerations may further elucidate our understanding of the link between exposure to media entertainment and altruism. Whereas this study found that elevation and moving/thought-provoking program perceptions mediated this relationship, it is also possible that viewers reported stronger moral motivations because they engaged in vicarious learning (Bandura, 2001). Perhaps when witnessing acts of human sensitivity, connection, and courage that are positively reinforced in lifestyle transforming reality programs, viewers' desire to enact such behaviors was disinhibited for the purpose of experiencing similar rewards. While social learning serves as an alternative theoretical explanation for future research on meaningful media to consider, it is also possible that individuals consuming lifestyle transforming reality TV engage in social comparisons. In this case, participants of these programs who embrace and enact acts of moral virtue may likely serve as comparison targets, subsequently instilling feelings of inspiration, hopefulness, and confidence in viewers. This upward social comparison process can contribute to an increase in self-efficacy and the desire to display altruism, particularly if one is motivated by self-improvement mechanisms (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991). Alternatively, it is possible that priming could explain some of our findings. Specifically, viewing lifestyle transforming reality TV programs in which people are depicted performing altruistic acts may have primed participants to want to be more altruistic. Therefore, future research should examine both short- and long-term effects of viewing meaningful content.

Some limitations of the study are worth noting. First, the present research did not take into consideration variables such as prior program exposure, perceptions of reality TV, fandom, and viewer empathy. These factors could have a bearing on the impact of reality TV on affective, cognitive, and motivational responses, and thus, researchers should consider including these as covariates for future studies. Second, it is possible that using different programs to represent the subgenres results in other program difference effects. Although we tried our best to edit the clips in a way that would represent the central narrative premise of the programs while upholding ecological validity, the 6–8 minute video segments may not have captured the full narrative structure of the shows. Furthermore, future research could strengthen the internal validity of the study by manipulating certain narrative elements within the program that would expect to contribute to elevation. Alternatively, scholars may consider conducting a survey to measure the quantity of exposure to different types of programs (reality versus fiction) to determine if a diet of one type over another associates with altruism.

Future research may also examine prosocial effects outside of altruism which provide additional support for the psychological and social benefits of lifestyle transforming reality TV. Most recently, Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, and Bente (2014) found that both hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experiences increase psychological well-being or vitality through media-induced recovery. In a similar vein, meaningful media may also induce feelings of personal growth and mastery which have implications for coping (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008). Such avenues of exploration may theoretically enrich entertainment scholarship on the positive effects of inspiring reality-based programs.

To conclude, this research is the first to provide significant insight into the elevating, moving, and thought-provoking experiences of consuming lifestyle transforming reality TV. Most interesting, we support the notion of lifestyle transforming reality TV as a form of meaningful entertainment that has important implications for positive psychology, particularly in promoting altruism. The findings derived from this line of inquiry bolster the prosocial impact of reality programs that emphasize themes of moral beauty and optimistically point to the power of such programs to encourage individuals to enhance the well-being of others.

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