

# Entertainment Media and Social Consciousness

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When you lecture people about your views on the problems of society, they tend to close up. When you talk to them on the level of laughter and cheers and tears and scares, they react emotionally.

—Jordan Peele, director of films *Get Out* and *Us*, Academy Award Winner

Entertainment media is arguably a strong force in the overall media landscape. It provides mechanisms through which we meet needs, adjust our moods and perceptions of ourselves, and connect with others inside and outside of a media narrative. Services such as Netflix, Hulu, Spotify, and Audible offer users seemingly endless television, film, music, and literary content in addition to the “traditional” venues for entertainment. Over the past decade and a half, scholarship in media effects has significantly expanded to investigate the role entertainment media and experiences play in encouraging audiences to think more deeply, feel inspired, encourage prosocialness, and otherwise serve in the interest of social good. Models such as the “two-level model of entertainment motivation” (Vorderer, 2011) and research in appreciation of entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011) and inspirational media (Oliver et al., 2018) emphasize the cognitive and affective “elaborations” through which entertainment encourages individuals to think on questions related to the purpose of life guided by wisdom and introspection. Thus, entertainment research more broadly seeks to understand how, when, and why entertainment media leave audiences cheering, frightened, crying, or with a haunting, thoughtful feeling that sticks with them beyond the viewing experience. In addition to providing avenues for pleasure

and growth, entertainment can also be reflective of and influence how we behave as members of society.

McKee and colleagues (2014) suggest that media, including entertainment, are a significant cultural force in that they can articulate identities and values of a culture, but also serve as sites where these same values and identities are discussed and challenged. They provide symbolic value through their ability to entertain through emotional engagement, allow escape from the daily grind, or even set the stage to see what is possible for human existence and connection that goes beyond our personal experiences. The literature on meaningful media experiences (see Oliver et al., 2018, for an overview) provides insight into the general ability of entertainment media to encourage personal growth and greater human connectedness. Yet, there is another entry point to greater understanding of entertainment's positive effects, and that is through examining entertainment media's ability to create social change.

Entertainment content is not generally thought of as being socially conscious or as being the source of robust discussion regarding society's ills. But, much content presents narratives that discuss some of the toughest challenges faced by organizations, governments, and societies. Entertainment with an explicit focus on social issues and those which emphasize historical (e.g., the films *Hotel Rwanda*, *Life Is Beautiful*, etc.) and current social issues as subplots or allude to social issues (e.g., *Avatar*) may differentially encourage thought and conversation among audiences on topics related to justice, equality, equity, and how individuals relate to one another on a human level. Entertainment narratives can make abstract ideas more concrete and easier to understand, especially in cases where an individual feels low self-efficacy (Bandura, 2009; Klimmt, 2017) or is faced with other barriers that prevent comprehension and understanding. Entertainment experiences may bring people together across different life experiences, or

individuals may find different meanings in the same narrative depending on their own life experiences (Green, 2008). Thus, entertainment media can serve as continuing education on social issues and encourage action in ways that other forms of media may not be able to. This chapter introduces the term socially conscious entertainment (SCE). We discuss its similarities with meaningful and hedonic entertainment experiences, entertainment-education, and various theoretical frameworks from which to examine its usefulness in prompting audiences to challenge existing social attitudes.

## Meaningful Media Experiences

Meaningful media experiences are the result of media content that generally encourages contemplativeness regarding one's purpose in life as it relates to the greater world around them. The content often features themes related to moral virtue and the human condition (Oliver et al., 2018). Compared to pleasurable entertainment experiences, meaningful ones may motivate individuals to be better people, kinder to others, search for greater purpose in life (Oliver, Hartmann & Wooley, 2012), or elicit prosocial motivations (Janicke & Oliver, 2017; Oliver et al., 2015). While common themes and genres may generally be thought of as meaningful (e.g., dramas, documentaries, etc.), a narrative that is meaningful for one person may or may not be meaningful for another. The experiences themselves are subjective and may vary across types of genres, narratives, and formats. Entertainment media is meaningful in so far as it prompts individuals to think on human moral virtues, perhaps demonstrates the values of those virtues, or to think about what it means to live a "just" life (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011).

Meaningful experiences can be categorized into more specific, nuanced groups that are distinguished by the value of the experience (Oliver et al., 2018). There are meaningful

experiences that resonate at the level of self-reflection and personal growth and those that involve reflection on the interconnectedness of the self with others and the wider universe. The former, inward-focused eudaimonic experiences more often fulfill intrinsic needs and gratifications related to areas such as personal growth and mastery. The second, self-transcendent experiences, are characterized by needs to go beyond self-enhancement to include consideration and valuation of others' needs. In this form of meaningfulness, individuals recognize shared elements of greater humanity in themselves, are aware of and reflect on the joys and tragedy of humanity, feel greater connectedness with others and their surroundings, and generally think of their existence beyond themselves.

The two forms of meaningful experiences may overlap in some ways. An entertainment experience could be eudaimonic in that seeing a character overcome an obstacle may result in a person feeling a higher sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, or that same experience could be self-transcendent if in addition to the aforementioned the viewer feels a greater sense of connection to humanity at large and elevated by their experience. To this end, [Oliver and colleagues \(2018\)](#) suggest that there is a continuum of meaningful media experiences ranging from those that are more self-related to those that are more transcendent.

[Vorderer and Halfmann \(2019\)](#) argue that entertainment media provides opportunities for individuals to experience “aesthetic resonance,” in which they engage with narratives that help them better understand and cope with their relationships with others and the broader world. Resonance consists of two main components: (1) people and elements of a person's environment touch or address them in some way and (2) the response and connection individuals have to the element that affected them. People are constantly driven to improve various aspects of their quality of life whether that is related to social status, health, basic freedoms, or happiness. This

drive is accompanied with a sense of competition for limited resources to meet these ends. How one thinks of the wants, needs, resources, and the factors related to each are a way of relating to the world and others in it. How one feels society responds to or addresses their assessment completes the other half of the resonance equation (Rosa, 2016). Entertainment media provides opportunities for individuals to feel acknowledged by the world. Such an acknowledgment, however temporary, serves as a transformative process affecting one's emotions, motivations, and values (Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019).

Experiences from SCE media may fall somewhere along the continuum of meaningful media experiences and may also create a sense of aesthetic resonance for those feeling otherwise alienated by society. Socially conscious entertainment media may even serve as a bridge between hedonic and meaningful experiences. In some ways socially conscious experiences are similar to self-transcendent ones in that they can elicit a sense of self-in-others that may encourage actions on behalf of others that serve no immediate personal benefit (e.g., charitable giving, volunteering, etc.). On the other hand, they could be similar to eudaimonic experiences because they could foster self-reflection and introspection that leads to personal growth without explicit outward benefits to those around them. We argue that SCE media elicit emotional responses that encourage both individual growth and human connectedness, bridging together both aspects of meaningful entertainment as defined by Oliver et al. (2018). Self-transcendent media experiences may encourage thoughts about where one fits in the human world and the value of that connection, while SCE adds to this conversation a responsibility to and for others which, in many, may encourage and require personal growth.

Content traditionally thought of for its hedonic value can also transcend its original purpose when socially conscious themes are present. Socially conscious elements presented in typically

hedonic media genres and formats may encourage contemplation about serious issues. In this way, hedonic and meaningful media experiences may not necessarily always be thought of as orthogonal to one another. According to Cooley (1907), introspection and empathy and connection with others are both necessary for social insight. So, it stands to reason that entertainment media that include themes of general societal concern, and the associated motivations and emotions may be related with social engagement.

## **Defining Socially Conscious Entertainment**

Research into the possible effects of socially conscious entertainment is important because individuals who are made aware of certain social injustices may experience a change in attitude that leads to action regarding an injustice or resolving inequities (Giddings, 2005). Such outcomes may result through a variety of cognitive and affective mechanisms that prompt entertainment consumers to socially engage, thinking more broadly of the self in connection to the world around them.

Whether encouraging introspection or presenting seemingly pure entertainment, socially conscious entertainment may encourage an openness to human flourishing that leads to connections with others, greater understanding and potentially social action.

## **Social Consciousness**

In order to understand what is meant by the term, SCE, one must have some understanding of what it means to be socially conscious. Schlitz, Vieten, and Miller (2010) define social consciousness as the degree to which a person is explicitly aware that they are part of a larger, interrelated community of people and how they may influence or be influenced by that community. There are varying levels of social consciousness ranging from lack of awareness to

explicit awareness of one's interdependence on others (Anderson, 2018; Schlitz et al., 2010). One's sense of consciousness may begin as being self-centered at an early age but through cognitive and emotional development an individual may arrive at full social consciousness (Anderson, 2018). This final stage isn't a direct or automatic result of the aging process as argued by theories of cognitive development. Even though one may be advanced cognitively, they may still remain ego-centered. This is where emotional development and the ability to use one's reasoning capacity to serve others, advances them along the path of consciousness.

Consciousness also often advances when an individual's needs seem to conflict with those of society. This creates dissonance where the only successful resolution is acquisition of moral relationships to provide for oneself and be valuable to and responsible for others. A person attains an awareness to serve an integrated whole, whether that is a family, community, a corporation, or nation. When an individual's worldview shifts from a primarily self-centered mode to one in which the self is experienced as an integral part of a larger whole, individuals become more compassionate, service-oriented, and inspired to act as agents for positive change in their immediate and distant environments (Schlitz et al., 2010). Given that media are an integral part of a culture and community, both reflective of it and an influencing factor, one's social consciousness can also be affected by entertainment narratives.

Much of the effects of media in regard to social change focuses on the role of news and news framing. Researchers studying entertainment content have done so in very specific ways. Political entertainment research has primarily examined late night talk shows, satire, and parodies showing the influential effects that entertainment-based media can have on individuals' perceptions and understanding of policy issues, political candidates, and elected officials (see Weinmann & Vorderer, 2018). The entertainment-education perspective emphasizes messages

that are created to entertain and educate audiences about a public policy or public health issue (see [Bandura, 2004](#)). Both research areas can elucidate on the role entertainment media may play in individuals' understanding social issues. However, there are distinctions between them and SCE media.

## **Socially Conscious Entertainment Media and Entertainment- Education**

Socially conscious entertainment media and entertainment-education (EE) are two related types of media content with different purposes. EE, according to [Singhal and Rogers \(2004\)](#), is a “process of *purposely* [sic] designing and implementing a media message to *both* [sic] entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior” (p. 5). Narratives are intentionally created and issues affecting public health and policy are embedded into storylines with the express purpose of providing knowledge, shifting attitudes and even behaviors in ways to address how the issues operate in audience members' daily lives ([Papa & Singhal, 2009](#); [Papa et al., 2000](#)). The early emphasis of EE strategies was on global conditions. Television and radio soap operas and music were used in Asian, African, and Latin American countries to influence beliefs and behaviors related to gender equity, smaller family sizes, and HIV/AIDS prevention, among others ([Papa et al., 2000](#)).

Socially conscious entertainment media overlaps with EE in terms of its emphasis on the ability of entertainment narratives to affect social change. There are also some similarities in regard to topics/content, and the psychological mechanisms (e.g., narrative transportation, identification with story characters and willingness to model such characters' behaviors)

influencing knowledge attainment, attitude and behavioral change. As with EE, narratives can have short- and long-term effects on knowledge and attitudes (Appel & Richter, 2007; Morgan, Movius, & Cody, 2009). Ideals and information presented in entertainment narratives can motivate individuals to consider behavioral changes to the extent they feel they've learned new and accurate information and perceived ability a person may ultimately feel in affecting change. Both mediated experiences can foster conversation among audiences and create opportunities for individual and collective social learning (see Papa et al., 2000). But we argue that there are differences between EE and entertainment media we are calling socially conscious.

Socially conscious entertainment media are not always created with persuasive intent, though persuasion may be a byproduct of the viewing experience. Also, SCE is not necessarily designed to increase awareness, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, or change behavior. A larger goal of SCE may be to present narratives that encourage understanding, connectedness with others, and cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, including specific issues as either major plots or subplots or by depicting one's life experiences. Additionally, the SCE approach we're introducing in this chapter more prominently considers the role emotions in addition to narrative engagement may play in an outward-focused awareness and awakening toward the needs of close and distant others. The EE approach has primarily emphasized changes in one's own life behaviors. Social change begins with the self. For SCE media, change could begin with the self or on behalf of others. In regard to entertainment content specifically, much of the EE research has focused on either attitudinal and behavioral influences through television serials or through examining narrative persuasion through public service announcements (Bandura, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 2004). While SCE can be inclusive of this content, its focus is primarily on entertainment media, including films, novels, music, and video games. Thus, we

contend SCE could be considered a form of EE if creator intent is considered, but EE is not always necessarily a form of SCE media.

To summarize, SCE media includes both broad and specific issues affecting individuals and societies. They may be either national or global in scope. Entertainment that presents narratives that challenge cultural values and identities related to equity in human existence and/or trigger psychological mechanisms to encourage open-mindedness, interrelatedness, and thoughts of and sense of responsibility for others' physical, emotional and overall well-being may lead to a SCE experience. Such an experience may encourage both individual growth and human connectedness and an increased motivation to be of value to oneself, close others but possibly distant others and society as a whole. While sometimes systematic, this form of entertainment media is not always geared toward a specific behavior but may elucidate broad goals aimed at motivating and inspiring individuals—leaving the specific actions to be taken for the individual to decide.

## **Emotions as Influencing Factors and Outcomes**

Narratives can serve as effective messaging tools (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). They are recognized for their ability to transcend boundaries to provide commentary on and raise awareness about cultural, political, and social issues related to unfair distribution of wealth, opportunities, or otherwise inequitable treatment of individuals and social groups by society. We can think of many examples of socially conscious content in music, movies, television, and books. Marvel's *Black Panther*, though a superhero film, touched on themes of colonialism, civil rights, and Pan-Africanism. Music and sometimes accompanying music videos have historically been, and continue to be, associated with social movements related to sexual assault,

multiculturalism, and mental health because of their educational potential (see [Bowman et al., 2018](#)). Entertainment with an explicit focus on social issues (e.g., *Blood Diamond*, *Thank You for Smoking*) and those which emphasize historical and current social issues as secondary narratives or provide metaphors for social concerns (e.g., the animated film *Zootopia*) may have differential effects, but nevertheless encourage thought and conversation among audiences on topics related to justice, empathy for others, and human connectedness. Affective responses to narratives are important factors in these outcomes.

Much of the literature on meaningful entertainment experiences has emphasized the role emotional responses may play in eliciting a sense of connectedness with others. Feelings such as elevation have been found to directly or indirectly influence enhanced feelings of connectedness toward diverse others and favorable attitudes toward them, more positive attitudes and approach tendencies toward individuals from stereotyped groups ([Kramer et al., 2017](#); [Oliver et al., 2015](#)), and connectedness and compassionate love toward others ([Janicke & Oliver, 2017](#)). Awe has been found to be associated with greater willingness to volunteer time and help others ([Rudd, Vohs, & Aaker, 2012](#)) while admiration is associated with empathetic and altruistic intentions if a person reflects on personal relevance of the situation ([Farsides, Pettman, & Tourle, 2013](#)). Finally, hope, a belief that things can change for the better for ourselves, others and the world even when circumstances are uncertain or dire, serves as an energizing force to change situations ([Tong, Frederickson, Chang, & Lim, 2010](#)).

Extant research has also expanded understanding of the resulting affective responses of meaningful media. They often result in complex affective responses such as feeling moved, touched or poignant ([Oliver, 2008](#)), and mixed affective responses ([Oliver et al., 2018](#)). Early exploratory research on SCE experiences compared emotional responses to entertainment with

socially conscious themes with those felt as a result of transcendent and eudaimonic media experiences. When asked about their affective responses to socially conscious content, individuals reported experiencing negative and positive affect to similar degrees, but stronger feelings of inspiration and reverence (Sanders et al., 2019b). This differs from what individuals reported feeling in response to various forms of meaningful media (Janicke et al., unpublished) which were heavier in feelings of positive affect, inspiration, and reverence.

For more hedonic-oriented experiences, presenting socially conscious themes may still be impactful. According to broaden and build theory, the experience of positive emotions broadens one's thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 2001). Positive emotions such as joy, contentment, and interest encourage approach tendencies with others and one's environment, and widen the range of thoughts and possible actions that come to mind. For example, feelings of joy may elicit more creativity in problem-solving, interest may encourage individuals to embrace new information and experiences that lead to personal growth, while contentment may encourage appreciation for one's current life circumstances they relate to the world around them. In other words, hedonic experiences and the related positive emotions lead to a general openness.

Das and Fennis (2008) found that in the context of health messaging, threatening messages were more thoughtfully processed when individuals were in a good mood prior to seeing the message. This was especially the case when the message was relevant. In the same vein, existing moods, according to the mood as information perspective, may play a role in how we receive socially conscious messages in entertainment particularly when it is either unexpected, implicit or comes in the form of a narrative that one may not typically think of as "serious" (e.g., comedy, action adventure, etc.). The positive mood, in this case elicited by other story elements closely

connected to the entertainment genre, may allow individuals the affordance of processing information that overcomes defensive biases.

Arguably, the majority of entertainment media are not designed to persuade. Many are designed to elicit emotional reactions whether those involve levity and lightness or being deeply moved. Nevertheless, such entertainment can affect how individuals choose to navigate through their world. In the case of meaningful content, [Das, Nobbe, and Oliver \(2017\)](#) refer to this as “accidental persuasion.” They found that mixed affective responses elicited by meaningful experiences (compared to a control) predicted transportation which in turn predicted intentions to engage in health-related behaviors alluded to in the film clip. They suggest that if mixed affect is triggered, entertainment not designed to persuade may still accidentally do so. Additionally, mere fun is not enough to motivate reflective thought, but such reflection is needed to motivate action ([Das et al., 2017](#)). While hedonic and more meaningful content can be equally engaging, the difference in their persuasion abilities lies in the ability to trigger complex emotions. If hedonic-oriented content can do this, even for a time, they may still have the ability to alter individuals’ attitudes and elicit a greater responsibility toward others.

Exploratory research generally supports these thoughts. An experiment, conducted by the authors of this chapter, examined genre differences (comedies, dramas, animation) in emotional responses to hedonic-oriented entertainment media compared to SCE media, and the relationships the responses may have with social justice attitudes ([Sanders et al., 2019a](#)). Of note, the socially conscious comedy was found to elicit higher feelings of elevation compared to its hedonic-oriented counterpart, and just as much elevation as dramas with and without socially conscious themes. Negative emotions elicited by dramas without socially conscious themes were found to be negatively associated with social justice attitudes, but negative emotions were

positively associated with one's attitudes toward justice after exposure to a drama with socially conscious themes. Feelings of elevation elicited by a comedy with socially conscious themes also positively predicted approach tendencies to social justice behaviors.

Socially conscious themes may appear in different genres of entertainment media, may be major portions of just a segment of a narrative, may be expected or unexpected, implicit or explicit. While there is a greater likelihood such themes may appear in more somber content, they may also be embedded in fictional worlds presented in animated worlds, or even introduced as metaphors. Story worlds don't have to be realistic but they do have to resonate with individuals' beliefs and experiences to be persuasive (Das et al., 2017). This may partially explain the influence of science fiction stories on one's understanding of marginalization. The original *Star Trek* series of the 1960s is credited with making a variety of social statements related to racism, gender inequality, and militarism even though the television series was set aboard a starship in a fictional future. Entertainment based in fantasy or those stories not based on true events aren't necessarily less engaging; rather, individuals adjust accordingly and allow the fantasy elements to become a normal part of the entertainment experience (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). One such adjustment includes judging the realism of the story by the story's standards (e.g., consistency in logic, motivations of characters and events within the narrative). For genres such as science fiction and others with high levels of fantasy, it is not the fantasy environment that could hamper engagement but lack of realism related to stories or characters within that story world that are much more detrimental to engagement and persuasion. What scholars are learning about unintentional persuasive effects may shed light on persuasive abilities of more hedonic-oriented genres with socially conscious themes, subplots, or references.

# Narrative Involvement and Self-Concept

Involvement with a narrative can take a variety of forms, but the two most often examined are those focused on involvement with the narrative itself and those that focus on involvement with the characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). Individuals experience a form of psychological convergence taking one's attention and cognitive resources away from the self and the immediate environment allowing them to emotionally and cognitively invest in the entertainment experience (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). The narrative thus becomes a catalyst for perspective change in that people lose themselves to the extent that they feel as though they are experiencing the story from the inside and from the viewpoint of the characters within the story. They have the chance to adopt a viewpoint that is not their own. Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) refer to this as a deictic shift. When involved to a higher degree, the narrative's persuasive ability is heightened such that individuals tend to adopt story-consistent beliefs (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004).

From a persuasion perspective, narrative involvement is associated with less counterarguing with a message because of a lower willingness to interrupt the experience to dispute the narrative's claims (Green & Brock, 2000; Hamby et al., 2018). People lose themselves in the story to such a degree that they may become unaware of any persuasive subtext that might be present. As a result, the ability to counterargue and resist persuasive texts is minimized.

Familiarity with the topic, realism of the narrative, and the strength of the emotional content are all influencing factors in level of narrative engagement. To this end, existing scholarship contends that narrative involvement either directly influences or mediates effects on perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors on various issues including immigration, gay marriage, and sexual violence (Bowman et al., 2018; see Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016).

## Narrative Engagement

At the narrative level, media scholars have examined the influences of transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), absorption, presence (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003), and narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). All generally refer to a sense of losing oneself within an entertainment experience in such a way that a person is removed from their immediate environment and are focused on, emotionally engaged with, and/or present in the story world (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Hamby et al., 2018). A body of research supports narrative engagement as a tool for persuasion (Bowman et al., 2018; Green & Brock, 2000; Hamby et al., 2018; Oliver et al., in press). It is especially effective in instances where the storyline and protagonist are similar and particularly relevant to the lives of the readers, listeners, and viewers (Hamby et al., 2018).

Entertainment media may be especially adept at creating social consciousness given that it is not expected to challenge one's attitudes, instead relying heavily on narrative engagement. Genres such as comedies and action may impede forewarning of a counterattitudinal message (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Events and messages in the narrative may unfold and be revealed at a slower rate or subtly so as to not rise to an individual's level of awareness to be rejected. The effects may not be realized until it's too late to be ignored. For example, the romantic comedy *The Big Sick* is a film that follows the relationship between a struggling stand-up comedian and a graduate student. The film follows the standard romantic comedy formula, but also depicts the challenges of being in an intercultural, interethnic relationship as one of the main characters is Pakistani American and the other is white. Scenes within the film touch on cultural assimilation, racism, and the challenges a person may sometimes face in honoring one's ethnic culture and family as well as their own goals. While these are all serious issues that warrant thoughtfulness,

the way in which they are addressed retains narrative cohesion and consistency with its genre thus creating an opportunity for individuals to contemplate societal structures by watching a “rom com.”

Critical reflection and analytical processing of a narrative during exposure isn't requisite for persuasion (Appel & Richter, 2007). In fact, such depth of processing may actually hinder various aspects of narrative involvement without necessarily having any impact on one's future intentions (Das et al., 2017). Post-exposure, individuals may have a need to make meaning of the narrative as it pertains to their real lives. A viewer of *The Big Sick* may think about the challenges of immigration, or of integrating two cultures into one relationship without feeling a sense of loss of one's identity. Hamby et al. (2018) argue that this aspect of self-reflection is what connects narrative engagement to persuasive outcomes. They argue the process results in a “reframed understanding of the receiver's past or application of the story message to current views or acts in one's world” (p. 118). This form of deep understanding, most likely to occur after the story's conclusion, may be even more relevant to the persuasive abilities of hedonic-oriented SCE. When individuals are more hedonically motivated, the socially conscious content may be unexpected and require *more* reflection post-exposure. The intensity of the need to do this may vary based on individual differences, strength of connection with characters featured in the narrative, the nature of the socially conscious content or issue being presented in the narrative, or the genre of the entertainment. This is something to be further explored by future research.

## **Identification as a Mechanism for Social Consciousness**

Viewer-character connections including parasocial relationships and interactions, liking, and similarity also have an important role to play in narrative involvement. Identification is considered to be the form most strongly associated with narrative involvement because the concept specifically refers to a connection established by taking on the persona of the character (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Klimmt, this volume). Because it's a sense of audience-character merging, it's not considered an interactive relationship as parasocial relationships might be, nor is it as distant of a connection as one might have through fandom or worship. Identification is more of an intimate connection, that may be *fostered* by liking, similarity, attraction, or other aspects of social comparison but is distinct from and not always necessarily reliant on them (Cohen, 2001; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). Identification also has some similarities with empathy, as both concepts rely on perspective-taking in some sense and emphasize the importance of the character. Empathy, however, is a cognitive and affective response to others' emotional experiences as a result of perspective-taking, individuals' dispositions, and physiological elements (Nathanson, 2003). Positive character traits and virtues (e.g., kindness, generosity, concern for others, etc.), the perspective from which the narrative is told (e.g., first person, presence of voice overs, direct address to audience), and level of self-awareness on the part of the audience member all differentially impact identification levels.

Like transportation, identification has been found to be correlated with one's knowledge, attitudes, and current and future behaviors (Murphy et al., 2012). So and Nabi (2013) suggest that identification reduces perceived social distance with a character, which in turn influences perceptions of personal risk and of the self. The act of taking on another's perspective and empathizing with their experiences may foster increased understanding of others' plights and struggles, creating a sense of kinship if those struggles are familiar or similar to a user's own life

experiences. Or it may provide a temporary sense of oneness for those with different life experiences due to an increased level of understanding. As Dal Cin et al. (2004) put it—it's hard to discount one's life experiences, especially if you like or identify with them. When a protagonist is clearly recognized in the narrative, identification may be targeted toward that character and lead an individual to adopt attitudes and beliefs consistent with them (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016).

Though not the same as direct experience, the act of identifying with someone can increase feelings of empathy, greater social acceptance, and ability and willingness to engage with a wider range of people to go beyond what our real-world social experiences may allow (Nathanson, 2003; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016). In other instances, such as when the narrative is reminiscent of an audience member's own life circumstances, a person may feel as though their reality is being acknowledged in some way. Their social status or life challenges (especially those rooted in systemic and institutional structures) are not a part of a social vacuum. There is some sense of being understood, touched by or feeling a generally stronger sense of relating to society (Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019). This sense of relating may precede a person experiencing aesthetic resonance (Rosa, 2016). Vorderer and Halfmann (2019) argue that media selection includes motivations to help individuals come to terms with themselves and their relationships with others and the rest of the world. Socially conscious entertainment media may be especially adept at meeting such needs.

## **Socially Conscious Entertainment Experiences and Expansion of the Self-Concept**

Entertainment narratives may also be a source to expand the boundaries of the self, with implications for how one feels about and perceives of themselves, their overall well-being and growth, and also tolerance of others and their life circumstances. The temporarily expanded boundaries of the self (TEBOTS) framework explains how one expands the repertoire of their own experiences (Slater & Cohen, 2017; Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). The TEBOTS framework explores the role media may play in the establishment, growth, and expansion of one's self-concept—the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions individuals have about themselves (Cohen, Appel, & Slater, 2019). The self can be further broken down into the actual self (who we are), the ideal self (who we want to be), the ought self (who we think others expect us to be), and the possible self (who we could be). Entertainment narratives allow people to manage threats to and limitations of self-concept (Johnson, Slater, Silver, & Ewoldsen, 2016). According to TEBOTS, media experiences “provide opportunities to learn about and reflect on ourselves, experiment with our identities and express ourselves in various ways” (Cohen, Appel, & Slater, 2019, p. 183). There isn't enough time or opportunity for us to explore these selves in the real world, but mediated environments allow us to do so, even in areas of our lives in which we are already content.

As with meaningful media experiences, SCE media provide opportunities to navigate through life complexities that are usually only accessible and understood by living them directly in the real world. Connecting with a character one sees as an ideal, increases the range of imagined possible selves. They are exposed to identities inconsistent with our own and are allowed in a sense to try on others. Individuals may also feel a sense of freedom from the limitations of a social role or circumstance, increasing one's sense of agency to affect change where and when it is needed and fulfilling a need for meaning in life (Johnson et al., 2016).

Through this form of expansion, a person may also feel a stronger sense of connectedness and responsibility for those around them—an increased feeling of social consciousness.

Boundary expansion also helps one see similarities with others, and potentially understand and accept differences. Boundary expansion of the self-concept has been found to be associated with decreased social distance (Cohen, Slater, & Appel, 2019). Entertainment audiences thus increase their comfort levels with individuals from different cultures and walks of life while sometimes experiencing manageable discomfort to allow for personal growth. Socially conscious entertainment media may challenge the actual self, inspire an ideal self, or encourage a person to face the harsh realities of an ought self. At a minimum, boundary expansion can serve as a bridge for allies to understand and experience, in some way, aspects of life they normally would not because of privilege or other advantages they enjoy in their daily lives. At its best and most hopeful, extending beyond the boundaries of the self allows there to be a bridge between those who are stigmatized and those performing the stigmatization, the marginalized and those resting in and protecting systemic structures that create and maintain the marginalization.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Arguably, entertainment media may be effective in reaching audiences and encouraging contemplation on challenging areas because it may be less patronizing and “preachy” compared to news and other forms of media (Klein, 2011). Audiences may be exposed to neglected perspectives and are given characters to relate to who are going through life-altering situations or are involved in movements that audiences may not otherwise see. Consuming some forms of media entertainment is not only healthy for individuals in so far as it can encourage introspection, growth, understanding, compassion, and connectedness with others but also can be

beneficial for the broader society, as we have suggested in this chapter. Research on meaningful media has focused on broad themes, which may be inclusive of media with socially conscious elements and plot lines. Meanwhile research on the persuasive ability of entertainment has focused primarily on health-related messaging which can be considered but one form of SCE. The current chapter explores aspects of entertainment that are inclusive of the broader elements studied in meaningful entertainment experiences, that could potentially be inclusive of hedonic media, but also an extension of the implications of the research in entertainment-education. We argue that SCE specifically focuses on the broader issues of society with the ability to engage audiences in contemplating their understanding of, responsibility for and potential role in solving societal problems.

Whereas meaningful media experiences encourage openness and action indirectly through felt emotions, in the case of SCE this may be only one avenue. Narrative engagement may help storylines resonate with audiences and persuade individuals to respond to a call to action to improve the lives of others working and living around them. These effects may be particularly strong among those viewers who belong to the marginalized, disadvantaged or affected groups whose lives may be represented in the content (Klimmt, 2017). Emotional connections may be the factor to create awareness and motivation in allies and accomplices building an overall sense of collective efficacy to bring about social change (Bandura, 2004; Klimmt, 2017). Exploring SCE media—the affective responses, cognitive processing, and potential behavioral effects—broadens our understanding of the positive effects of entertainment narratives—how they can foster compassionate individuals, more connected communities, stronger cross-cultural relationships, and greater consciousness of the needs of one another.

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