

The pursuit of hopefulness in entertainment media

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Has a movie or TV show ever left you feeling happy or uplifted about your own life? Entertainment media provides a wealth of emotionally evocative content, but relatively little attention has been paid to the subject of media creating positive emotions, and specifically, hope. In a recent study entitled "The Pursuit of Hopefulness: Operationalizing Hope in Entertainment Media Narrative," published in Routledge Journal's *Media Psychology*, author Abby Prestin researches the effects of hope and underdog characters in entertainment media.

Feelings of hope are associated with benefits for psychological and physical wellbeing, and efforts to increase or sustain hopeful feelings are increasingly incorporated into wellness interventions. Positive emotions have also emerged as important predictors of social, physical, psychological, and even [financial wellbeing](#). Hope can be a coping resource during hardship, or can be an achievement-oriented emotion that predicts [academic performance](#) in a classroom. Recent research points to media as uplifting and elevating affective viewing responses, and could be a powerful means of generating hope.

"I felt that there was a [bias](#) in the existing literature, with the bulk of the research focusing on negative effects of entertainment media," says Prestin. "When you look out into the world, it's not difficult to find real life stories of people surviving situations where the odds aren't in their favor. Do these stories actually have an effect on the audience, and if so, what?"

Prestin set out with two goals for this study. First to identify a media narrative that evokes hope in viewers by testing the effectiveness of media portrayals of underdog characters, struggling to achieve their goals despite unfavorable odds. Second, she wanted to explore the extent to which such elicitation of hope motivates important [personal goals](#), after viewing. "Is it something we feel briefly, like most emotions, and move on," Prestin asks, "or, is it something that changes us or that we carry with us?"

Participants were assigned to one of three media groups - underdog narrative, comedy, and nature scenes - or a no-media control group. Those in the media groups were assigned to view one 5-minute video clip per day for five consecutive days. Following this period, those in the underdog narrative group felt more hopeful and reported greater motivation to pursue their own goals than those in other conditions. And, partially consistent with Prestin's second hypothesis, the [emotional](#) experience of hope was durable, with hopefulness remaining at elevated levels up to three days after the final media exposure.

Prestin's research shows a number of potentially important results. First, exposure to different types of positive [entertainment media](#), in all three cases, led to three different positive emotional responses. Second, the results of this study suggest that underdog narratives not only provide viewers with models of hard work and determination, but that inducing hope may increase the likelihood that viewers will pursue their own goals. "It has always seemed to me that there's an undeniable potency to inspirational stories that we haven't quite harnessed yet," says Prestin. "These results, to me, indicate that there are certain emotional, cognitive, and motivational pathways that inspirational underdog stories appear to activate. Although I wouldn't say I have harnessed the power of these stories yet, this study is a step in that direction."

More information: The Pursuit of Hopefulness: Operationalizing

Hope in Entertainment Media, *Media Psychology*.

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