Article

The awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of transience in the domain of eudaimonic media experiences

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Abstract

The research comparing hedonic and eudaimonic media experiences has often conceptualized the two categories as monolithic wholes. Although thematic differences within each category have been identified, these differences are usually theoretically inconsequential: They are merely variations in hedonic or eudaimonic content. Adopting a conditional effects approach, this research shows that transience-themed posts and motivation-themed posts on social media—which are both considered eudaimonic—are appreciated by different groups of people. Study 1 found a moderating influence of impermanence acceptance: People who had greater impermanence acceptance were more likely to have eudaimonic responses after viewing transience-themed posts than after viewing motivation-themed posts. The Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, or beauty in pathos, was used to motivate study 2. Study 2 found that people who viewed transience-themed posts experienced greater impermanence appreciation than people who viewed motivation-themed posts, but media theme did not influence impermanence awareness or impermanence acceptance.

Keywords

Eudaimonia, impermanence, meaningfulness, media appreciation, self-transcendence

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Among the various ways through which people find meaning in life, viewing stories via the media—that show moral excellence, determination against adversity, the wonders of the natural world, and the like—is unique in that people can have meaningful experiences without having personally experienced any of those stories themselves (Slater et al., 2019). One early study in the area of meaningful media experiences identified the construct of *eudaimonic motivations* for watching movies, which represents people's desire to watch movies that, among other things, "challenge [their] way of seeing the world," "make [them] more reflective," "focus on meaningful human relationships," or facilitate their "search for greater understanding in life" (Oliver and Raney, 2011: 992). Going against the then-dominant perspective that hedonic enjoyment is the central motivating factor for media consumption (see for review Oliver et al., 2018), this construct explains why some people choose to watch movies such as *Schindler's List* or *Hotel Rwanda*, which contain some degree of pathos and are, arguably, hedonically unpleasurable.

Subsequent research on media meaningfulness built on eudaimonic motivations to study *eudaimonic media experiences*, which are about the processes by which individuals find meaning or purpose for themselves, as well as the outcomes associated with those processes, such as increased compassion (see for review Oliver, 2022; Oliver et al., 2018). Eventually, eudaimonic media experiences came to be understood as "a continuum of more self-focused, inward-oriented experiences based on exposure to eudaimonic media on the one end, and other-oriented self-transcendent experiences on the other" (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021: 369; see also Raney et al., 2021). The term *eudaimonic media experiences* (used interchangeably with *meaningful media experiences*) thus refers to short-term experiences during or after media exposure, while *eudaimonia*—which has more complex antecedents than momentary media exposure—refers to long-term eudaimonic well-being (Huta and Waterman, 2014).

One outstanding issue in this domain concerns the somewhat rudimentary levels of distinction between different media themes that can engender eudaimonic media experiences. Where videos are concerned, for example, clips showing "a middle-school football team that banded together to let a disabled classmate score a touchdown" or "a father's record of his daughter's childhood" can both be considered eudaimonic—although the former deals with a common humanity and the latter deals with a nostalgic passing of time (Slater et al., 2019: 342). Where static social media posts are concerned, a content analysis by Rieger and Klimmt (2019) identified several distinct themes, such as (a) human endurance, (b) human connection, and (c) art, architecture, and nature. The diversity of eudaimonic media themes, which all supposedly engender eudaimonic media experiences, thus raises the question as to whether different people will find different media themes eudaimonic. If the answer is yes, then an attempt to delineate between various eudaimonic themes should generate more nuanced theorizing in this domain.

To this end, study 1 in the present research studied the conditional (i.e. moderated) effects of individual differences across two different eudaimonic media themes in the context of social media: motivational posts and transient posts (N.B., transient posts do *not* refer to the affordance of ephemerality; rather, they mention the evanescence of life, relationships, joy, sadness, etc.). Specifically, study 1 tested the prediction that people

who were more aware of or who accepted the impermanence of life would find transient-themed posts more meaningful than motivation-themed posts, but people who were relatively unaware of or who did not accept the impermanence of life would find motivation-themed posts more meaningful than transient-themed posts. Transient posts were a subset of the human connection theme identified by Rieger and Klimmt (2019), while motivational posts were a subset of the human endurance theme. They were selected for their thematic contrast: Transient posts convey the message that many things in life are not within one's control, but motivational posts encourage people to strive harder precisely because things are within one's control.

While study 1 conceptualized impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance as antecedent moderating factors, study 2 reversed this logic, predicting that viewing transient posts would engender greater awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of impermanence than viewing motivational posts. To motivate the construct of impermanence appreciation, study 2 borrowed from the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*—or the sweet melancholy of impermanence—epitomized by cherry blossoms that bloom radiantly but ephemerally, and when they die saturate the ground in beautiful color (Saito, 2007).

Collectively, these studies contribute to the literature on eudaimonic media experiences by integrating with it the concept of *mono no aware* and by considering several different aspects of impermanence.

Themes that elicit eudaimonic or hedonic experiences

Before attempting to study how different media themes elicit eudaimonic experiences for different groups of people, a baseline distinction between eudaimonic media and hedonic media needed to be established. To this end, the present research, which was set in a social media context, drew from the work of Rieger and Klimmt (2019).

Rieger and Klimmt's (2019) rationale for studying social media posts was unconventional insofar as the tradition of research on meaningful media is concerned, because the stimuli typically used for such studies were snippets from movies. Although social media posts may lack comprehensive narrative arcs that can be found in movies and are short-lived experiences, they can still contribute toward eudaimonia via what the authors term a "daily dose of inspiration" (Rieger and Klimmt, 2019: 100). The argument is that if people can get short moments of inspiration daily from social media, these moments can accumulate into long-term experiences of eudaimonia over time.

However, social media posts presented as stimuli in cross-sectional research cannot truly capture the "daily dose of inspiration." Therefore, it is important to distinguish between different levels of analysis. According to Huta and Waterman (2014), eudaimonia conceptualized at the experience level deals with people's short-term responses evoked by singular stimuli or events, but eudaimonia conceptualized at the functioning level refers to people's long-term mental health, well-being, and flourishing. As mentioned earlier, where the present research is concerned, the former is termed *eudaimonic (media) experiences* and the latter is termed *eudaimonia*. As the present research has a cross-sectional design, it will only assess people's eudaimonic experiences as potentially brought about by social media posts—and not people's long-term eudaimonia.

In their study, Rieger and Klimmt (2019) used hashtags such as #meaningful and #inspirational to collect social media posts. The collected posts were subsequently analyzed and three broad thematic clusters were identified: (a) human endurance, (b) human connection, and (c) art, architecture, and nature. From those results, two text-based eudaimonic themes were derived for the present study: *motivational posts* and *transient posts*. Motivational posts are a subset of the first cluster because they exhort people to bravely face challenges (e.g. "Be the change you wish to see in the world"). Transient posts are a subset of the second cluster because all humanity is connected by our inability to defeat time, and the common fate that binds us all is death (e.g. "The easiest and simplest way to deal with sorrow is to remember that nothing is permanent").

In contrast, *humorous posts* were used to represent hedonic media. Operationally, they were characterized as jokes: amusing discrepancies between what was expected and what was revealed in the punchline. Indeed, liking "[media] that make me laugh" is a key aspect of hedonic enjoyment (Oliver and Raney, 2011: 992), and humorous content has been used to represent hedonic media experiences in previous studies (e.g. Clayton et al., 2021; Krämer et al., 2017).

Before claims about differentiating different eudaimonic media themes can be made, a baseline should be established to show that certain themes are associated with eudaimonic experiences and other themes with hedonic experiences. In a social media context:

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1)*. Transient posts and motivational posts engender a greater perceived eudaimonic experience than humorous posts.

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*. Humorous posts engender greater enjoyment than transient posts and motivational posts.

Comparison conditions for eudaimonic media

Within the research on eudaimonic media, the norm is for researchers to use either hedonic media or non-eudaimonic controls as the focal point of comparison for eudaimonic media. Examples of the former include Krämer et al.'s (2017) study, which compared eudaimonic media (operationalized as video clips of beautiful landscapes, the similarity of peoples across the world, and acts of kindness) to hedonic media (operationalized as humorous clips); likewise, Clayton et al. (2021) compared eudaimonic media (operationalized as inspirational video clips) to hedonic media (operationalized as humorous video clips). Examples of non-eudaimonic controls as comparison conditions include Slater et al.'s (2018) research, in which they found three movies, and from each movie they selected one eudaimonic clip (e.g. the main character from *Up* "falling in love with his wife, marrying her, and eventually losing her to illness," p. 87) and one non-eudaimonic clip (e.g. the same character "using balloons to lift his house into the sky," p. 87); Chang's (2023) research compared eudaimonic media (operationalized as video clips showing moral virtue, transformational growth, and creativity) to non-eudaimonic media (operationalized as screensaver video clips). Indeed, the very purpose of such research is to demonstrate that eudaimonic media can engender morally meaningful

outcomes such as increased prosociality, reduced prejudice, or "transcendent" emotions like awe, admiration, and hope (see for review Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021).

Yet, given the various ways of operationalizing eudaimonic media and the numerous themes that have been labeled eudaimonic, questions arise as to whether testing eudaimonic media in relation to comparison conditions such as hedonic media or non-eudaimonic controls has inadvertently obscured important differences between various eudaimonic media themes. For example, "issues of moral beauty, enduring faith when humans encounter struggles, appreciation of excellence, and encouragement and hope" (Rieger and Klimmt, 2019: 107) should, *prima facie*, appeal to a different group of people than "issues of pain, sorrow, and tragedy, or gratitude" (Rieger and Klimmt, 2019: 108)—but these issues are collectively considered to be part of eudaimonic media. The one-to-one relationship between eudaimonic media and eudaimonic media experiences, as discussed earlier, can be refined. Put differently, can eudaimonic media fail to elicit eudaimonic media experiences, if some people cannot appreciate particular eudaimonic themes? Studying how the effects of eudaimonic media may be conditional on individual-level variables—such as personality or life experiences—could provide a suitable approach to this question.

Conditional effects: impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance

Differential susceptibility to eudaimonic media

The differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM; Valkenburg and Peter, 2013) was originally proposed as a potential solution for small or non-existent media effects that were occasionally obtained when researchers tried to find a relationship between a certain class of messages (e.g. eudaimonic media, humor appeals, gain/loss-framed messages) and a particular outcome (e.g. perceived meaningfulness, attitude change). According to the DSMM, the relationship between a class of messages and its hypothesized outcome may be weak because messages influence different people differently. Instead, media effects may be more pronounced when researchers consider individual-level variables, such as people's disposition (e.g. personality, values, and attitudes), developmental process (e.g. learning experiences and parental interventions), and social context (e.g. family and friends, workplace, and cultural norms). In other words, these individual-level variables may moderate the relationship between media content and media effects. For example, watching media reports of disasters led to greater posttraumatic stress symptoms among people who had greater information-seeking behaviors than those who had less (Houston et al., 2018).

As a guiding principle, the DSMM has influenced the theorizing and study designs regarding eudaimonic media experiences. In the model of inspiring media (Oliver et al., 2021), individual traits, such as empathy and spirituality, as well as personal circumstances, such as mood and message relevance, were explicitly theorized to moderate the effect of media content on people's affective/cognitive responses toward media messages.

Several empirical studies on eudaimonic media experiences have also adopted the principle of analyzing individual-level variables as moderators to test for conditional effects. For instance, Appel et al. (2019) found that eudaimonic videos (encompassing various operational themes such as caring for others and repaying altruism) elicited less perceived corniness (e.g. silly, oversentimental, and lacking authenticity) than non-eudaimonic videos for most people, but not for people with dark triad personalities. The dark triad—which comprises narcissism (having an exaggerated sense of self-importance), Machiavellianism (desiring to manipulate others for personal gain), and psychopathy (lacking in empathy and having antisocial behavior)—made people perceive eudaimonic videos as corny (Appel et al., 2019). In another example, Raney et al.'s (2018) survey found that several demographic variables (gender, age, and education level) and traits (need for affect, emphatic concern, and universality) predicted eudaimonic media experiences. Ott et al.'s (2021) study also found that people were more motivated to be morally good, among other outcomes, when their personal values matched the themes of the eudaimonic movies that they watched than if there was a value mismatch.

The model of inspiring media (Oliver et al., 2021) and the DSMM (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013) therefore provide a clear reason to introduce individual-level trait or state moderators to research on eudaimonic media experiences. In the present context, considering that transient posts contain the idea that change is the only constant, the likelihood that people will perceive transient posts as meaningful may be conditional on their awareness and/or acceptance of impermanence.

Impermanence

Many branches of social theory assume that certain things are permanent or at least enduring, including culture, tradition, heritage, and identity (Geismar et al., 2022). To even contemplate that these things—like all others—are impermanent and will eventually change can therefore strike at the heart of how people view themselves in relation to their society (Gross, 2000). Yet, in Buddhist philosophy, to ignore or resist impermanence is to deny the truth, which leads to suffering. Put differently, "overcoming suffering—the main concern of Buddhist thought and practice—is concomitant with a realization that much of one's suffering arises from a hopeless desire for stability in a world that is fundamentally unstable" (Geismar et al., 2022: 5).

Impermanence implies that over time, people will lose some things they cherish, such as their loved ones, their health, and eventually their own lives. However, "impermanence is also a liberating notion. . . because it means that [sadness], illness, and even authoritarian regimes will not last forever" (Geismar et al., 2022: 5). In addition, impermanence does not necessarily need to be understood as the extinguishing of the light in a lamp, that is, transitioning from existence to non-existence (Anālayo, 2017). Instead, it can also be understood as the steady flow of a river, where the flowing water represents a changing continuity (Anālayo, 2017).

When viewed as a changing continuity, impermanence can enable personal growth and societal progress or inspire optimism for future possibilities (Coleman and Coleman, 2019). In other words, impermanence is not fundamentally positive or negative, but it can lead to both positive and negative outcomes for people.

    According to scholars, cognitions involving impermanence can be mindfully cultivated (Fernández-Campos et al., 2021; Geismar et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). On its part, mindfulness involves monitoring and acceptance (Lindsay and Creswell, 2017). Monitoring refers to focusing on the present and not allowing one's mind to wander, while acceptance is maintaining an objective, non-emotional attitude toward the present experience (Lindsay and Creswell, 2017). By switching the target of mindfulness from in-the-moment experiences to impermanence, the principles that guide mindfulness can be translated to thinking about impermanence, resulting in two constructs: impermanence awareness (a result of monitoring) and impermanence acceptance (Fernández-Campos et al., 2021). Impermanence awareness is "the cognizance that all phenomena are transient" and impermanence acceptance is "an attitude of openness toward the transient nature of all phenomena" (Fernández-Campos et al., 2021: 1542).

    The hallmark of Rieger and Klimmt's (2019) second cluster of social media posts is human connection in combination with pain, sorrow, tragedy, and gratitude. They represent a bittersweet experience, which was translated for the present purposes into the theme of transient posts, and operationalized with quotes that signal the ephemerality of all things (e.g. "Things change. And friends leave. Life doesn't stop for anybody."). In the present context of social media posts, transient posts contain the core idea of accepting that all things, bad or good, are temporary. A conditional effects approach to transient posts suggests that not everyone will be equally aware/accepting of loss, and thus not everyone will have eudaimonic experiences after viewing transient posts. Some people would certainly refuse to "go gentle into that good night," to quote Dylan Thomas's (2014 [1951]) poem.

    Therefore, impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance were expected to moderate the relationship between media themes and eudaimonic experiences:

> *Hypothesis 3 (H3).* Transient posts engender greater perceived eudaimonic experience than motivational posts and humorous posts the more people have (a) impermanence awareness and (b) impermanence acceptance.

    In this way, impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance can also help to delineate transient posts from motivational posts, potentially demonstrating that different types of eudaimonic media can be reasonably compared to each other. Relatedly:

> *Research Question 1 (RQ1).* Do transient posts engender greater enjoyment than motivational posts and humorous posts the more people have (a) impermanence awareness and (b) impermanence acceptance?

Pilot test

A pilot test was conducted to identify stimuli that best represented each type of post. To obtain humorous posts, 10 jokes from Reddit that were highly upvoted on either r/Jokes or r/DadJokes were identified. To obtain quotes for posts for transient posts, keywords such as "melancholic," "pain," and "sorrow" were entered into a Google search. From

the results, 10 quotes deemed most appropriate were identified. Google search keywords for motivational posts included "motivational" and "inspirational." Again, 10 quotes were identified. All 30 jokes/quotes were designed to look like Instagram posts, and then placed into a Qualtrics questionnaire for pilot testing (see Online Supplemental Materials for the pretested stimuli).

100 US-based participants were recruited from Prolific. Three participants failed attention checks, resulting in $N=97$. Their ages ranged from 21 to 53 years old ($M=36.01$, $SD=8.69$), and the majority were female (53.6%).

The 30 posts were presented to participants in random order (within subjects) and were rated one by one. After viewing each post, participants rated it on three statements: "The post encourages people to accept that all things, bad or good, are temporary," "The post is motivational," and "The post is humorous." The first statement was used to evaluate transient quotes, the second statement to evaluate motivational quotes, and the last statement to evaluate jokes. All statements were scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

To minimize message-specific idiosyncratic effects, based on the pilot test results, the top three quotes for each theme were selected and used in study 1. Based on mean scores, the top three quotes for transient posts were: "The simplest and easiest way to deal with sorrow is to remember that nothing is permanent," ($M_{transient}=5.79$, $SD_{transient}=1.40$), "Accept that sorrow and strife are part of even a joyful life," ($M_{transient}=5.45$, $SD_{transient}=1.47$), and "Things change. And friends leave. Life doesn't stop for anybody," ($M_{transient}=5.07$, $SD_{transient}=1.72$).

Based on mean scores, the top *four* quotes for motivational posts were: "Be the change you wish to see in the world," ($M_{motivational}=5.92$, $SD_{motivational}=1.11$), "If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way," ($M_{motivational}=5.78$, $SD_{motivational}=1.33$), "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can," ($M_{motivational}=5.77$, $SD_{motivational}=1.29$), and "The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be," ($M_{motivational}=5.76$, $SD_{motivational}=1.16$). Due to the close mean scores between the third and fourth best quote, the standard deviation was taken into account. On this basis, the quote with the fourth highest mean (and narrower SD) was selected over the quote with the third highest mean (and wider SD).

Based on mean scores, the *four* best jokes were: "Why couldn't the bicycle stand up by itself? Because it was two-tired!" ($M_{humor}=5.46$, $SD_{humor}=1.42$), "What has two butts and kills people? An assassin." ($M_{humor}=5.42$, $SD_{humor}=1.60$), "My granddad always used to say, 'As one door closes, another one opens.' Lovely man. Terrible cabinet maker." ($M_{humor}=5.39$, $SD_{humor}=1.46$), and "A girl on Tinder asked me why I have an unlit cigarette in my picture. Told her I'm looking for a match." ($M_{humor}=5.39$, $SD_{humor}=1.54$). Due to the equal mean scores for the third- and fourth-best jokes, the standard deviation was taken into account. Therefore, the cabinet maker joke was selected over the Tinder joke.

Study 1

A between-subjects experiment was conducted to test the hypotheses. Participants were recruited via Prolific, and randomly assigned to one of three possible conditions

representing different media themes: transient posts, motivational posts, and humorous posts. After giving consent, participants answered questions on impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance. They were then exposed to the three fictitious Instagram posts associated with their assigned condition (see the Online Supplemental Materials). Participants were told to "Take some time to look at and think about the following Instagram posts" and that "the 'next' button is disabled for 30 seconds." This was to encourage participants to cognitively engage with the posts. Subsequently, participants answered questions on eudaimonic experience (operationalized with two dimensions, eudaimonic meaning and eudaimonic self-actualization) and their enjoyment after viewing the posts. Finally, participants answered demographic questions.

Sample

Assuming a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.085$), power analyses showed that a sample size of 157 is required to have 80% power when performing a regression with five predictors (see Results section). The participants, recruited from Prolific, lived in the United States and used Instagram. In all, 17 participants failed attention checks (e.g. "Select disagree if you are paying attention") and were excluded, leaving a total sample size of $N = 337$.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75 years old ($M = 36.10$, $SD = 11.46$). In all, 65.0% of the participants were female, 31.2% were male, 3.3% were non-binary, and 0.6% declined to answer. In all, 66.8% of participants were White, 12.2% were Black, 8.0% were Asian, 4.7% were Hispanic or Latine, and the remaining 8.3% had mixed or other ethnicities.

Measures

All items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Impermanence awareness and *impermanence acceptance* were measured using a scale by Fernández-Campos et al. (2021). Sample items for impermanence awareness include "I am aware of the impermanence of all things" and "I am aware of the brevity of life," Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$. Sample items for impermanence acceptance include "The idea that nothing in life lasts forever frightens me" and "Thinking that my relationship with loved ones will change worries me," Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$. All items for impermanence acceptance were reverse-coded—hence larger scores mean greater impermanence acceptance. As Fernández-Campos et al. (2021) conceptualized impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance as distinct constructs, they were entered into the analyses as two separate variables. Participants completed the measures for these two constructs before viewing the stimuli.

Eudaimonic experience was measured using two scales adapted from Meier et al. (2020): *eudaimonic meaning experience* and *eudaimonic self-actualization*. The former was measured with the question stem "The experience I had while looking at the posts was" and four items: "meaningful," "valuable," "full of significance," and "precious," Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$. The latter was measured with the question stem "While looking at the posts" and three items: "I got a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the

universe," "I got the sense that I was becoming who I really am," and "I felt more complete and fulfilled," Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$. Following Meier et al. (2020), eudaimonic meaning experience and eudaimonic self-actualization were analyzed as two separate variables.

Enjoyment was measured using three items adapted from Waddell and Sundar's (2020) affective enjoyment scale: "I enjoyed viewing the post," "I felt good viewing the post," and "I liked viewing the post." Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$.

The three items that were used to select the best quotes for each condition (see Pilot Test section) were used as manipulation checks.

Results

Manipulation checks

An ANOVA showed that transient posts ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.14$) were rated as giving greater encouragement to people "to accept that all things, bad or good, are temporary" than motivational posts ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.32$) and humorous posts ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.74$), $F(2, 334) = 83.02$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests showed that all three conditions were significantly different from each other (all $p < .001$).

An ANOVA showed that motivational posts ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.19$) were rated more highly on the statement "the posts are motivational" than transient posts ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.50$) and humorous posts ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.59$), $F(2, 334) = 93.76$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests again showed that all three conditions were significantly different from each other (all $p < .001$).

An ANOVA showed that humorous posts ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.28$) were rated more highly on the statement "the posts are humorous" than transient posts ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.29$) and motivational posts ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(2, 334) = 336.50$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests showed that humorous posts were perceived as significantly more humorous than the other two conditions (both $p < .001$), but transient posts and motivational posts were not perceived to be differentially humorous ($p = .999$).

Therefore, the manipulations worked as intended.

Focal tests

Regressions were performed using the *lm*() function in R. Effect sizes were obtained using the *effectsize* package and simple effects tests were conducted using the *emmeans* package.

Effect codes were employed to represent the multi-categorical predictor of media themes for the linear regressions testing H1 and H2. Humorous posts were used as the reference condition by coding it as $-1/3$ for both dummy variables, described below. Two dummy variables were created to represent the comparison between (a) transient posts and humorous posts, and between (b) motivational posts and humorous posts. For comparison (a), transient posts were coded as $2/3$, motivational posts as $-1/3$, and humorous posts as $-1/3$. For comparison (b), transient posts were coded as $-1/3$, motivational posts as $2/3$, and humorous posts as $-1/3$. H1 and H2 did not require comparisons between transient posts and motivational posts.

H1 predicted that transient posts and motivational posts engender greater perceived eudaimonic experience than humorous posts. The model regressing eudaimonic meaning experience on media themes (effect coded) was significant, $F(2, 334)=14.40$, $p<.001$, $R_{adj}^2=.07$, $\eta^2=.08$. Transient posts ($M=4.26$, $SD=1.77$) led to greater perceived eudaimonic meaning experience than humorous posts ($M=3.30$, $SD=1.56$), $b=0.96$, $p<.001$. Motivational posts ($M=4.36$, $SD=1.57$) also led to greater perceived eudaimonic meaning experience than humorous posts, $b=1.06$, $p<.001$.

Another model regressing eudaimonic self-actualization on media themes was significant, $F(2, 334)=18.03$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.10$. Transient posts ($M=3.42$, $SD=1.61$) engendered greater perceived eudaimonic self-actualization than humorous posts ($M=2.46$, $SD=1.50$), $b=0.97$, $p<.001$. Similarly, motivational posts ($M=3.60$, $SD=1.50$) engendered greater perceived eudaimonic self-actualization than humorous posts, $b=1.14$, $p<.001$. Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that humorous posts engender greater enjoyment than transient posts and motivational posts. Enjoyment was regressed on media themes, $F(2, 334)=8.49$, $p<.001$, $R_{adj}^2=.04$, $\eta^2=.05$. Humorous posts ($M=5.28$, $SD=1.37$) engendered greater enjoyment than transient posts ($M=4.42$, $SD=1.72$), $b=-0.86$, $p<.001$. However, humorous posts did not engender greater enjoyment than motivational posts ($M=4.91$, $SD=1.60$), $b=-0.37$, $p=.078$. Thus, H2 was partially supported (humorous posts resulted in greater enjoyment than transient posts only).

The results of H1 and H2 established that the traditional effects concerning eudaimonic versus hedonic media experiences largely held up in the current context (despite using static social media posts instead of video clips), thereby establishing the baseline upon which further tests can be conducted. The nonsignificant difference between humorous posts and motivational posts for enjoyment is unlikely to detrimentally affect the testing of H3 and RQ1, as H3 and RQ1 are about the difference between transient posts and the other two conditions—not between humorous posts and motivational posts.

A separate set of effect codes was used to represent media themes for the linear regression analyses testing H3 and RQ1, with transient posts as the reference condition. This was achieved by coding transient posts as −1/3 for both dummy variables, described subsequently. The previous set of effect codes cannot be reused as H3 and RQ1 required comparing transient posts to motivational posts. Therefore, two additional dummy variables were created to represent the comparison between (c) transient posts and motivational posts (henceforth "MP-TP[1]"), and between (d) transient posts and humorous posts (henceforth "HP-TP[2]"). For comparison (c), transient posts were coded as −1/3, motivational posts as 2/3, and humorous posts as −1/3. For comparison (d), transient posts were coded as −1/3, motivational posts as −1/3, and humorous posts as 2/3. Impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance were mean-centered.

H3 predicted that impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance moderated the relationships between media themes and eudaimonic meaning experience, and between media themes and eudaimonic self-actualization. First, eudaimonic meaning experience was regressed on: media themes, impermanence awareness, impermanence acceptance, the interaction between media themes and impermanence awareness, and the interaction between media themes and impermanence acceptance. The model was significant, $F(8, 328)=4.77$, $p<.001$, $R_{adj}^2=.08$. There was a significant effect of HP-TP,

Table 1. Regression model predicting eudaimonic meaning experience (H3a).

	b	SE	t	p
(Intercept)	3.96	0.09	44.45	<.001
MP-TP	0.07	0.22	0.30	.766
HP-TP	−0.95	0.22	-4.37	**.000**
Impermanence Awareness	−0.08	0.14	-0.60	.549
Impermanence Acceptance	−0.05	0.07	-0.79	.432
MP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	−0.08	0.35	-0.22	.829
HP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	−0.14	0.36	-0.39	.699
MP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.49	0.17	-2.87	**.004**
HP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.25	0.16	-1.60	.112

See the Online Supplemental Materials for the ANOVA-style equivalent of this table.

$b=-0.95, p<.001, \eta_{partial}^2=.08$ (i.e. humorous posts engendered less eudaimonic meaning experience than transient posts), but this result is irrelevant to H3. There was a significant interaction effect between impermanence acceptance and MP-TP, $b=-0.49$, $p=.004$, $\eta_{partial}^2=.02$. Sidak-adjusted post hoc simple effects tests showed that the interaction was driven by the difference in slopes between the transient posts and the motivational posts, $p=.013$. Participants with less impermanence acceptance perceived motivational posts to elicit greater eudaimonic meaning experience than transient posts, but participants with more impermanence acceptance perceived transient posts to elicit greater eudaimonic meaning experience than motivational posts. Other predictors were nonsignificant. See Table 1 for the full results and Figure 1 for the interaction.

Next, eudaimonic self-actualization was regressed on the same predictors as in the previous analysis. The model was significant, $F(8, 328)=6.59$, $p<.001$, $R_{adj}^2=.12$. There was a significant effect of HP-TP, $b=-0.98, p<.001, \eta_{partial}^2=.10$ (i.e. humorous posts engendered less eudaimonic self-actualization than transient posts), and a significant effect of impermanence acceptance, $b=-0.13$, $p=.042$, $\eta_{partial}^2=.01$, but these results were irrelevant to H3. There was a significant interaction effect between impermanence acceptance and MP-TP, $b=-0.50$, $p=.002$, $\eta_{partial}^2=.03$. Sidak-adjusted post hoc simple effects tests showed that the interaction was driven by the difference in slopes between the transient posts and the motivational posts, $p=.006$. Participants with less impermanence acceptance perceived motivational posts to elicit greater eudaimonic self-actualization than transient posts, but participants with more impermanence acceptance perceived transient posts to elicit greater eudaimonic self-actualization than motivational posts. No other predictors were significant. See Table 2 for the full results and Figure 2 for the interaction.

Overall, participants who did not strongly accept impermanence had greater eudaimonic meaning experience and greater eudaimonic self-actualization if they saw motivational posts than if they saw transient posts. However, participants who strongly accepted impermanence had greater eudaimonic meaning experience and greater eudaimonic self-actualization if they saw transient posts than if they saw motivational posts. Therefore, H3a was unsupported, and H3b was partially supported (only for MP-TP and not for HP-TP).
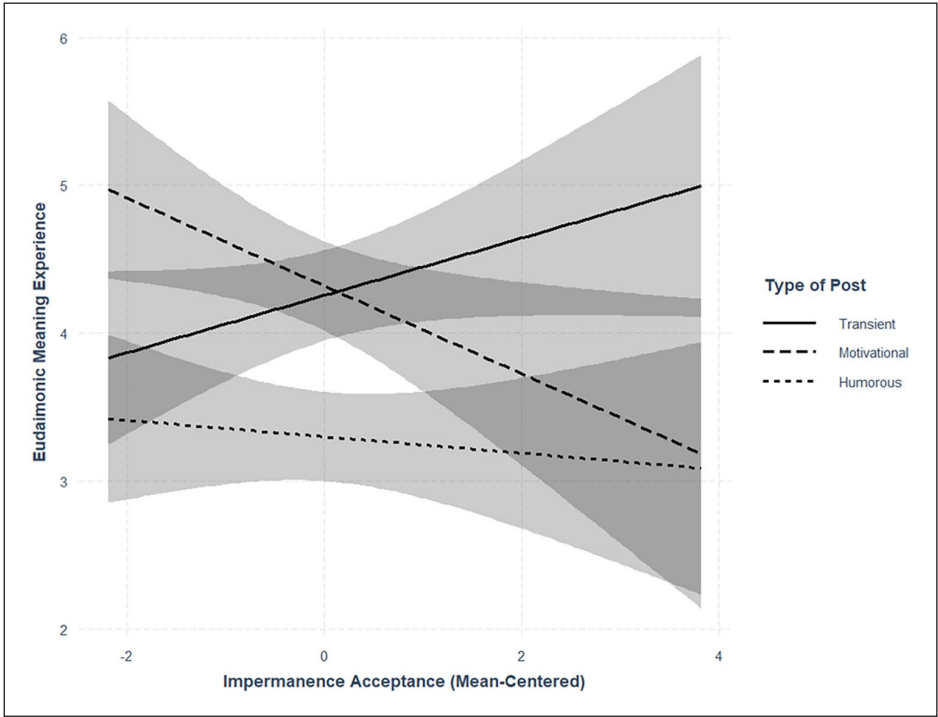
Figure 1. Significant interaction effect between impermanence acceptance and MP-TP on eudaimonic meaning experience.

Table 2. Regression model predicting eudaimonic self-actualization (H3b).

	b	SE	t	p
(Intercept)	3.15	0.08	37.94	<.001
MP-TP	0.11	0.20	0.54	.591
HP-TP	−0.98	0.20	-4.80	**<.001**
Impermanence Awareness	−0.22	0.13	-1.70	.090
Impermanence Acceptance	−0.13	0.06	-2.04	**.042**
MP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	0.06	0.33	0.20	.843
HP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	0.02	0.33	0.06	.956
MP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.50	0.16	-3.13	**.002**
HP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.27	0.15	-1.87	.063

See the Online Supplemental Materials for the ANOVA-style equivalent of this table.

To test RQ1, enjoyment was regressed on the same set of predictors that were used to test H3. The model was significant, $F(8, 328) = 2.84$, $p = .005$, $R_{adj}^2 = .04$. Motivational posts (MP-TP; $b = 0.47$, $p = .026$) and humorous posts (HP-TP; $b = 0.88$, $p < .001$) were
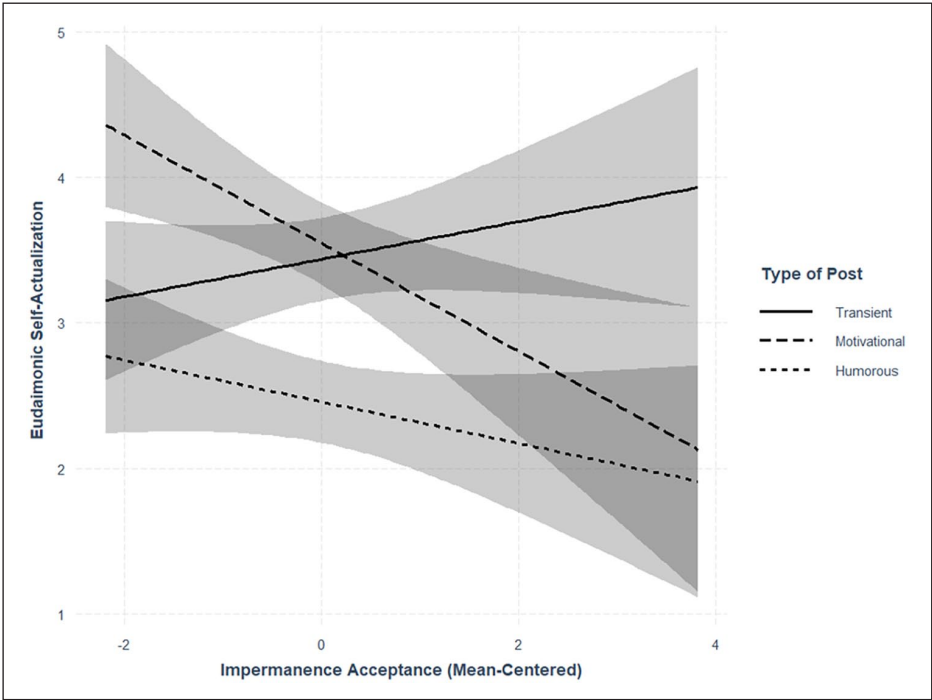
Figure 2. Significant interaction effect between impermanence acceptance and MP-TP on eudaimonic self-actualization.

both perceived as more enjoyable than transient posts ($\eta_{partial}^2 = .05$). Other predictors were nonsignificant. RQ1 was unsupported (see Table 3).

Study 1 discussion and rationale for study 2

The support for H1 and H2 established that even with static social media posts, the traditional distinction between eudaimonic media experiences and hedonic media experiences could be obtained. Transient posts and motivational posts, representing Rieger and Klimmt's (2019) human connection and human endurance eudaimonic thematic clusters, respectively, were perceived as eliciting greater eudaimonic meaning experience and self-actualization than humorous posts (representing hedonic media). Furthermore, humorous posts elicited greater enjoyment than transient posts. Although other studies (e.g. Dale et al., 2020; Rieger and Klimmt, 2019) have also studied eudaimonic media in a social media context, the present study is unique in using static social media posts as stimuli—rather than content-analyzing existing social media posts and subsequently categorizing them. Short-term effects for eudaimonic media experiences were obtained despite the weaker static (vs video-based) stimuli, although the present research does not make any assertions regarding long-term eudaimonia.

Table 3. Regression model predicting enjoyment (RQ1).

	b	SE	t	p
(Intercept)	4.87	0.09	56.69	<.001
MP-TP	0.47	0.21	2.24	**.026**
HP-TP	0.88	0.21	4.20	**<.001**
Impermanence Awareness	0.07	0.13	0.53	.597
Impermanence Acceptance	−0.04	0.07	−0.68	.500
MP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	−0.16	0.34	−0.46	.647
HP-TP × Impermanence Awareness	0.28	0.35	0.81	.420
MP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.29	0.17	−1.76	.080
HP-TP × Impermanence Acceptance	−0.18	0.15	−1.17	.243

See the Online Supplemental Materials for the ANOVA-style equivalent of this table.

On that basis, a conditional effects approach to eudaimonic media experiences was adopted. Transient posts and motivational posts—both supposedly equally eudaimonic when compared to humorous posts—show that they have crucial differentiating qualities when compared to each other with the moderator of impermanence acceptance. The argument was that transient posts can be perceived as eudaimonic because the inevitability of change—both the good and the bad—is a common reality that connects us all. But only people who can accept the impermanence of all things in this world will be able to value this connection and experience some (momentary) transcendence when they view transience-themed eudaimonic media. The findings suggest that merely being aware of the impermanence of all things does not necessarily contribute to a more meaningful experience when viewing transient posts.

One question that arose out of that finding was whether the relationship can be reversed: Can viewing transient posts engender greater impermanence awareness and/or impermanence acceptance than viewing other types of posts? Research by Slater et al. (2018) suggests this is possible. They found that after exposing people to eudaimonic (vs non-eudaimonic) videoclips, people felt psychologically closer to their future selves, and consequently, had greater acceptance of their deaths. Although the present research deals with impermanence acceptance instead of death acceptance, given that death acceptance is a subset of impermanence acceptance, viewing transient posts should engender greater impermanence acceptance than viewing motivational/humorous posts.

Mono no aware and aesthetic responses to transient themes

Insofar as the domain of impermanence is concerned, Japanese philosophy suggests that there could be a third dimension, apart from awareness and acceptance: *appreciation*. The notion that there is beauty to be found in loss and/or ephemerality is perhaps best explained by the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, understood as "beauty in pathos" or "the ah-ness of things" (Ward, 2022: 2). According to Saito (2007):

In one sense, to be reminded of our own decay or past glory is not pleasant, except for the morbid satisfaction in wallowing in our misery. However, in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, by drawing an analogy between our own transience and the ephemeral aspects of the world, we console ourselves with the realization that nothing whatever is exempt from this law of nature, accompanied by the feeling of camaraderie that "we are all in it together." That is, if there were some things that stay the same, our own transience will be harder to bear, because we wonder why we cannot be more like them. However, by admitting the common fate that binds everybody and everything in this world, we feel in a way reassured that we are not singled out as exceptions. (p. 186)

A prototypical example of the *mono no aware* aesthetic is cherry blossoms, with their evanescence leading people to perceive them as more precious than if they bloomed all year round (Ward, 2022). In gerontology, *mono no aware* was thus described by Danely (2016):

Transience, and the "pathos of things" (*mono no aware*), is an appropriate aesthetic of hope for those reflecting on ageing and death . . . the experience of this aesthetic opens up the possibility of transcendence as one faces the end of life. Accepting that attachments to [this world] are illusion allows one to mourn losses and to imagine other possible futures. Transience provides hope for transcendence. (p. 19)

Unlike mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1994), which makes apparent to people their impending deaths, *mono no aware* asks that people find beauty and appreciation in loss. As Danely (2016) puts it, when loss is understood as transience, "rather than a deprivation of something once possessed, loss is a revelation that possession was never really possible" (p. 16). The loss of youth, health, possessions, friends, family, and ultimately our lives, when viewed through a *mono no aware* lens, is the common fate that dooms and unites us all, and in which we can take solace—we are not alone in our losses.

Drawing from *mono no aware*, we conceptualized *impermanence appreciation* as an aesthetic response to transient phenomena in general, and as an aesthetic response to transient-themed media content when applied to the present research. Media-based impermanence appreciation is a response involving an assessment of transience-themed media content: Does a message help one to find beauty and peace in the finitude of all things?

On the one hand, impermanence appreciation can be viewed as a subset of appreciation as an audience response (Oliver and Bartsch, 2010). Media content involving transience—like those involving other categories of eudaimonic media—can provoke thought, focus on meaningful human conditions, or aid people's search for greater understanding in life (Oliver and Bartsch, 2010; Oliver and Raney, 2011).

On the other hand, impermanence appreciation is different from other types of media appreciation because of its strong focus on time, rather than the subject of what is shown in media. Consider fall colors: the varied shades of red, orange, and brown of autumnal leaves. A photograph of nature basked in fall colors can be eudaimonic in itself, fitting into the theme of art, architecture, and nature in Rieger and Klimmt's (2019) categorization of eudaimonic media. But where impermanence appreciation is concerned, it is the *evanescence* of fall colors that allows such a photograph to evoke eudaimonic responses.

Thus, a photograph depicting fall colors may elicit eudaimonic responses due to its content (i.e. the beauty of fall colors) and also because of the reminder that things are transient (i.e. fall colors do not last all year round). In this way, impermanence appreciation is linked to, but also distinct from, other types of media appreciation.

Impermanence appreciation is also distinct from other types of media appreciation due to its equivocal appraisal. Few sensible people will dispute that showing courage amid adversity (e.g. in *Schindler's List*) is worthy of appreciation or that nature can be beautiful. But cognitions involving transience—such as the loss of friendships and the passing of happy times—involve far more psychological resistance (Coleman and Coleman, 2019; Danely, 2016). Yet *mono no aware* suggests we should appreciate, not mourn over, the loss of our present selves and relationships.

Due to these unique qualities of impermanence appreciation, the present research investigated impermanence appreciation as an outcome in a focused manner. It asked participants how much they can find "beauty in impermanence," as opposed to using a more generic measure of appreciation. Study 2 aimed to find out:

> *Research Question 2 (RQ2).* Do transient posts engender greater (a) impermanence awareness, (b) impermanence acceptance, and (c) impermanence appreciation, than motivational posts and humorous posts?

Study 2

Study 2 was a between-subjects online experiment. Participants, recruited via Prolific, were randomly assigned to one of the same three conditions: transient posts, motivational posts, and humorous posts. The posts were operationalized in the same manner as in study 1. The procedure followed that of study 1, with two major changes. First, impermanence awareness and impermanence were now measured *after* participants saw the stimuli. Second, impermanence appreciation was added as a measure.

Sample

As in study 1, participants lived in the United States and used Instagram. 10 participants failed attention checks and were excluded, leaving a total sample size of $N=373$. Their ages ranged from 18 to 70 years old ($M=36.89$, $SD=11.64$). 61.7% of the participants were female, 36.5% were male, and 1.9% were non-binary. White participants comprised 66.2% of the sample, Asian participants 11.0%, Black participants 9.9%, Hispanic or Latine participants 6.2%, and 6.7% had mixed or other ethnicities.

Measures

Impermanence awareness (Cronbach's $\alpha=.82$) and *impermanence acceptance* (Cronbach's $\alpha=.89$) were measured using the same scale by Fernández-Campos et al. (2021) as in study 1. As before, all items for impermanence acceptance were reverse-coded.

Impermanence appreciation was an original Likert-type scale. The question stem read "While looking at the posts": and three items followed: "I appreciate impermanence," "I understand that there is beauty in impermanence," and "I can find peace in impermanence," Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$. As impermanence appreciation was an original measure, a confirmatory factor analysis (ML estimation) was performed to test whether impermanence awareness, acceptance, and appreciation were meaningfully different from each other. Fit indices were good, $\chi^2(101) = 243.99$, $p < .001$; CFI $= .951$; RMSEA $= .062$, 90% CI $= [.052, .072]$; SRMR $= .042$. See the Online Supplemental Materials for details.

The same three manipulation check items were used. All items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Manipulation checks

An ANOVA showed that transient posts ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 0.78$) elicited greater perceptions of transience than motivational posts ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.57$) and humorous posts ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.45$), $F(2, 370) = 174.55$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests showed that all three conditions were significantly different from each other (all $p < .001$).

An ANOVA showed that motivational posts ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.19$) were perceived as more motivational than transient posts ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.48$) and humorous posts ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.30$), $F(2, 370) = 200.59$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests showed that all three conditions were significantly different from each other (all $p < .001$).

An ANOVA showed that humorous posts ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.04$) were perceived as more humorous than transient posts ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.91$) and motivational posts ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(2, 370) = 673.83$, $p < .001$. Sidak-corrected post hoc tests showed that humorous posts were perceived as significantly more humorous than the other two conditions (both $p < .001$), but transient posts and motivational posts were not perceived as differentially humorous ($p = .097$).

Hence, all manipulations worked as intended.

Focal tests

The effect codes employed were the same as those used in the analyses for H3 and RQ1. Transient posts were the reference condition, resulting in the same coded predictors: MP-TP and HP-TP.

First, impermanence awareness was regressed on media themes. The model was non-significant, $F(2, 370) = 2.56$, $p = .079$, $R_{adj}^2 = .01$. Next, impermanence acceptance was regressed on media themes. The model was again non-significant, $F(2, 370) = 0.23$, $p = .798$, $R_{adj}^2 = .00$.

Finally, impermanence appreciation was regressed on media themes, and the model was significant, $F(2, 370) = 5.907$, $p = .003$, $R_{adj}^2 = .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Transient posts engendered greater impermanence appreciation than humorous posts (i.e. HP-TP), $b = -0.59$, $p = .001$. Transient posts and motivational posts did not differ (i.e. MP-TP), $b = -0.13$, $p = .454$. Therefore, RQ2c was partially supported, but not RQ2a and RQ2b.

Study 2 discussion

Study 2 showed that viewing transient posts could engender greater impermanence appreciation, a construct motivated by *mono no aware*. It also suggested that impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance—the moderators used in study 1—were less malleable, at least not by static social media posts. This raises interesting questions about the extent to which impermanence appreciation is more malleable compared to impermanence awareness and impermanence acceptance, which seem more stable. Future research testing the model of inspiring media (Oliver et al., 2021) can study how these three dimensions of impermanence can influence, or be influenced by, eudaimonic media—thereby revealing their stability/malleability.

Relatedly, our findings deviate from Slater et al. (2018) who found that exposure to eudaimonic media can lead to greater death acceptance. It is possible that the medium—video clips with a narrative arc—used in that study evoked stronger responses, which may be necessary to influence more stable constructs like impermanence acceptance. Nevertheless, our findings support the idea that brief text-based social media posts can evoke aesthetic responses, which opens promising lines of inquiry.

One limitation of this study was that *mono no aware* was not formally operationalized. It was used to inspire the study of impermanence appreciation as an outcome, but it is more than impermanence appreciation. As literary and philosophical discussions of *mono no aware* have highlighted its associations with melancholy, empathy, longing, poignancy, and tragic beauty (e.g. Prusinski, 2012; Sato, 2024; Ward, 2022), there may be an affective component to *mono no aware* not captured in the constructs of impermanence awareness, acceptance, and appreciation. Future research should more fully develop the concept of *mono no aware* within media psychology, and study how impermanence constructs may or may not be associated with other constructs pertaining to eudaimonic media experiences, such as self-transcendence (Oliver et al., 2018).

General discussion

People's experience of uplifting and inspiring media can have profound effects on their outlook in life (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2021). At the same time, different media themes should engender different kinds of media experiences depending on one's individual disposition (Oliver et al., 2021; Valkenburg and Peter, 2013). The present research supported the findings from these two lines of research. First, both transient and motivational posts foster a greater eudaimonic experience when compared to humorous posts. Second, among participants with higher levels of impermanence *acceptance*, transient posts had a positive effect on eudaimonic experience, while this pattern was reversed for motivational posts. Overall, these results suggest that while eudaimonic media content can drive potential eudaimonic outcomes in general, these effects may depend on both the *type* of eudaimonic media content people are exposed to and their specific individual dispositions.

This research holds several theoretical contributions and implications. Most importantly, it demonstrated that there is substantial value for researchers interested in meaningful media use to further conceptualize, explore, and elucidate the various kinds of

eudaimonic media content. In other words, eudaimonic media content should not be viewed as a monolithic whole. As Reeves et al. (2016) argued, there is a pressing need for media psychologists to consider and include the variance inherent in media stimuli when trying to understand media effects.

Although this task seems daunting given the wide variety of content out in the world, one potential avenue would be to seek inspiration from other humanistic fields. For example, some sociologists have argued that literary themes could enrich theory and research within their field (Carter and Carter, 2014), while psychologists have drawn from literary plots to inform research on a universal human emotional experience, kama muta (Fiske et al., 2017). Communication researchers can similarly draw inspiration from these fields to conceptually organize eudaimonic content. Given that centuries of literary and artistic analyses have focused on understanding the meaning embedded within cultural products, their insights could be useful starting points to inform research on eudaimonic media experiences. Themes such as transience, ambition, curiosity, power, and deviance, among others, often speak to issues fundamental to the human condition.

Next, several related concepts drawn from the philosophy of *mono no aware* were integrated with media psychology: transient-themed media, impermanence awareness, impermanence acceptance, and impermanence appreciation. This integration opens new lines of inquiry both within and beyond media psychology, given that the temporality of all things is an inescapable fact of life. Future research can also integrate *mono no aware* with psychological conceptualizations of time. People more receptive to the *mono no aware* aesthetic or more aware/accepting/appreciative of impermanence may view time as finite, and therefore focus greater effort on things they perceive as emotionally meaningful (Carstensen, 2006). Or they may perceive greater continuity between their present selves and their future selves, changing the way they plan for the future (Hershfield, 2011; see also Slater et al., 2018).

From cave paintings to novels, video games to films, human cultural products have been produced to entertain and provide avenues for humans to make sense of the world and their lives. Meaningful experiences can come from many places, and our individual dispositions and worldviews can and are shaped by these experiences themselves. Our experiences with social media are no different, and discourse on its impact ought to consider these nuances.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. That is, if the regression coefficient *b* associated with this predictor is positive, motivational posts (MP) have a *higher* value than transient posts (TP) in terms of the outcome variable. But if *b* is negative, motivational posts (MP) have a *lower* value than transient posts (TP).
2. That is, if the regression coefficient *b* associated with this predictor is positive, humorous posts (HP) have a *higher* value than transient posts (TP) in terms of the outcome variable. But if *b* is negative, humorous posts (HP) have a *lower* value than transient posts (TP).

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