

On the Meaning of Life and the Inevitability of Death

*Exploring the effects of mortality salience and
eudaimonic videos on media experience*

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars have argued that there must be more to entertainment than just amusement and thrill. Therefore, a new approach to entertainment has looked beyond entertainment gratification such as sensation-seeking and fun, and has included affective states as poignant, emotionally moving, and inspiring as description of media experience. In the current study, eudaimonic entertainment is linked to the meaning of life and inevitability of death. Participants are either primed with the death of oneself (mortality salience self, MSS), the death of a loved one (mortality salience loved one, MSLO) or placed in a control group. Consequently, they are asked to watch an eudaimonic video where the protagonist loses a loved one. In the video, the protagonist either showed emotions indicating acceptance towards the death of the loved one (Accepting Emotion Video, AEV) or strong and sorrowful emotions about the death of the loved one (Sorrowful Emotion Video, SEV). The main question is whether type of mortality salience (MSS/MSLO/control) and type of video (AEV/SEV) lead to different media experiences in terms of positive and negative affect, mixed affect, poignancy, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, TEBOOTS and para-social relationships. The results showed little evidence for both type of mortality salience and type of video on media experience. Nonetheless, several ambiguous findings also provided the knowledge that something unanswered and unexplained is going on in the field of eudaimonic stories and mortality salience. Directions for future research are discussed.

In retrospect, all of us can refer to stories that changed our perspective on life. The stories altered our perceptions of ourselves and our direct environment. These were the books, plays, or movies that we were completely immersed in, the stories that kept us up in the middle of the night. A wide variety of characters contributed to contemplations about who we are, where we come from and what we would like our futures to be. These are the stories that moved us. The narratives that we appreciated most.

In recent years, research on the influence of narratives has begun to identify the importance and consequences of narratives in the field of persuasion. Scientists have argued that we can use narratives to contemplate unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts and activities that are yet to be finished (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result, stories can be used to escape the woes of everyday life (Katz & Foulkes, 1962) or help individuals expanding their ideas and thoughts about the world we live in (Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). Narrative processing enables people to better understand and explain the world around them due to the structure of narratives (Escalas, 2004). In other words, narrative structures can help people to comprehend temporal, causal and relational links. In this regard, stories are not only used for mere entertainment, but also for meaning-making and enhanced interpretation.

This inference about stories is in line with more recent theorizing on the subject of narratives. For a long time, scholars have considered entertainment's main focus to be experiences of fun, amusement and thrill (Zillmann, 1988). This form of entertainment is also known as *hedonic* entertainment, and its experience can be considered an enjoyable and independent state that involves physiological, cognitive and mood-related processes (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Hedonic entertainment is mostly aimed at making people feel good about themselves and the world around them. In this sense, most (romantic) comedies and comedian shows do justice to the idea of hedonic entertainment. However, pleasure alone cannot explain why media users are still engaged with seemingly depressing movies. Feagin (1983, p. 96) quite accurately described this phenomenon for the audiences of tragedies:

"It would not be surprising to find someone claiming that aesthetically developed persons do not feel pleasure or enjoyment from tragedy at all, and, that the appropriate response to such works of art is to be unnerved, disturbed, depressed, or even horrified."

The hedonic view cannot explain why people love tragedies, while those stories leave their audiences "unnerved, disturbed, depressed or even horrified". It can also not resolve the question

why so many teenagers are fascinated by movies such as *The Fault In Our Stars* or *The Hunger Games*. How can these teenagers consider a sad love story about two terminally ill cancer patients entertainment? How do we explain the fun behind watching children slaughter each other in an arena?

As argued before, stories are often not only used for mere entertainment, but also for meaning-making and enhanced interpretation. Several scholars have argued that entertainment is also aimed at providing media users food for thought through meaningful media experiences, the so-called *eudaimonic* experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Rieger & Hofer, 2017). This view on entertainment has looked beyond entertainment gratifications such as mood management and sensation-seeking, and has included 'being moved/thought-provoked' as a factor for media experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). In this light, eudaimonic entertainment does not necessarily lead to fun, but rather to meaning-making and great appreciation for the beauty to live (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Rieger & Hofer, 2017). Eudaimonic entertainment distinguishes itself from hedonic entertainment by inducing appreciation rather than fun and laughter (Oliver & Bartsch, 2011). This appreciation can be described through feelings of being moved and thought-provoked by a meaningful book or movie. While some stories may both be meaningful and entertaining, others may only cover one of the two constructs (or none, if the movie is just extremely bad). Appreciation can explain why audiences rate certain movies as shallow but entertaining, while other movies are considered to have a deeper meaning.

This idea of entertainment as encompassing can explain why people enjoy sad and depressing movies, even when these movies are making them feel unhappy or uncomfortable. This is in line with the finding that media users consider self-development one of the perceived functions of movies (Tesser, Millar, & Wu, 1988). Other scholars have also argued that there is potential for enjoyment to be partly described as the need for psychological well-being, such as the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Gizzard, & Organ, 2010). It can explain the paradox of why Gibson, Aust, & Zillman (2000) found that lonely people seek mournful and sad songs for their enjoyment. Furthermore, it can also clarify why psychologists have started to prescribe books and movies to their patients as a form of therapy (Greiner, 2016). In conclusion, it seems that eudaimonic entertainment can explain the reason that we are also engaged in books and movies that negatively influence our mood. While hedonic entertainment provides us with laughter and happiness, eudaimonic entertainment can serve for other, perhaps greater, purposes such as poignancy and meaning-making.

The meaning of life & the inevitability of death

Several scholars have further elaborated on eudaimonic entertainment linked to the meaning of life and the inevitability of death (Tsay, Krakowiak, & Oliver, 2012). In earlier research, the fear of death is hypothesized to unconsciously haunt people during their lives, a theory known as Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Solomon, 1986; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). Terror Management Theory explains why humans generally fear death and why humans have the urgent desire to deny death or cope with the inevitable through notions of immortality (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Many experiments related to Terror Management Theory make use of death reminders, known as mortality salience (for a meta-analysis, see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). In conditions of mortality salience, a participant is primed with the idea of his/her own death before engaging in the rest of the experiment. In these experiments, participants are asked to write a short essay about their own death, which is followed by a break or different unrelated tasks. These breaks and unrelated tasks are implemented in experiments to ensure that the notion of one own's death is less obvious during the rest of the tasks. A delay is necessary to let mortality salience become unconscious. However, once mortality salience is unconsciously activated, it has a wide variety of results. Different experiments have shown the influence of mortality salience on defending one's cultural beliefs, negatively evaluating dissimilar cultures, and increased aggression against those with a different attitude (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Moreover, the activation of the unconscious fear of death also resulted in more willingness to donate money to charities (Fransen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Das, 2008) and in increased purchase intentions (Das, Duiven, Arendsen, & Vermeulen, 2014). This may be due to the fact that earlier research indicated that mortality salience positively influenced impulsive behaviours (Frieze & Hoffmann, 2008). Thus, death reminders seem to influence the extent to which human beings protect their worldviews and spend their money. Once the unconscious fear of death is activated, humans seem to engage in maintaining the beliefs that are most important to them.

These experimental findings are often explained by the concept of an anxiety buffer. Central to Terror Management Theory is the notion that human beings use an anxiety buffer in order to cope with the unconscious stress that is related to the knowledge that none of us will live forever. This anxiety buffer is often referred to as the wide spectrum of ideas, beliefs, cultural worldviews and close relationships individuals hold in order to cope with death-related thoughts (Greenberg, et al., 1986). As long as individuals manage to maintain their own perspective, there is no need to more

thoroughly protect oneself against death-related thoughts. For example, when an individual truly believes in immortal life after death, this (often religious) worldview serves as an anxiety buffer to suppress the fear of dying. Maintaining cultural and religious values is an important way of dealing with death. Furthermore, close relationships that make one feel connected and secure may also serve as buffer for what may come once one stops breathing (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003).

More recently, scholars have asked whether the mortality salience of these close relationships would result in the same findings as one's own mortality salience. The question arose whether being primed with the death of a loved one would also induce worldview protection and the use of anxiety buffers. Liu and Aaker (2007) looked at the differences between a control group and a group that needed to envision the death of a loved one through cancer. Their findings showed that participants who lost someone important to them by cancer favoured long-term decision-making over making short-term decisions. These participants were more invested and interested in their future lives on the long run, rather than focused on present day. In a study towards the effects of mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO) and mortality salience of the self (MSS), Wang (2014) found significant differences in attitudes towards materialistic consumption, purchase intentions and brand preference. The results indicated that participants in the MSS condition were more likely to choose pro-materialistic consumptions, to favour money over experiences and to prefer high-status brands than participants in the MSLO condition were. Wang (2014) also found that fear is the dominant emotion in MSS individuals, while MSLO participants reported higher levels of sadness. In conclusion, these findings indicated that there are different effects of MSS than of MSLO. However, few studies have examined the effects of the unconscious fear of the death of a loved one. Much is still unknown about how MSLO can affect attitudes, intentions and behaviour. More research is necessary to fully understand the processes and mechanisms underlying the unconscious fear of the death of a loved one.

Worldview creation

So far, we have explored the notion that the wide spectrum of ideas, beliefs, cultural worldviews and close relationships individuals hold can help them cope with death-related thoughts of oneself. However, we have not yet asked ourselves how these worldviews have come to be. Surely it seems plausible that many beliefs and ideas are formed in early upbringing, through the influence of parents and caregivers. The society and the culture an individual grows up in strongly influences

the assumptions an individual makes about the world. In this light, stories can help individuals expanding their ideas and thoughts about the world they live in (Slater et al., 2014). It has also been suggested that being moved by stories is a form of 'play' for acquiring coping mechanisms (Vorderer, 2001). Watching your favourite series character going through a hard time may help you dealing with the problems you are facing in daily life. In this theorizing, stories can be considered as a script on how to approach the difficult and serious dilemmas people face in life. Media experience may be explained as a mental preparation for later difficulties. In short, it is proposed in this thesis that narratives may serve as a script for worldview creation.

The script for worldview creation may be related to eudaimonic entertainment. As discussed earlier, research on eudaimonic entertainment can further explain why we are engaged with seemingly depressing stories. In conceptualizing the idea of appreciation (rather than enjoyment), it has been proposed that there are more aspects to the eudaimonic media experience, which could rather be captured in words such as poignant, emotionally moving, touching, tender or inspiring (Oliver & Bartsch, 2012; Janicke & Oliver, 2017). These affective states may more accurately depict the media experience of eudaimonic entertainment than words such as amusement and fun do. More specifically, poignancy is described as experiencing happiness and sadness at the same time (Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008; Slater, Oliver & Appel, 2016). Individuals remembering being in a meaningful place for the last time, or remembering the end of an important period in one's life reported high levels of these mixed feelings (Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen, 2008). Getting closer to the graduation date also accounted for stronger feelings of poignancy in college students (Zhang & Fung, 2009). In conclusion, it seems that meaningful endings can influence the level of poignancy experienced. As eudaimonic stories are often related to limited time horizons and meaningful changes in life, it could be argued that eudaimonic entertainment can lead to higher levels of experienced poignancy. In light of this proposition, Slater, Oliver, and Appel (2016) carried out an experiment comparing eudaimonic video clips (classified as such by their meaningful endings) to non-eudaimonic video clips. Their results indicated that eudaimonic videos indeed lead to higher reported levels of poignancy than non-eudaimonic videos do. Poignancy seems to be an important concept in understanding the media experience of eudaimonic entertainment.

Moreover, poignancy may also explain how worldviews have come to be. In experiencing the mixed feelings of our favourite characters, we may find ourselves expanding the range of emotions we are familiar with. We can consider it as an opportunity for temporarily losing ourselves to the

character's emotions. Recent theorizing proposed that humans are engaged with stories to expand the boundaries of the self (Slater, et al., 2014). This phenomenon of expanding the boundaries of the self is shortened as TEBOTS. It explains the extent to which individuals feel that they are experiencing something that is dissimilar and unlike something they normally experience. The protagonist in a story may show the reader or watcher surroundings that they normally would not be able to visit. An insight in the protagonist's feelings could demonstrate relationships or struggles the reader or watcher would normally not run into. In this light, TEBOTS would be a feasible way to explain the use of eudaimonic entertainment for creating new worldviews.

Furthermore, worldview creation may be influenced by the extent to which individuals identify themselves with the protagonist. This phenomenon is known as identification (Zillmann, 2006). Identifying oneself with the protagonist can be considered a form of learning, by which individuals can learn to better understand others and the roles they take on in daily life. Further conceptualization of the concept by Cohen (2001) has led to considering identification as a mechanism that helps audiences to experience entertainment from the inside. Earlier research has indicated that taking the perspective of a character is related to story-consistent attitudes (De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2009; 2012). In this sense, identification is different from transportation. While in identification readers are recognizing themselves in or imaging themselves to be the protagonist, transportation is the feeling that you have left the real world and are submerged in the fantasy world (Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation can explain why children immersed in reading a book cannot hear their parents' call for dinner. It can clarify why some people experience stories with more stronger emotions and thoughts, as they are fully engaging in the story world (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004).

Another concept that may explain the ignorance to the parents' call, may be para-social relationships. Para-social relationships can be considered the imaginative relationships the audience has with the characters in the movies or TV series they watch (Horton & Wohl, 1956). One of the characteristics of a para-social relationship is that the individual responds to the character as if it was a real person, and thus a real social bond (Giles, 2002). These social bonds are hypothesized to specifically be found in series where audiences follow their characters for a longer period of time. In a personal example, my mother always had to call me at least three times before I would put down the *Harry Potter* series. In *Harry Potter*, the audience follows a young wizard at his wizarding school over the course of his whole teenage years in seven different books (or even eight movies). Chances

are that it becomes more easy to form a personal bond with Harry and/or his friends, than it is to form imaginative personal bonds with characters from a one-time movie. This personal bond with Harry can consequently contribute to forming new ideas and thoughts which become part of our worldview.

In short, we have looked at the proposal that narratives can help us expand our current way of thinking and create new worldviews. Several media experiences of eudaimonic entertainment can help us explain how these new worldviews come to be. Appreciation, poignancy, identification, transportation, TEBOTS and para-social relationships have been further discussed and defined in relation to eudaimonic entertainment. However, the role of Terror Management Theory needs to be more fully addressed. It is time to connect and link concepts in order to fully grasp what the current study is aimed at.

Connecting and linking concepts

In the context of eudaimonic entertainment, it has been discussed that meaningful stories can provide individuals with better scripts on how to deal with the difficulties in life. Earlier, it was also indicated that the inevitability of death is one of the important hardships humans face. It can be argued that mortality salience is helpful in understanding the psychological need for eudaimonic entertainment. Eudaimonic entertainment may serve as a way to build new perspectives and worldviews, which consequently serve as anxiety buffers for the unconscious fear of dying. In that sense, eudaimonic entertainment provides scripts that can help people dealing with their own death or that of a loved one.

Earlier research has found that mortality salience can influence eudaimonic media experience. Appreciation for a story was found to be related to the need to find meaning in life (Hofer, 2003). Participants primed with mortality salience also showed higher levels of appreciation of the movie and liking of the protagonist when the protagonist survived than when he passed away at the end of the movie (Rieger & Hofer, 2017). Meaningful movies provided better anxiety buffers to mortality salience than enjoyable or informative movies did (Rieger et al., 2015). This leads to the question whether there are underlying mechanisms during meaningful movies inducing the better anxiety buffers. These underlying mechanisms could possibly include mixed feelings or poignancy. However, to date, it has not yet been demonstrated that poignancy caused by meaningful movies also provides better anxiety buffers to mortality salience (Rieger et al., 2015). In the present thesis, it

is argued that mixed feelings of sadness and happiness are used to setting up a way of dealing with the inevitability of death. The experience of poignancy may help manage the subconscious stress that is related to the end of life.

According to Rieger and Hofer (2017), watching meaningful movies can result in better coping mechanisms related to the anxiety of own death through reflection on the meaning of life and the strength of life. They argued that eudaimonic stories form a strong basis for strengthening the anxiety buffer by providing media users with meaningful interactions or relationships with the story characters. This anxiety buffer is necessary to be able to cope with fear of the finiteness of our own life (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). It could be that this anxiety buffer is also in place for the death of a loved one. The meaningful experiences happening in a story may help those grieving a lost one in the same way as the meaningful experiences help individuals to cope with their own death. This would be in line with earlier indications that enjoyment can be partly described as the need for psychological well-being (Tamborini et al., 2010). It could also demonstrate that the psychologist that prescribes book therapy for those in grief (Greiner, 2016) is onto something. In this light, having the unconscious awareness that death is inevitable for yourself may result in different coping mechanisms than the awareness that your loved ones will die, too. It can be hypothesized that the narratives about the death of a loved one will result in a different media experience than the death of oneself. In the current study, the measured aspects of media experience are positive and negative affect, poignancy, identification, transportation, TEBOTS, and para-social relationships.

Research Question 1: *To what extent does activating the unconscious awareness that death is inevitable for oneself (Mortality Salience Self, MSS) lead to different media experiences in terms of positive and negative affect, mixed affect, poignancy, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, TEBOTS and para-social relationships than activating the unconscious awareness that death is inevitable for a loved one (Mortality Salience Loved Ones, MSLO) or than a control group?*

In earlier research, videos were classified as eudaimonic by the fact that they had a meaningful ending (Slater, Oliver, & Appel, 2016). Eudaimonic videos led to higher reported levels of poignancy than non-eudaimonic videos did. In the current study, the influence of mortality salience on the media experience of short videos is explored. All videos depict a story of a protagonist who is unexpectedly losing a loved one. However, in two out of the four videos, the protagonist is having a

harder time with the death of the loved one than in the other videos. In these videos, the protagonist is dealing with heavy emotions related to the death.

In the present thesis, it is argued that the meaningful ending of the used videos may also lead to higher levels of poignancy. However, a slight difference is being made between the two conditions. As mentioned, in the one condition, the protagonist is dealing with heavy emotions related to the death of the loved one. While all videos in the current study have a meaningful ending, the protagonist's thoughts and emotions throughout the videos are dissimilar to each other. To date, no research has been done on the influence of mortality salience on thoughts and emotions in eudaimonic videos. Therefore, the question remains whether differences in the condition in which the death of a loved one is hard on the protagonist of the video (sorrowful emotions videos (SEV)) in comparison to videos where the protagonist seems to be more accepting towards the death of the loved one (acceptance emotions videos (AEV)).

Research Question 2: *Do videos in which the protagonist shows heavy, sorrowful emotions (SEV) lead to different media experiences in terms of positive and negative affect, mixed affect, poignancy, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, TEBOs and para-social relationships than videos in which the protagonist is going through more accepting emotions towards the death of the loved one (AEV)?*

Research Question 3: *Does the combination of mortality salience conditions (Mortality Salience Self (MSS), Mortality Salience Loved Ones (MSLO), Control) and type of video (Acceptance Emotions Videos (AEV) and Sorrowful Emotions Videos (SEV)) lead to different media experiences in terms of positive and negative affect, mixed affect, poignancy, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, TEBOs and para-social relationships?*

Method

Design

The experiment used a 2 (type of video: Sorrowful Emotions Videos (SEV) vs. Accepting Emotions Videos (AEV)) x 3 (mortality salience: Mortality Salience Self (MSS) vs. Mortality Salience Loved Ones (MSLO) vs. Control) between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions. In the video type conditions, there was a difference in the extent to which protagonists' felt strong emotions about the death of a loved one during the video. In the sorrowful emotions videos (SEV), protagonists found it very hard to deal with the death of their loved one during the video. In the acceptance emotions videos (AEV), the protagonist seemed to be more accepting towards the death of the loved one. Mortality salience was manipulated into three different items: mortality salience of the self (MSS), mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO) and a control condition. See Figure 1 for an overview of the experimental design.

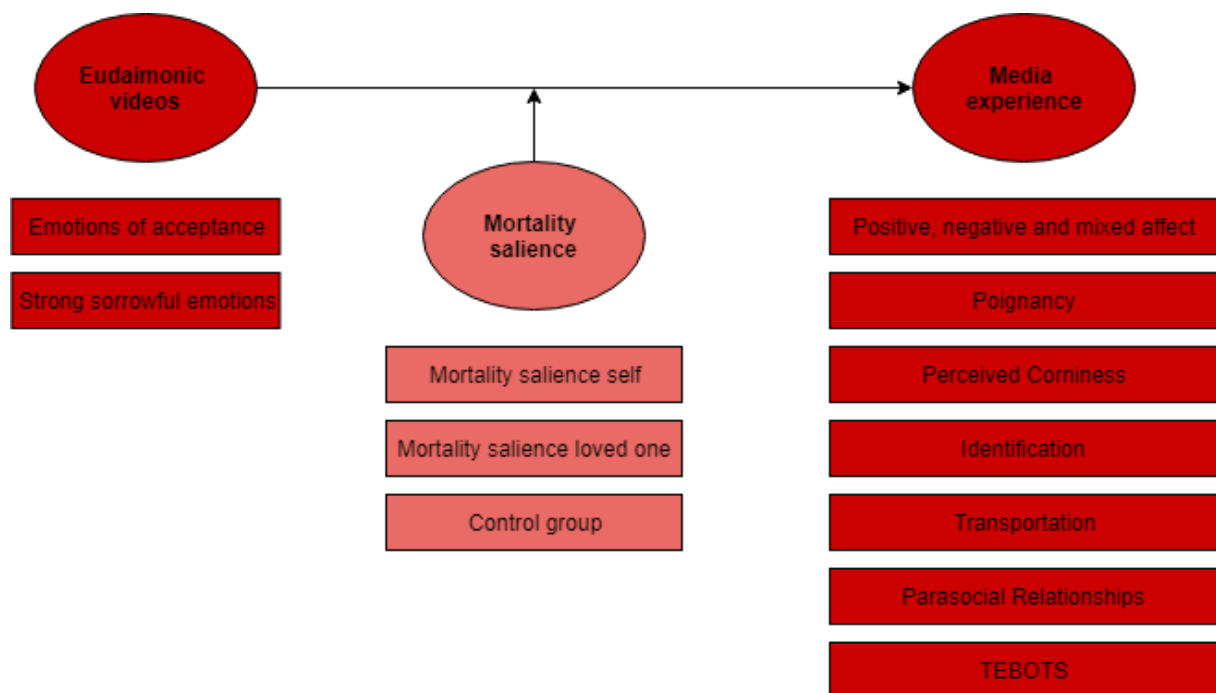


Figure 1: Experimental design

Materials

During an extensive search on YouTube, the first experimenter screened short videos about the death of a loved one. Videos were selected on the criteria that they should (1) only include animated characters, (2) did not include more characters than a protagonist, loved one and bystander, and (3) were no longer than ten minutes. Seven different videos were shown to a second experimenter, in order to choose four videos for the final experiment. Strong emotions were present in all the videos, and all videos included the sudden death of a loved one. Two videos were assigned to the Sorrowful Emotions Video condition based on the visible strong emotions and pain the protagonist was feeling throughout the video (*Borrowed Time* and *Father and Daughter*). Two other videos were assigned to the Acceptance Emotions Video condition based on the less strong and more accepting emotions towards the death of the loved one (*The Song of Rain* and *Wakan Short Film*). The URLs and a short description of the videos can be found in Appendix A. It should be mentioned that no pre-testing has been done. Although a pre-test is highly recommended in this scenario, it was beyond the scope of this project. The effects of the videos were checked with manipulation checks in the main experiment (see Measures).

Mortality salience was manipulated using the same items as used in Wang (2014). In the case of mortality salience of the self (MSS), two different questions were asked: (a) *"Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death awakens in you"* and (b) *"Describe, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead."* In the case of mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO), participants were asked to think of someone they love incredibly much and to contemplate how they feel about the death of this loved one. Three questions were consequently asked: (a) *Could you please tell us who you are thinking of? You do not have to include a name, just the role this person has in your life (e.g. mother, partner, best friend ...),* (b) *"Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of this loved one's death arouses in you,"* (c) *"Describe, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to this loved one as he or she dies, and once he or she has died."* In the control group, participants are asked for their emotions with regard to eating breakfast, and what they think physically happens to them when they are eating breakfast. All answers from MSS, MSLO and control were checked by the experimenter to see whether the participant filled out the question thoughtfully. This check did not lead to exclusion of any participant.

Measurements

As dependent variables, several aspects of media experience were measured. These constructs included positive and negative affect, mixed affect, poignancy, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, parasocial relationships and TEBOTS. All answers for all constructs were collected using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly agree (1) to Strongly disagree (5), according to the standard five-point Likert scales in Qualtrics.

Positive and negative affect. To measure positive and negative affect, the international positive and negative affect short-form for international use (I-PANAS-SF) was used (Karim, Weisz, & Rehman, 2011). The questionnaire included five items related to positive affect (*active, determined, attentive, inspired and alert*) and five items related to negative affect (*afraid, nervous, upset, hostile, ashamed*). PANAS-I-SF was measured two times: before and after watching the video. Items related to negative affect were recoded. Cronbach's alpha was measured to consider the internal consistency of the items. The reliability scores were found to be acceptable before ($\alpha = .75$) and after ($\alpha = .71$) the video.

Mixed affect. For mixed affect, participants were presented with the statement "*I felt the video was...*" followed by nine items: *emotional, moved, touched, tender, compassionate, meaningful, inspired and elevated* (Appel, Slater, & Oliver, 2017). Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$).

Poignancy. Poignancy was measured using the technique from Slater, Oliver, & Appel (2016), based on the earlier work of Ersner-Hershfield et al. (2008). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt cheerful, happy, joyful, unhappy, sad and depressed. The poignancy score was based on the lowest score participants reported between the items: *unhappy/happy, depressed/joyful, sad/cheerful*. For example, if participant reported 2 on unhappy and 5 on happy, the poignancy score was measured as 2. If depressed was 5 and joyful was 4, the poignancy score was 4. Reliability analyses indicated excellent reliability scores before ($\alpha = .90$) and after ($\alpha = .90$) watching the video.

Perceived corniness. To measure the extent of authenticity of the video, perceived corniness was measured based on Slater, Oliver, & Appel (2016). Corniness was measured with five items: *silly, over-sentimental, corny, authentic, and genuine*. The items silly, over-sentimental and corny were recoded. Reliability analysis showed internal consistency was questionable ($\alpha = .63$). Additional

reliability analyses were run to check whether removing items would improve internal consistency. This was not the case.

Identification. Identification was measured by using six validated items from De Graaf (2014). These items included examples such as *“During reading, I imaged what it would be like to be in the position of the character”* and *“I felt tense when the character felt tense”*. Participants were asked to report the character they identified most with. Interreliability analysis showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$). If participants felt they identified themselves with more than one person, they could also fill out the identification scales for another character. These items were shown to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$).

Transportation. Previously validated questions were used to assess the extent to which participants felt transported into the story (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). Participants were asked: *“How do you feel about the following statements?”*. The measurement involved ten items, such as *“During the video, I forgot about my daily affairs”* and *“During the video, it seemed as if I was there in my thoughts”*. Internal consistency was found to be good, almost excellent ($\alpha = .89$).

Para-social Relationships. PSR was measured using questions from the measurement of Rubin et al. (1985). Five questions were aimed at measuring the extent to which participants feel that they have an one-way connection or friendship with one of their short movie characters. Examples include *“I feel that the main character has become some sort of friend”* and *“I’d like to get to know more stories about the main character”*. Participants were asked which character they felt they had the best relationship with. Once again, participants could also fill out the items for a second character. Reliability analysis showed good internal consistency for both PSR in the first ($\alpha = .89$) and second character ($\alpha = .89$).

TEBOTS. To measure the extent to which individuals feel that they are experiencing something that is dissimilar and unlike they normally experience, TEBOTS was used (Slater, et al., 2014). TEBOTS included items related to overcoming the boundaries of the self, such as *“Did you experience relationships between characters that are different than relationships in your own life”* and *“Did you experience how it would be to have skills that you normally don’t have”*. The internal consistency of the items was shown to be questionable ($\alpha = .65$). It was not possible to improve Cronbach’s alpha by

deleting items. Therefore, the items were combined into TEBOTS, but conclusions on the effects of TEBOTS were carefully and critically considered.

Death thought accessibility. To check whether participants were indeed primed with the death of oneself or a loved one, a word completion task was placed in the experiment. In this task, participants are asked to complete a list of words to make existing words, e.g. BUR __ D. Generally, participants primed with death fill out more death-related words such as BURIED (e.g. Fransen et al., 2008). In total, participants completed 25 words, of which six could be completed as death-related words (BUR __ D, DE __ , GRA __ , KI __ ED, SK __ L, COFF __). Every time a participant completed the word as buried, dead, grave, killed, skull or coffin, a participant received one point. A total of six points could be acquired. All points were summed up to create a word completion task total per participant (range 0 – 6).

Video questions. A set of items was created to check the expected differences in the perceived acceptance of the death of the loved one by the protagonist in the video. The six items included questions such as “During the video, I felt that the death of the loved one was acceptable for the other character” and “I thought the atmosphere in the video was peaceful”. Internal consistency between the items was found to be unacceptable ($\alpha = .46$). Therefore, all six items are considered separately in the results section.

Subjects

Participants were recruited through two different channels. First of all, the experimenter was making use of SONA, the participant system of Radboud University. For each fully filled out questionnaire, a participant received half a participant point. Secondly, participants were recruited personally by the experimenter, either by word-of-mouth, e-mails or through Facebook messages. Participants' responses were only included if they filled out more than 95% of the questionnaire. The responses of a total of 194 participants was included in the data analysis. Participants were between 17 – 57 years old ($M = 21.73$, $SD = 5.33$). A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant differences for age between the experimental groups for mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.32$, $p = .269$) or type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1$, $p = .819$) or the interaction between the two ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .651$).

A total of 152 females and 42 males took part in the study. This imbalance can be explained by the high amount of female psychology students in Radboud University, which are the main users of the participant system SONA. A Chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of woman and men among the conditions. No significant difference was found in the distribution of gender over mortality salience ($\chi^2(2) = 1.65, p = .437$) or type of video ($\chi^2(1) = 3.48, p = .062$). Thus, gender was distributed equally over the conditions.

Participants generally had a high school degree as their highest level of completed education (65.9%), followed by a university's bachelor degree (16.5%) and a university's master's degree (10.8%). A large range of nationalities was covered, with 22 different nationalities listed. The most common nationalities were Dutch (49.3% of participants) and German (35% of participants). At the end of the questionnaire, participants were also asked whether they had recently lost a loved one. A total of 29.9% of the participants indicated that they had recently lost someone they loved. Participants who lost someone either still thought of the death of the loved one on a daily basis (19.0%), on a weekly basis (44.8%), on a biweekly basis (15.5%), on a monthly basis (13.8%) or on a half year's basis (6.9%). The most commonly reported role of the lost one was a grandparent (42.9%). As the amount of participants who lost a loved one would not result in enough power for any further analyses, no further statistical treatments were carried out related to the recent death of a loved one.

Procedure

All questionnaires were collected online through the questionnaire tool Qualtrics. Participants were told that they were engaging in a study about short videos and that their input was of great importance as some of the videos were going to be shown at a short film festival. In the first page of the Qualtrics questionnaire, participants were asked to read the consent form. The consent form was followed by the manipulation of mortality salience. Participants were either shown the questions related to mortality salience of the self (MSS), mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO) or the control group. Directly after filling out these questions, participants were presented with a combination of items from PANAS-I-SF and poignancy, followed by one of the four videos and another combination of items from PANAS-I-SF and poignancy. Next, all participants were presented with blocks of items from the word completion task, mixed affect, perceived corniness, identification, transportation, para-social relationships, video questions, TEBOTS and general questions. At the end

of the questionnaire, participants were explained that we are looking into the existential questions people may have about death and the loss of a loved one, and their response to emotional and thought-provoking video's in this matter. Participants could leave their e-mail address if they were interested in the outcomes of the questionnaire. E-mail addresses were kept separately from the answers to the questionnaire. For an overview of the survey flow, please see Appendix B.

Results

The influences of type of video and type of mortality salience on media experience were analysed with univariate analyses. A factor analysis was carried out to further study variable relationships for more complex concepts.

Type of video

In order to check whether participants perceived the death of a loved one as more acceptable in the Acceptance Emotions Videos (AEV) than in the Sorrowful Emotion Videos (SEV), six questions related to the atmosphere in the video were analysed.

Video Question 1: "During the video, I felt that the death of the loved one was acceptable for the other character". A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .581$), type of video ($F(1, 188) = 3.03, p = .084$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 1.46, p = .234$). The results indicated that participants did not see any differences in the protagonist's emotions during the video.

Video Question 2: "At the end of the video, I felt that the death of the loved one was acceptable for the other character". A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.14, p = .323$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 2.62, p = .076$). A significant effect was found for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 23.49, p < .001$). The results indicated that participants who were watching SEV ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.14$) thought the death of the loved one was more acceptable for the other character at the end of the video than those watching the AEV ($M = 3.45, SD = 1.18$) did. These results are not in line with the intended manipulation and will be later further discussed.

Video Question 3: "I thought the death of a loved one was hard on the character who lost the loved one". A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 0.19, p = .828$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 0.16, p = .856$). A significant effect was found for the influence of type of video on the perceived hardness of losing the loved one ($F(1, 188) = 8.97, p = .003$). The death of the loved one was considered harder on the protagonist in SEV ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.67$) than in AEV ($M = 1.84, SD = 0.86$). This was in line with the intended manipulation.

Video Question 4: "I thought the atmosphere in the video was peaceful". A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.41, p = .248$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 0.50, p = .606$). A significant effect for type of video on the perceived atmosphere of the video was found ($F(1, 188) = 6.94, p = .009$). Videos with accepting emotions ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.02$) were considered to have a more peaceful atmosphere than videos with sorrowful emotions ($M = 2.93, SD = 1.02$). This indicated a successful manipulation.

Video Question 5: "I believe the character who lost the loved one will be alright". A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for the type of video ($F(1, 188) = 0.51, p = .476$) or for the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 0.14, p = .870$). Unexpectedly for video questions, a significant result was found for the influence of type of mortality salience on the belief that the character who lost the loved one was going to be alright ($F(2, 188) = 3.66, p = .028$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed that participants in the control group ($M = 2.44, SD = 0.91$) were more likely to think that the protagonist was going to be alright than those primed with MSLO ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.00$). No significant differences were found for MSS ($M = 2.76, SD = 0.88$) and control, or for MSS and MSLO.

Video Question 6: "I thought the death of the loved one was on a sour note for the other character." A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 2.01, p = .137$), for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 1.09, p = .297$) or for the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 0.02, p = .984$).

Positive Affect and Negative Affect Scales

I-PANAS-SF before the video. A one-way analysis of variance showed a significant effect for the type of mortality salience (MSS vs. MSLO vs. control) on I-PANAS-SF ($F(2, 191) = 6.21, p = .002$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed that being primed with MSLO ($M = 2.55, SD = 0.61$) resulted in significantly less positive affect on I-PANAS-SF than being primed with MSS ($M = 2.23, SD = 0.53$) and being in the control group ($M = 2.27, SD = 0.52$). No significant differences were found between MSS and control.

I-PANAS-SF after the video. In PANAS after the video, a two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effect for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 0.08, p = .923$) or for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 3.18, p = .076$). A significant interaction effect was found between mortality salience and type of video ($F(2, 188) = 4.60, p = .011$), see Figure 2. Simple effects analyses showed no significant

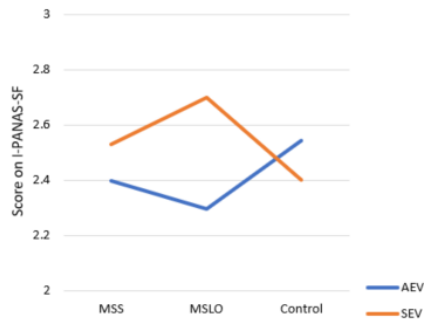


Figure 2: Means interaction effect for I-PANAS-SF after video

effects for type of video on PANAS in MSS ($F(1, 66) < 1$, $p = .331$) and control condition ($F(1, 66) = 1.21$, $p = .275$). However, a significant result was found for type of video in MSLO ($F(1, 62) = 13.39$, $p = .001$). Participants in MSLO who saw AEV ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 0.08$) reported higher levels of positive affect on I-PANAS-SF than those who saw SEV ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.08$).

Differences in I-PANAS-SF before and after the video (PANAS_D). A repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction determined that I-PANAS-SF significantly differed before and after the video ($F(1, 188) = 17.71$, $p < .001$). The difference in PANAS was not significant for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 2.87$, $p = .092$) or the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .545$). A significant interaction was observed between mortality salience and timing of measurement ($F(2, 188) = 8.11$, $p < .001$). However, Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed no significant differences between MSS, MSLO and control.

Poignancy

Poignancy before the video. A one-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for the type of mortality salience on poignancy ($F(2, 191) = 1.76$, $p = .175$).

Poignancy after the video. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for the type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.71$, $p = .184$), the type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1$, $p = .732$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .405$).

Differences in poignancy before and after the video. A repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction showed no significant differences before and after the video ($F(1, 188) = 3.75$, $p = .054$).

Perceived corniness

A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effect for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.34$, $p = .264$) or for an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 1.21$, $p = .301$) on perceived corniness. A significant effect for type of video on perceived corniness was found ($F(1, 188) = 8.27$,

$p = .005$). As the items were recoded so that higher scores indicated higher levels of corniness, participants in SEV ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.60$) reported higher levels of perceived corniness than those in AEV ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.72$).

Mixed Affect

A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .752$), for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 1.89$, $p = .171$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .451$) on mixed affect.

Identification

Identification with the protagonist. When participants were asked with which person they identified themselves most, most participants indicated to identify themselves with the character who lost the loved one ($N = 142$), followed by the dying character ($N = 37$), or a bystander ($N = 2$). A total of 13 participants indicated to not identify themselves with any of the characters. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .902$), for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 3.33$, $p = .070$) or for the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .578$) on identification with the protagonist.

Identification with the other character. Participants were also asked if there was another character they also identified themselves with. A total of 32 participants indicated to also identified themselves with another character, either the dying character ($N = 21$), the character losing the loved one ($N = 10$) or a bystander ($N = 1$). A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 27) < 1$, $p = .498$), for type of video ($F(2, 27) < 1$, $p = .876$) or for the interaction effect ($F(2, 27) < 1$, $p = .986$) on identification with the other character.

Transportation

A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .664$), type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1$, $p = .893$) or the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1$, $p = .894$) on transportation.

Parasocial Relationships

Relationship with the protagonist. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.06, p = .349$), type of video ($F(1, 188) = 1.56, p = .213$) or the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .850$) on the experienced parasocial relationship with the protagonist.

Relationship with the other character. Participants were also asked whether they then experienced any parasocial relationship with the other character in the video. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.66, p = .192$), type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1, p = .700$) or the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .614$) on the experienced parasocial relationship with the second character.

TEBOTS

A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1, p = .903$) or the interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .385$) on the expanding of the boundaries of the self. A significant effect was found for type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 3.25, p = .041$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests indicated that participants in the control group ($M = 2.98, SD = 0.60$) reported higher levels of TEBOTS than participants primed with MSS ($M = 3.24, SD = 0.62$). No significant differences were found between MSS and MSLO ($M = 3.05, SD = 0.58$) or between MSLO and control.

Death thought accessibility.

A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant results for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 2.76, p = .099$) or interaction effects ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .639$). A significant effect for type of mortality salience on the word completion task was found ($F(2, 188) = 3.22, p = .042$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed that participants reported significantly more death words in the MSLO group ($M = 2.12, SD = 0.97$) than in the control group ($M = 1.73, SD = 1.39; p = .039$). There was no significant difference between the MSS ($M = 2.12, SD = 0.97$) and MSLO groups or the MSS and control group. These findings indicated that those in the MSLO group indeed were more primed with death than the ones in the control group.

Additional analysis: Factor analysis

Many of the scales used in this study may have measured interrelated concepts. For that reason, a factor analysis was conducted to verify potentially undetected underlying dimensions that would lend themselves to re-exploration of the data. All items for mixed affect, identification, transportation, para-social relationships and the manipulation checks were included in the factor analysis. A principle axis factor analysis was conducted on 56 items with oblique rotation (direct quartimin). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, $KMO = 0.85$. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Fourteen factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 68.71% of the variance. However, the scree plot was ambiguous and showed inflexions that would justify retaining either two or five factors. We retained five factors because of the large number of items. These five factors explained 45.64% of the variance. The items that cluster on the same factor suggest five possible factors.

The first factor was related to the extent of which the participant was able to transport themselves into the video character (hereafter called character transportation). The second factor was related to feelings of elevation and meaningfulness of the video and will hence be called meaningfulness. Factor three was a representation of how easy participants find it to leave the real world behind. Factor four is related to feelings towards the other character and factor five to new experiences. These factors were combined into new variables and re-analyzed.

Factor 1: Character transportation. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for the influence of type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .977$), type of video ($F(1, 188) = 2.45, p = .119$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .528$) on character transportation.

Factor 2: Meaningfulness. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects for the influence of type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .458$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) = 1.01, p = .365$) on meaningfulness. A significant effect was found for type of video ($F(1, 188) = 8.19, p = .005$) on meaningfulness. Participants who saw AEV ($M = -0.19, SD = 0.88$) reported higher levels of meaningfulness than participants who saw SEV ($M = 0.20, SD = 0.97$).

Factor 3: Leaving the world behind. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects of type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .631$), type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1, p = .702$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .775$) on leaving the world behind.

Factor 4: Feelings towards the character. A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects of type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .381$), type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1, p = .580$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .765$) on feelings towards the character.

Factor 5: A two-way analysis of variance showed no significant effects of type of mortality salience ($F(2, 188) = 1.65, p = .194$), type of video ($F(1, 188) < 1, p = .409$) or an interaction effect ($F(2, 188) < 1, p = .871$) on new experiences.

Additional analysis: Separate video-analyses

An additional analysis was carried out to check for any significant differences among the four videos. The four videos were treated separately in a one-way analysis of variance. For a full overview of the videos, please see Appendix A.

No significant results. A one-way analysis of variance for type of video (four videos) showed no significant results for PANAS after the video ($F(3, 190) = 1.21, p = .306$), mixed affect ($F(3, 190) = 2.56, p = .056$), identification with the main character ($F(3, 190) = 1.83, p = .144$), identification with the second character ($F(3, 29) < 1, p = .791$), transportation ($F(3, 190) < 1, p = .957$), parasocial relationship with the second character ($F(3, 190) = 1.94, p = .125$) and TEBOTS ($F(3, 190) < 1, p = .698$). Video question 1: “During the video, I felt that the death of the loved one was acceptable for the other character” ($F(3, 190) = 1.52, p = .211$), video question 5: “I believe the character who lost the loved one will be alright” ($F(3, 190) = 1.80, p = .148$) and video question 6: “I thought the death of the loved one was on a sour note for the other character” ($F(3, 190) < 1, p = .701$) yielded no significant results. A one-way analysis of variance showed significant results for video question 3: “I thought the death of a loved one was hard on the character who lost the loved one” ($F(3, 190) = 3.14, p = .026$). However, Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests showed no significant differences among the videos. Parasocial relationships with the main character were also found to be significant ($F(3, 190) = 2.72, p = .046$). However, Bonferroni-post hoc tests did not indicate any significant differences among the videos. A full overview of significant results can be found below.

Perceived corniness. A one-way analysis of variance for type of video (four videos) showed significant results for corniness ($F(3, 182) = 5.12, p = .002$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed that participants who viewed *Song of Rain* reported higher levels of corniness ($M = 2.96, SD = 0.75$) than those who saw *Borrowed Time* ($M = 2.58, SD = 0.67$) or *Father and Daughter* ($M = 2.47, SD = 0.53$). No significant differences were found between *Song of Rain* and *Wakan Short Film* ($M = 2.62, SD = 0.66$), nor between any of the other videos among each other.

Poignancy after the video. A one-way analysis of variance for type of video (four videos) showed significant results for poignancy after the video ($F(3, 190) = 3.80, p = .011$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests showed higher levels of reported poignancy for *Father and Daughter* ($M = 2.27, SD = 0.60$) in comparison to *Song of Rain* ($M = 2.64, SD = 0.67$) and in comparison to *Borrowed Time* ($M = 2.60, SD = 0.58$). No significant differences were found between *Father and Daughter* and *Wakan Short Film* ($M = 2.46, SD = 0.52$), nor among the other videos.

Video Question 4: "I thought the atmosphere in the video was peaceful". A one-way analysis of variance for type of video (four videos) showed a significant result for video question 4 ($F(3, 190) = 6.87, p < .001$). Bonferroni-corrected post hoc tests revealed participants reported to think that the atmosphere in *Borrowed Time* ($M = 3.31, SD = 0.97$) was less peaceful than in *Song of Rain* ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.13$), *Father and Daughter* ($M = 2.57, SD = 0.94$) and *Wakan Short Film* ($M = 2.50, SD = 0.91$). No significant differences were found between the other videos.

Video Question 2: "At the end of the video, I felt that the death of the loved one was acceptable for the other character". A one-way analysis of variance for type of video (four videos) resulted in significant differences in experienced acceptance at the end among the videos ($F(3, 190) = 10.64, p < .001$). Participants who saw *Borrowed Time* ($M = 2.96, SD = 1.21$) indicated that they felt the death of the loved one was more acceptable on the other character at the end of the video than participants who saw *Song of Rain* ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.19$). Participants who saw *Father and Daughter* ($M = 2.39, SD = 1.02$) indicated higher levels of acceptance in comparison to *Song of Rain* ($M = 3.64, SD = 1.19$) or *Wakan Short Film* ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.19$). No significant differences were found among the other videos.

Conclusion and discussion

In recent years, scholars have argued that there must be more to entertainment than just amusement and thrill. Mere enjoyment cannot explain why people are engaged with tragedies (Feagin, 1983) or seemingly depressing movies. Several researchers have indicated their support for a new approach to entertainment, known as eudaimonic entertainment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Rieger & Hofer, 2017). Eudaimonic entertainment has looked beyond entertainment gratification such as sensation-seeking, and has included affective states such as poignant, emotionally moving, touching, tender and inspiring as description of the media experience (Oliver & Bartsch, 2012; Janicke & Oliver, 2017). Eudaimonic entertainment has been theorized to be very useful for depicting the meaning of life and inevitability of death (Tsay, Krakowiak, & Oliver, 2012).

Based on earlier theories about stories (Slater et al., 2014; Vorderer, 2001), it was hypothesized that stories provide us with a script for future experiences. Therefore, the current research focused on the effects of type of mortality salience and type of eudaimonic videos on eudaimonic entertainment experience. In the current study, mortality salience was manipulated by priming participants with either the death of themselves or the death of a loved one. A control group was asked to think about their daily breakfast. Type of video was manipulated by making use of different kind of videos about the death of a loved one. Videos with very clear and strong emotions about the death of a loved one were used as sorrowful emotion videos (SEV), in contrast to videos where the death of the loved one seemed to be more acceptable to the experimenters (AEV).

In the next section, there will first be a reflection on the success of the manipulations. Next, the results are discussed and related to earlier findings. Lastly, the general implications and limitations of the study are taken into account.

Manipulation

A word-completion task was used to check whether death-words were more accessible to participants in the MSS or MSLO condition than to those in the control group. The findings indicated that the manipulation for mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO) worked. Participants primed with the death of a loved one reported significantly higher levels of death words than those in the control groups. No significant results were found for mortality salience of the self (MSS), unlike findings in

earlier studies (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). The implications of these findings will later be further discussed.

For the videos, several video questions were asked to check whether the experience of the participants was in line with the experimenters' intentions. These video questions yielded interesting, yet ambiguous results. Participants reported no differences in both how acceptable and sour the death of a loved one was for the other character during the video. However, participants did perceive the death of the loved one harder on the protagonist in sorrowful emotions videos (SEV) than in accepting emotions videos (AEV). Videos with accepting emotions (AEV) were also considered to have a more peaceful atmosphere than videos with sorrowful emotions (SEV). These findings are in line with the experimenters' intentions. It signified the videos as indeed being eudaimonic and manipulated in the intended direction.

However, one question also yielded an ambiguous result. Participants who watched SEV thought the death of a loved one was more acceptable at the end of the video than those who watched AEV. Although this finding is not in line with the intended manipulation, it does pose food for thought. In SEV, the protagonists were going through the pain of the death of the loved one from the very early beginning of the video onwards. Both videos showed a child losing a parent, and their consequent long journey of mourning until they were grown-ups. Therefore, SEV showed the long, sorrowful and painful process the protagonist had to deal with, while the death of the loved one came more suddenly in AEV. At the end of SEV, the protagonists found peace with themselves about the death of their loved one after the long journey of mourning. This very meaningful ending of SEV may have indicated a form of closure for the protagonist, which can be interpreted as more peaceful and less hard on the protagonist. In contrast, in AEV, the death of the loved one just happened during the video. The mourning process still had to start, so this may have yielded the result that participants viewed the AEV less peaceful and harder on the protagonist.

Another interesting finding related to the video manipulation checks was the question: *'I believe the character who lost the loved one will be alright'*. Although this question was meant to check for differences in the videos, it yielded significant results for type of mortality salience. The results indicated that those in the control group were more likely to think that the protagonist was going to be alright than those primed with MSLO. In earlier research, it was found that being primed with the death of a loved one resulted in favouring long-term decision-making over short-term decision-making (Liu & Aaker, 2007). In line of these findings, the current study should have found that

participants in the MSLO condition would have been more prone to think that the protagonist was going to be alright in the long run than those in the control condition. Nonetheless, the findings can be explained by considering what the participants in the MSLO condition went through during the experiment. They had to think and write about the death of someone very close and important to them, while consequently watching a video in which the death of a loved one was the central topic. Although the participants in the control condition saw the very same videos, to them there was no personalization of losing a loved one. Therefore, it could technically be possible that those in the MSLO condition have a harder time to think that the protagonist is going to be alright than those in the control condition. The results of the current study also indicated that those in the MSLO condition reported more negative affect before watching the video than those in the control condition. This could also have influenced the outcome of this video question.

In conclusion, the manipulation for type of mortality salience was only proven to be successful by the word-completion task for MSLO. The video questions to check for intended manipulation yielded ambiguous results. Although the intended direction the manipulation may not have been perfectly covered, the results also indicated that some form of manipulation did happen between the videos.

Research Question 1: Mortality Salience

For the first research question, the data was investigated to see whether activating MSS or MSLO would lead to different media experiences than in a control group. The findings indicated no results for type of mortality salience on differences in PANAS before and after watching the video, on poignancy, perceived corniness, mixed affect, identification, transportation and para-social relationships. A factor analysis did not identify significant results for mortality salience in newly created concepts.

Significant results were found for positive and negative affect before watching the video, positive and negative affect after watching the video, and TEBOTS. Directly after the mortality salience manipulation, being primed with MSLO resulted in more negative affect than being primed with MSS or the control group. These findings indicated that being primed with MSLO does influence experienced affect. This is in line with earlier argumentation of Wang (2014), who suggested that sadness is the dominant emotion in MSLO, in comparison to MSS. Furthermore, the results indicated that after watching the video, MSLO participants watching AEV reported higher levels of positive affect than those who saw SEV. These findings are discussed under Research Question 3.

Lastly, an effect of type of mortality salience on TEBOTS was found. It seemed that participants found it easier to experience something that is dissimilar and unlike they normally experience when they were in the control group than when they were primed with MSS. Generally, it is assumed that individuals keep to their cultural beliefs in order to cope with the inevitability of death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). In that sense, it seems logical that being in the control condition would lead to more expanding of boundaries of the self than being in the MSS condition would do.

In conclusion, type of mortality salience did not show significant results for most of the studied concepts. However, the influences on positive and negative affect showed that type of mortality salience does indeed induce different responses to videos. The influences of MSLO are still not very well understood and yielded in unclear yet interesting results in the current study. The findings for MSS on TEBOTS were in line with earlier findings. More research is needed to understand the effects of priming participants with the death of a loved one. The implications for further research are discussed later.

Research Question 2: Type of video

For the second research question, the question was asked whether videos in with clear strong and sorrowful emotions in the protagonist (SEV) would lead to different media experiences than videos in which the emotions of the protagonist seemed more accepting (AEV). As discussed earlier, the video questions to check for intended manipulation yielded ambiguous results. Therefore, the interpretation of the results needs to be done carefully and critically.

Type of video did not significantly influence positive and negative affect before and after watching the video, poignancy, perceived corniness, mixed affect, identification, transportation, parasocial relationships, and TEBOTS. An interaction effect of type of video with type of mortality salience was found for positive and negative affect after having watched the video (discussed under Research Question 1).

Significant results were found for perceived corniness and the concept meaningfulness created after the factor-analysis. Participants watching SEV reported higher levels of perceived corniness than those watching AEV. By having a close look at the differences in the videos, these findings may be explained by intended manipulation between the videos. In the sorrowful emotions

videos, the protagonists go through a series of very 'raw' emotions that come with the struggle of losing a loved one years before coming to peace with oneself about the loss. The main characters in SEV have lost their loved one relatively early in the process, and are longing for their loved one for years to come. That these feelings have been considered more corny by the participants may be due to the fact that these feelings are still so strong after so many years.

Furthermore, a factor analysis led to the creation of the concept meaningfulness. Participants who saw the AEV reported high levels of meaningfulness than participants who saw SEV. These findings could indicate that the relatively easy acceptance of the death of a loved one is considered to be more meaningful than the long way it takes to accept the death of a loved one. Nonetheless, the findings are unclear and need further investigation.

In conclusion, type of video did not show significant results for most of the measured concepts. There is very little supporting evidence that the differences in the emotions of the loss by the protagonist leads to different media experiences.

Research Question 3: Type of video and type of mortality salience

Under RQ3, the question was posed whether the combination of type of mortality salience and type of video would result in interaction effects. Only one interaction effect was found. While measuring positive affect after the video, MSLO participants watching AEV reported higher levels of positive affect than those who saw SEV. It seems that the accepting emotions in AEV have a positive influence on those in MSLO conditions, while the same effects were not found for the MSS or the control condition. At first sight, these findings may be explained by the fact that those in the MSLO condition have thought through what it would mean to actually love someone important to them. One could expect that watching the videos in which the emotions of the protagonist are more accepting towards the death of a loved one would consequently result in more positive emotions. However, when taking this theory into consideration, one would also expect higher levels of identification with the main character of the video. The findings of the current study do not support higher levels of identification with the main character for the MSLO condition. Therefore, alternative theories must be considered. One possibility would be that it is not necessarily identification with a character or transportation into a story that is useful in eudaimonic entertainment. Many scholars have elaborated on concepts such as appreciation, poignancy, emotionally moving, and inspiring as descriptions of media experience (e.g. Hofer, 2003; Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, & Carstensen,

2008; Rieger et al., 2015; Slater, Oliver, & Appel, 2016). Perhaps these are the important concepts that we need to further explore to fully understand what is going on when participants are primed with the death of a loved one. Understanding what concepts such as meaningfulness or inspiring mean in the context of loss and grief may provide more insights in the findings of the current study.

Additional video analyses

Additional video analyses were carried out to gain better understanding of the underlying mechanisms among the videos. All four videos were evaluated separately.

AEV – Song of Rain

The results indicated that *Song of Rain* was perceived more corny and had a more peaceful atmosphere than *Borrowed Time* (SEV). The death of a loved one was considered to be less acceptable for the protagonist at the end of the video in *Song of Rain* (AEV) than in *Borrowed Time* (SEV). These findings can be explained by the set-up of the videos. In *Song of Rain* (AEV), the death of the loved one is announced towards the end of the video. While the video on a whole is quite peaceful, the protagonist is still very much in pain about the death at the end of the video, while the protagonist of *Borrowed Time* (SEV) comes to acceptance with the loss of the loved one towards the end of the video.

Participants watching *Song of Rain* (AEV) also reported a more peaceful atmosphere and lower levels of poignancy in comparison to *Father and Daughter* (SEV). No significant differences were found among *Song of Rain* (AEV) and *Wakan Short Film* (AEV). These findings were an indication of a successful manipulation, as the videos within AEV and SEV needed to be similar in order to grouped into one condition.

AEV – Wakan Short Film

The atmosphere in *Wakan Short Film* (AEV) was found to be perceived more peaceful than in *Borrowed Time* (SEV). Participants indicated that they felt that towards the end of the video, the death of the loved one was more acceptable in *Father and Daughter* (SEV) than in *Wakan Short Film* (AEV). Once again, this can be explained by the same kind of set-up the videos use. While in *Father and Daughter* (SEV) and *Borrowed Time* (SEV) the acceptance of the death of a loved one comes towards the end of the video, the death of the loved one only happens towards the end of the video in *Song of Rain* (AEV) and *Wakan Short Film* (AEV). Interesting enough, these findings indicate that

there are differences in SEV and AEV with regard to the acceptance of the loss towards the end of the video.

SEV – Father and Daughter & Borrowed Time

Although no differences significant differences were found between the accepting-emotion videos, *Father and Daughter* (SEV) and *Borrowed Time* (SEV) significantly differed from each other on two measures. *Father and Daughter* (SEV) was found to show higher levels of reported poignancy than *Borrowed Time* (SEV). The video was also considered more peaceful than *Borrowed Time* (SEV). While choosing the videos, this was already one of the concerns of the experimenters. The emotions the protagonist of *Borrowed Time* (SEV) goes through are way more heavy and guilt-related than in any of the other videos.

Limitations and further research

Although the study has been carried out with as much perfectionism as possible, there are certain limitations to the study. As discussed before, the manipulation checks implemented showed that the materials were not always perceived by the participants as intended by the experimenters'. It was beyond the scope of this research project to carry out pre-tests, but it is suggested to do so in future research into eudaimonic videos.

Furthermore, it would have been useful to have a more extensive participants pool. The greater part of the participants was university students, so the conclusions are drawn based on quite a monogamous group. Naturally, this often happens in science, and specifically in master's theses, but within the field of mortality salience and eudaimonic videos, there are many reasons to argue why it could lead to different results. Almost 90% of the participants in the current study were under the age of 25. Only one in three participants had recently lost of a loved one and most of the reported losses were grandparents, aunts and uncles. While not wanting to downgrade the grief participants can actually have felt for their loss, it can be argued that most of the closest bonds people have are with their parents, siblings, partners and close friends. The data of the current study also suggest that this is the case, as more than half of the participants in the MSLO condition have listed to have chosen to think about their mother or a partner. The older people are, the higher the chances that they have actually lost someone really close to them. The older people are, the more life experience they have. Both the loss of a loved one and life experience could be linked to different

experiences with mortality salience. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to include people from all ages.

Another limitation of the study is the set-up of the experiment. Several concepts within eudaimonic entertainment were taken into consideration as dependent variables. However, it could be possible that concepts such as identification or transportation could rather work as a moderator or mediator in a study. Thus, it is recommended to carry out further studies on the different ways these concepts are influenced by type of videos and type of mortality salience.

Implications of the study

In the above discussion, several ideas about further research have been proposed. However, the main question that still needs to be addressed is what the implications of the current study actually are. While two decades of research in mortality salience showed many significant effects among a wide range of studies (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010), the current study indicated very little evidence for the effects of mortality salience on the media experience of eudaimonic videos. More specifically, while the questions for priming the death of oneself (MSS) have been often-used to create successful manipulations, the current study did not find any significant differences in the amount of reported death-related words in the MSS condition. Generally speaking, this indicated that the manipulation was probably unsuccessful. It is important to stress that it is still a plausible option that the priming with the death of oneself has just failed in the current study. However, earlier findings have also indicated that meaningful films can suffice as an anxiety-buffering function in conditions of mortality salience of the self (Rieger & Hofer, 2017). This would explain why mortality salience has yielded many significant results in other studies, while hardly showing any effects in the current study. As the word completion task was taken after having watched the videos, could it be possible that the eudaimonic videos cancelled out the unconscious awareness of the death of oneself?

If so, these findings would provide us with an explanation on why eudaimonic stories are so valuable to humans. The implications would go beyond the scope of eudaimonic videos just being beautiful through concepts of thought-provoking, poignant or inspiring – eudaimonic stories would be helping us to create a way of looking at life in which we do not have to fear the end of our lives. They possibly serve as an important anxiety buffer. More research should be done on the matter of eudaimonic stories and the unconscious awareness of the inevitability of death (MSS).

Furthermore, the implications of mortality salience of the self (MSLO) should be taken into account. Very few earlier studies have been done on what the reminder of the death of a loved one does to our behaviour and attitudes, let alone our media experience. Although the findings of the current study did not shed much light on MSLO, they did indicate lower levels of positive affect and less belief that the protagonist in the video was going to be alright. This was in line with the finding that fear would be the dominant emotion in MSS individuals, while MSLO participants report higher levels of sadness (Wang, 2014). As Liu & Aaker (2007) also indicated significant differences in decision-making tasks with MSLO, it could be argued that the unconscious awareness that a loved one will come to pass is processed differently than MSS/control. More research is necessary in order to establish a profound theory on the matter. Upcoming studies could not only further explore laboratory research questions, but perhaps also better explain what knowing a loved one will die does to behaviours and attitudes of individuals. In the long term, this could potentially lead to a way to better care for those who are facing the death of someone very close to them.

In short, the current study leaves us with many unanswered questions, possible improvements and potential research designs still lying ahead of us. Nonetheless, it provides us with the knowledge that something unanswered and unexplained is going on in the field of eudaimonic stories and mortality salience. The current study provides us with a direction for future research.

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- Lisette te Hennepe, May 2018

Appendix A: Video overview

Sorrowful emotion videos: Borrowed time

In Borrowed Time, it seems as if we are looking at a Western. We meet a young man who is standing on top of a abyss, remembering how he had been there with a sheriff on a carriage. Throughout flashbacks we learn that the sheriff has given the boy a small pocket watch. Suddenly, the carriage is followed by attackers. The boy falls of the carriage, just before the sheriff and the carriage fall of the abyss. While the sheriff is hanging on the abyss, the boy tries to pull him up by his gun. Suddenly, the gun goes off and the sheriff falls into the abyss. Throughout the video we learn about a lot of pain, regret and feelings of guild. The man – as an older version of the boy – also is thinking of committing suicide from the abyss. However, while being on the point of jumping of the cliff, he sees the pocket watch lying in the sand. While climbing his way back up, he is looking at the pictures inside of the pocket watch where he as a boy and the sheriff are depicted. While he is mourning the sheriff, the pocket watch suddenly starts to tick again. Note: During the experiment, the video has been taken down by YouTube several times. The URL below is working as of February 2018, but I cannot guarantee it will stay on YouTube for long.

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLlDod95rIs>

Sorrowful emotion videos: Father and Daughter

This video is about a father and daughter who are indicated to go for a walk every now and then. At some point, however, the father takes a boat never returns to the place where the girl had been. Throughout the video, we see the young girl grow older while she visits the place where her father left with the boat on a regular basis. As an elderly person, she returns to the lake that now has turned into a field of grass. In the field of grass she finds the boat her father left with. Both experimenters agreed on the atmosphere being very depressing and specifically mournful for a very long period of time. In the end of the video, we see the elderly woman slowly turning into a younger woman again, where she meets and hugs her father.

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaDuV4lpZ1E>

Accepting emotion videos: The Song of Rain

In The Song of Rain, the love story of two young Asian students is depicted. The first minutes describe how their love starts and evolves over the years. A turn in the video is taking place once the man in the video is being send to war. We find that he does not survive the war and the woman is left on her own, while holding the umbrella the man has given her when he was still a boy.

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXnmphnF7v8>

Accepting emotion videos: Wakan Short Film

In Wakan Short Film, we follow two young people who seem to be from an Native American tribe. They play hide and seek, until the girl is drawn into the forest by her curiosity for a little blue ball that is flying around in the air. In the forest, she finds that the little blue ball is going to a small flower. Once she picks up the flower, a predatory bird is trying to hurt her. The boy had followed the girl into the forest and jumps in front of the predatory bird. After doing so, he slowly turns into ashes and becomes a little blue ball. The girl returns to the village they come from and we see her mourning his death. At the end of the video, she also decides to go into the forest. The credits indicate that she has also turned into a little blue ball, but not all participants agreed to this point of view.

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXjIGR-xZPQ>

Appendix B: Survey flow

Block: Introduction and Consent Form		
Block Randomizer: Evenly Present Elements		
Block:	MSS	Mortality Salience of the Self
Block:	MSLO	Mortality Salience of a Loved One
Block:	Control	Control
Block: PANAS and Poignancy 1		
Block Randomizer: Evenly Present Elements		
Block:	SEV	Sorrowful Emotion Video: Borrowed Time
Block:	SEV	Sorrowful Emotion Video: Father And Daughter
Block:	AEV	Accepting Emotion Video: Song of the Rain
Block:	AEV	Accepting Emotion Video: Wakan Short Film
Block: PANAS and Poignancy 2		
Block: Word Completion Task		
Block: Mixed Affect and Perceived Corniness		
Block: Identification		
Block: Transportation		
Block: Parasocial Relationships		
Block: Manipulation checks type of video		
Block: TEBOTS		
Block: General questions		
Block: Debriefing		