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Positive psychology at the movies: Using movies to promote virtues and psychological well-being among university students

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Abstract:

Movie, like all art, is a form of expression created, consumed, and studied by human being. This form of expression has been considered as a universal language that surpasses cultural and geographic boundaries and speaks to the minds of different generations. The impacts of it on the audience has long been an important topic in psychology (Young, 2012). Yet, findings from the early literature almost exclusively showed a negative influence of movies on the audience including the association with an increase in aggressive behaviours through observational learning (Bandura, 1973; Leyens et al., 1975). It was not until the recent years an increasing amount of evidence has begun to show that movies can similarly bring positive impacts on the audience and be an effective tool to promote desirable educational and clinical outcomes (Berg-Cross et al., 1990; Hesse et al., 2005; Lampropoulos et al., 2004; Niemiec, 2020; Powell & Newgent, 2010; Smithikrai et al., 2015). Nevertheless, what is currently lacking is a systematic study on the potential positive impacts of movies on the audience. A full picture of how movies can possibly be used in ethical education to nurture virtues and promote psychological well-being is yet to be uncovered.

Positive Psychology is a rapidly developing field of study in Psychology with an aim to understand the factors contributing to psychological well-being and authentic happiness. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have identified six human virtues and 24 character strengths (traits that can be categorized under the six universal human virtues) which are important for the attainment of a fulfilling and flourishing life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These six virtues (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) and 24 character strengths (e.g., creativity, curiosity, love of learning, judgment, bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest, love, social intelligence, teamwork, kindness, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, prudence, self-regulation, gratitude, humor, spirituality, and hope) are positive aspects of the human nature valued by people in a society. Psychometric measures have been developed to measure these different psychological traits. Interestingly, as Niemiec and Wedding (2012, p.14) have put it, "virtues and character strengths abound in the cinema". It is not difficult to find characters in movies who embody certain character strengths. Niemiec and Wedding (2012) have recommended different positive psychology movies for each of the 24 character strengths under the 6 virtues. Positive psychology movies, as defined by Niemiec and Wedding (2012), are movies that clearly demonstrate at least one character strength which benefits the character him/herself or others in face of adversity, and with an overall uplifting presentation speaking deeply to the human condition.



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However, little is known about the perception of the general population and the effects of positive psychology movies on the audience have not yet been systematically studied so far.

Given there is accumulating evidence showing the effectiveness of using movies as a tool to promote educational gains, the present project is therefore proposed to use movies as a tool to promote virtues and psychological well-being among university students based on the list of positive psychology movies recommended by Niemiec and Wedding (2012). A large-scale Campus Movie Project is proposed where students are invited to watch carefully chosen positive psychology movie materials (movies or movie clips, will be referred to as movies in the following) and to rate the movie characters with reference to the 24 character strengths. Students will also have the opportunity to assess their own profile of character strengths (i.e., self-assessment; to see what are their own signature character strengths) and to learn how to use their own character strengths in an innovative way. Evidence from the literature has suggested that by knowing one's own signature character strengths and to use them innovatively can enhance psychological well-being for at least up to 6 months of time (Seligman et al., 2005). In addition, by observing how the characters in the selected movies make use of their character strengths to overcome adversities (i.e., observational learning), it may further enhance our students' capacity in applying their own signature character strengths in real life. A total of 120 positive psychology movies will be selected for use in this project (with about 20 students watching each movie). It is estimated that ~2400 students will be benefited through participating in this project. Students' subjective psychological well-being will be assessed both before and 3-month after the movie watching sessions to measure the effectiveness of this project. Another tangible outcome of this project will be an emerging movie database (containing 120 movies in total, with 5 movies under each of the 24 character strengths) with objective rating data on different aspects of human character strengths and virtues as displayed in the movie. The movie database will be a useful reference for educational and clinical practitioners when there is a need to use relevant movie materials to aid their practices.