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"The Only Disability in Life Is a Bad Attitude": So-Called "Inspirational" Media in the Age of Trump

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“THE ONLY DISABILITY IN LIFE IS A BAD ATTITUDE”:

SO-CALLED “INSPIRATIONAL” MEDIA IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

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Abstract

This study explores the reactions of ideologically divergent social media users to so-called "inspiration porn," or mediated images of physically disabled persons doing ordinary—or extraordinary—activities, relegating those depicted to vehicles for the emotional or spiritual gratification of nondisabled or typically able (or, among disabled observers, differently so) persons. This is important because although a quarter of American adults identify as living with a disability themselves, ableism remains very internalized; others' experience is still very voyeuristic when presented in this medium. The objective of this study is to describe an approximate correlation—either positive or negative—between the popularity of inspiration porn and the social identities of those adults who consume it. The goal is to understand, through the lenses of Erving Goffman's framing theory and Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, how inspiration porn not only confirms but also contradicts concepts of what it means to be a political conservative or a political liberal in America. These theories are discussed with a view to define the efficacy of inspiration porn's intended function on social media users, even threatening their most inviolable identities of political ideology, religion, education, and disability. Results suggest that, despite the majority of respondents skewing liberal, agnostic or atheist, college educated, and having no personal disability experience, those who consistently interacted with inspiration porn media the most exhibited a tendency to favor conservative politics, espouse evangelical Christianity, lack college education, and have an experience of disability—either in themselves, someone close to them, or both.

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Preface

The curly-haired young man strode up the ramp to the stage as his name was announced to cheers and applause. The 22-year-old, who bore familiar facial features and an even more familiar name, had come to the 1984 Democratic National Convention to share his vision for the next presidential administration and beyond—that "the disability movement in America should be considered a human rights movement" (C-SPAN, 1984, 1:32:14).

"Disabled people are not unable people," said Edward M. Kennedy, Jr., son of the longtime Democratic senator and nephew of the late president John F. Kennedy—who himself became disabled after the amputation of his right leg due to bone cancer when he was a child. "We want to face up to our challenges. We want to be treated as human beings, not as foreign objects. We want to be understood and respected, not feared or pitied. Remember, we are people first and disabled second" (C-SPAN, 1984, 1:32:56).

Kennedy also told the audience, "We have a lot to contribute to America, if only America will give us the chance to make that contribution" (C-SPAN, 1984, 1:32:44).

Another American who made headlines that same year was a figure skater, Scott Hamilton. The affable Hamilton won a gold medal at the 1984 Winter Olympics and, while Kennedy pursued a future in law and politics ("Edward M. Kennedy, Jr.," n.d.), Hamilton had a lengthy skating-related career as a coach, sports commentator, and author after he retired from competition ("Bio," n.d.). He even appeared on television programs such as Donald Trump's *Celebrity Apprentice*, where he made the acquaintance of the future president: In January 2017, after acknowledging that half the audience would not like what he was about to say, Hamilton praised Trump's philanthropic endeavors and desire to do good things for America (Graham Bensinger, 2017). In the years following his Olympic triumph, Hamilton's name reemerged in

the news because of his high-profile struggles with testicular cancer and brain tumors; he parlayed his experiences into a new career in activism and motivational speaking ("Scott Speaks," n.d.). Of all his encouraging remarks, perhaps his most famous quote is one he told the press after his cancer diagnosis: "The only disability in life is a bad attitude" (Associated Press, 1997, p. B18).

Despite their considerable success and fame, neither Kennedy nor Hamilton was able to escape fear, physical pain, or the danger of dying young. Both are humanitarians who have used their celebrity to raise awareness and capital to make life better for their fellow citizens from all social strata. Both have spoken of their faith-filled family ties that guided them through their most difficult times (CQ Transcriptions, 2009; Sharos, D., 2020). Both personify the traditionally all-American qualities of perseverance, optimism, and service.

Yet, in 2020, their sentiments carry a whiff of controversy—not always explicit, but attitudinal. Some people may even find them at odds with each other.

It is undeniable that social media—particularly Facebook—has served to amplify and spread messages of hope, fear, love, callousness, joy, and hatred. This means of communication—virtually unimaginable when Kennedy and Hamilton ascended their respective podiums some 36 years ago—is the first place that millions turn to today when looking for news, information, entertainment, stimulation, and of course human interaction. Similarly, countless individuals and organizations have used social media to move users emotionally, to ends benign and sinister. What one person finds liberating, another may find demeaning; here rests the polarity of attitudes surrounding pornography.

Realistically, there are disabilities more affecting—both in the emotional and the functional senses of the word—than a bad attitude. However, looking at some media, one might never know that.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the three decades since the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush, advances in accessibility for the estimated 61.4 million Americans living with a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018) arguably have not occurred as markedly as the nation's political landscape has changed. The ADA established measures to further integrate Americans possessing or regarded to have "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual[s]" (Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990) into society and recognize their value to the economy and the nation's social fabric. At the same time, the Bush presidency, although hardly liberal by any definition, was marked by pragmatism and compromise—a de facto continuation of the Reagan era, during which Bush served as vice president after a long and distinguished career in international diplomacy and intelligence. Some 30 years later, with the rise of populism in the United States, the pragmatic conservatism of the late 20th century has mostly died out at the national level—and, along with it, the promise of the ADA.

There remains ongoing controversy among the ADA's largely conservative opponents alleging that legally mandated (and largely ubiquitous) accommodations—such as curb cuts, elevators, video captions, and other modifications that benefit society at large—constitute special treatment. Similarly, companies still grapple with the presumed inconvenience and bottom-line ramifications of hiring individuals who may need assistive technology and arrangements—such as magnifiers, amplifiers, or space for a guide dog—to do their jobs alongside their nondisabled or bodily typical colleagues. As the world strains under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no reason to believe this will be any different once Americans return to their places of

business; it is not unreasonable to expect that many disabled workers—regardless of immunity status—may be expected to stay away from work, lest employers be compelled to provide aids their employees already may have at home for personal use.

Nevertheless, in leisure at least, there is an undercurrent of tenderness among rank-and-file conservatives, exemplified in their willingness to "like" and share certain media on platforms and apps such as Facebook—media, in the form of images and captions, featuring individuals who may actually include those facing eroded freedoms. In these posts, people with physical disabilities are depicted doing unexpected things—unexpected in that many nondisabled or bodily typical people underestimate their abilities to live independently, raise a family, pursue hobbies, or partake in athletic activities. No embellishment of the novelty is necessary, although some viewers still cannot seem to resist the pull to positively comment on or caption the mediated images before sending them on.

These images and captions are provocative. They provoke emotion, at the expense of the disabled people in the pictures and videos. (Due to the visual nature of the media described, for the purpose of this study, "disabled" will refer almost exclusively to persons with physical impairments—although developmental and other disabilities may be depicted.) There is even a provocative name for these image-caption combinations: At a TED Talk in Sydney, Australia, the late disability activist and comedian Stella Young aptly described these objectifying media as "inspiration porn." The audience laughed—not heartily, but perhaps a bit uncomfortably—at this shocking but very consciously formulated nomenclature (TED, 2014a, 3:50).

As Young described it to the audience: "The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, 'Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person'" (TED, 2014a, 4:05). As of this writing, the video of this speech,

between YouTube and the original TED.com site, has been viewed more than 4.3 million times—something of an Internet sensation in itself (TED, 2014b).

In that same TED Talk, Young spoke about her subscription to the social model of disability—that the real problem was not the tangible physical impairment (the medical model), but a society that assumes full physical ability and turns impairments (such as those requiring a wheelchair to enter a building, for example) into disabilities (a lack of accessible entrances to that building) (TED, 2014a, 5:20). Even though she spoke from the Antipodes, her message was universal: Disabled people's rights are human rights.

Yet, in dismantling laws protecting the human rights of disabled Americans, conservative leaders appear to make a point of noticing the medical impairments and maintaining their status as social disabilities. This was most salient in the relinquishment of Bush's moderate conservatism to a worldview that saw 2016's Republican presidential nominee rebrand Reagan's slogan, "Let's Make America Great Again"—to say nothing of Democratic president Bill Clinton's hope of "mak[ing] America great again, economically, educationally and socially" (C-SPAN, 1992, 7:41)—as a rallying cry redolent of nativism and physical dominance. Whereas the old (mid-20th to early 21st-century) conservative ideology was defined by laws and customs promoting adherence to traditional gender roles, Judeo-Christian morality, patriotism and nationalism, and limited government intervention with an emphasis on self-reliance, the blatant expressions of this new iteration were a shock to a system that had heretofore at least pretended to a semblance of civility.

While much of this reformulated conservativism was still recognizable (and successfully marketed) to the old guard, this new aspiration to make America great once again ramped up these characteristics and wrapped them in ableist rhetoric that gave no quarter to any person

lacking the most robust physique. Ultimately, it came to define the party in the second decade of the 21st century, culminating in the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States.

This study explores the divergence between American conservatives and liberals surrounding the consumption of inspiration porn via social media, particularly Facebook. Is "liking," sharing, or commenting on these media with a few positive words a sign of pity, or of solidarity? The answers may vary depending on the person, but the hypothesis is that, overall, conservatives are more likely than liberals to respond due to their own internalized ableism; this prediction is based on Nario-Redmond's "A, B, C's of ableism: affective emotions or attitudinal reactions; behavioral actions/practices; and cognitive beliefs/stereotypes that go beyond general negativity" (Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 6). Similarly, these three attributes are what make an image of a disabled or nontypical person become inspiration porn.

There is also the question of the concomitant characteristics of education and religion on this interaction—to wit, that the Trump base of undereducated, evangelical Christian conservatives (Tyson, 2018) are the most fond of inspiration porn as seen on Facebook vs. their more liberal, more educated, and nonevangelical counterparts. The prediction is that those most liable to interact with the media fit the profile of a Trump voter—even when Trump himself is not what one necessarily would consider a traditional conservative.

Disability status is a confounding variable in that its existence runs up against what many find acceptable in a society where independence—including self-reliance—is supposed to reign. Is an ableist worldview part and parcel of being Trump supporter? With so many red state residents claiming disability (Social Security Administration, 2017), how do conservatives square their own experience of disability with that of others? One must not forget about the

performative aspect of social media, in which one's clicks resound across one's digital social sphere, gaining amplitude—even currency—with each additional person.

Chapter 2 reviews literature surrounding spreadable media; stigma and the "supercrip" archetype; Trump's public aggression toward disabled Americans; performative and sincere online behaviors; characteristics of conservatives and liberals, including fiscal tendencies; federal legislation, particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act; and theories involving dissonance, framing, and resonance.

Chapter 3 outlines the method of data collection, the survey's design, and measures of the survey. These include details of participant recruitment, a description of the media in the questionnaire, and what data was analyzed.

Chapter 4 presents the study's results, with a breakdown of how respondents who identified as conservative or liberal—as well as other factors—reported their likelihood to interact with the media presented and how they reacted emotionally.

Chapter 5 explores possible similarities and differences between this study's sample and the general American public; a discussion of the most salient characteristics of the demographic groups that interacted the most markedly; an application of theoretical frameworks to explain those interactions; and a description of the social climate surrounding the data collection.

References and appendices can be found following the conclusion.

This apparently novel study preserves a moment within a time of vast controversy and turmoil. However, the type of media described is nothing new; only the medium used in this time is unique in its role in consumers' reception—both technically and emotionally—of those media.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

When Media are Spread

While social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become up-to-the-minute catalogs of every cultural or political event, hashtag, quote, or media personality, so have the media within been subject to alteration and magnification as to become a cultural touchstone in itself—a collection of found objects become neo-Dadaist art. Memes, described as "aggregate texts, collectively created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants . . . [that] resonate because of intertwining collective contributions" (Milner, pp. 2–3), are twisted and self-referentially reformulated and circulated at the whim of and for the amusement of its sharers. However, "inspo-porn" (to use an Internet-friendly contraction) lives within this social media movement as a rawer, less adulterated phenomenon than memes.

"Spreadable media," which Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) characterized as "the potential . . . for audiences to share content for their own purposes" (p. 3), was further explained by Ellis (2015) in that it "illustrates the way our emotions are leveraged in popular culture. We spread media because it either makes us think or makes us feel . . . or makes us think by making us feel" (p. 148).

For all their discourse on what makes certain media spreadable, Jenkins et al. (2013) postulated many factors but ultimately admitted that it is impossible to identify a singular reason certain material is regarded as spreadable. Presumably the causes and motivations are as varied as the media and their users themselves, but in the end they come down to the media sharers' common interests. While some spreadable media are widely shared, others find popularity within a smaller, niche audience (Jenkins et al., 2013). This spreadability is not the same as "going

viral," which Jenkins et al. (2013) likened to spontaneous diffusion "of pandemic proportions" (p. 22); similarly, spreadability is not the same as stickiness, which "capitalizes on the easiest way companies have found to conduct business online—rather than the ways audiences want to and do experience material online" (p. 5). The use of the word "viral" to describe media, Jenkins et al. (2013) said, evokes images of infectious agents and downplays the role of audiences in transmitting the content. Spreadability is conscious and voluntary; virality is not.

While media of physically disabled persons engaged in activities few others would think twice about are neither memetic nor viral nor sticky, they nevertheless can play a similar role in the minds and hearts of those who see and share them. They are not consciously clichéd parody; they lack the appeal for near-limitless distribution, with or without a host; and they normally are not used by corporate entities, although some advertising has been known to incorporate imagery that capitalizes on their potential for emotional affect.

Stigma and Supercrips

In her TED Talk, Stella Young pinpointed the ableist fascination with the disabled body:

> [Disabled people] are just using their bodies to the best of their capacity. So is it really fair to objectify them in the way that we do, to share those images? People, when they say, "You're an inspiration," they mean it as a compliment. And I know why it happens. It's because of the lie. It's because we've been sold this lie that disability makes you exceptional. And it honestly doesn't. (TED, 2014a, 5:50)

The great contradiction at the core of Young's account is the concept that disabled persons are exceptional and thus evoke feelings of awe similar to those someone might feel meeting their favorite athlete or rock star. However, while people might meet their idols and say, "You're an inspiration," the same people might look down at a stranger in a wheelchair and say the same thing. The difference is, while lots of them may have daydreamed of themselves hitting a home run or belting out the big hit before cheering crowds, few—if any—have imagined trying

to squeeze onto a crowded train in a wheelchair. One kind of inspirational figure represents a latent wish to be like him or her; the other represents gratitude for not being in that person's shoes. Most people know it is difficult and are aware, even if in a small way, that there is stigma that contributes to that difficulty.

Stigma lies at both the root and as a manifestation of the social model of disability. Decades before the Internet redefined the word, Goffman (as cited in Davis, 2017) described the difference between the "virtual social identity" (what we assume a person to be like) and the "actual social identity" (the person's actual attributes) (as cited in Davis, 2017, p. 134). He then discredited the use of attributes to describe a person—congruent with the medical model—in favor of relationships—à la the social model (as cited in Davis, 2017, p. 134). However, he acknowledged, even though social conventions dictate benevolence toward disabled persons, the belief remains that they are less than human. Rationalization ensues: "We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, and at the same time to impute some desirable but undesired attributes" (as cited in Davis, 2017, pp. 135–136). Or, as Young said, exceptional (TED, 2014a).

The resulting archetype is that of the "supercrip," or a disabled person who is "inspiring to others because they have achieved success against all odds (or above what most expect from them)" (Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 103). Nario-Redmond (2020) argued that these images, when presented as novelty, communicate the fallacy that all it takes for a below-the-knee amputee to run a race/blind person to cook an elaborate meal/deaf child to dance to music is an extra bit of effort and a positive attitude. It would be expedient to mention that given the predilection for inordinately fit and attractive bodies in media, what makes stories compelling is the voyeuristic

aspect of seeing those bodies in extreme contexts, such as those involving sexually explicit situations, violent scenes, or persons with disabled bodies or atypical minds (Davis, 1995).

The latter is at the heart of inspiration porn, with the crowd-pleasing happy ending as the person depicted "overcomes" his or her disability. In this narrative, the discrimination of ableism is pushed out of the audience's mind because things have changed and there is no disability here—it already is a distant memory, a shed skin on the road to "normalcy."

Nevertheless, many will maintain that the disability is a flaw, not a part of that person's identity. At the same time, for a significant segment of American society, a cornerstone of their faith is a belief in miracles, based on New Testament accounts of Jesus healing myriad believers of their afflictions—a conviction that, for evangelical Christian believers, continues to the present day. Thus, a reevaluation and even rehabilitation of the disabled person's image (modeled on God's own image, according to Genesis 1:27) certainly is possible among that audience—which, at least in its American form, defines itself by a literal interpretation of the Bible and a mission to tell others of that literalness—if not others: One must only believe it possible.

The existence of these mediated triumphs does not mean the stigma is gone. Societies, particularly during times of strong nationalistic sentiment, have flirted with eugenics, championing a body politic comprised of physically robust citizens; weak bodies, after all, could only result in a weak and impotent regime (Davis, 1995). Stigma, in the form of fear, stereotyping, and social control (Coleman-Brown, as cited in Davis, 2017), motivates societies to marginalize their weakest members. Interestingly, political conservatives are more likely to champion the ideal of physical superiority (Nario-Redmond, 2020), seeking to limit the physical and social mobility of disabled persons.

Sincerity and Performance in Conservative Action

Some 25 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act—a bipartisan triumph—became federal law, explicitly crude behavior that would have made a candidate unelectable in mid- to late-20th-century America endeared Trump's base to him. This happened even when he engaged in the kind of ableist mocking that parents once might have been horrified to see their children direct at a classmate—never mind demonstrated by a man on the cusp of his seventh decade. At a rally a scant year before his election, Trump, contorting his face and flapping his hands, mimicked Serge Kovaleski, a *New York Times* reporter who was born with the joint condition arthrogryposis (CNN, 2015b). This was not the first time Trump had mocked a reporter who had called his remarks into question. In the spring of 2015, Trump apparently referred to Charles Krauthammer, a paraplegic *Washington Post* reporter and Fox News contributor, as "a guy who can't buy a pair of pants" ("Trump Teases Critic for Being Paralyzed," 2015, para. 1), and, along with another reporter, a "loser" who "sit[s] there" and "[hasn't] done anything" (Raw Story, 2015, 2:14).

Trump could not legitimately claim ignorance of his offensiveness, his internalized ableism, or his privilege—whether sincerely or performatively. Along with an anonymous collaborator, he wrote a book called *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*, later reissued under the title *Great Again: How to Fix our Crippled America*. Both versions included a word in the title that he acknowledged as "nasty," adding ahead of publication, "I think [publishers Simon & Schuster] probably won't allow that title to be used" (Campbell, 2015, para. 6). However, not only was it used—twice—but used apparently without controversy.

While Trump uses disparaging rhetoric on social media and at rallies directed at, among others, disabled persons, his supporters do not appear to mind, justifying his malevolence as "un-

P.C." or "telling it like it is" (Trump Nation, 2016, June). However, many of those same supporters, when faced with the image of a disabled person—especially a child—"overcoming" a challenge, will not insult the person on social media but "like," share, or leave a comment intended to convey a positive, heartfelt, and life-affirming recognition of shared humanity and perhaps a flicker of realization of the disabled person's struggles. Alternately, the person can be engaging in so-called "slacktivism," or showing support or awareness through nominal effort such as simply "liking" a social media post:

> If your small support action is observable and your friends know you did it, you may be less likely to go the extra mile later because you have already created the impression you wanted to create. However, if your action is private, impression management is not an issue. Instead, you may be more willing to do something meaningful because of cognitive dissonance and the desire to be consistent in terms of beliefs and behavior. (Wallace, 2015, pp. 182–183).

Regardless of the actions taken, the mediated images of inspiration porn are designed to be seen and shared. Often accompanied by platitudes drawing attention to the novelty of the subjects' actions or attitudes, they become spectacle for the nondisabled or typical viewer, evoking emotions such as wonder, pity, gratitude, or self-reproach that moves some users to interact with these image-caption combinations on Facebook or another site, ensuring the propagation of the media among the users' networks. As Stella Young said, "I use the term *porn* deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people" (TED, 2014a, 3:50).

Is this interaction sincere, from the heart and born of a genuine perception of human connection . . . or it is performance, done to promote the user's identity as a good person for the sake of optics? Overall, it appears to be a combination of the two; the power of these media is not lost on those who admire and share them, and neither is the power to spread the media's message far and wide. In the years leading up to the 2016 election, the relationship between

social media and politics became not one of a medium for a message, but one built on symbiosis—a tool for mutual promotion of each by the other as a new vehicle for delivering ideas, rhetorically and electronically. Trump built his empire—seizing first the media, then the Oval Office—with a canny combination of self-promotion (he was already a nationally known tabloid fixture by the mid-1980s) and often outrageous, headline-grabbing rhetoric. His continued trajectory along his self-made arc of controversy resulted in a re-created, if not rebranded, vision of American conservatism, with a laser-sharp focus on identity politics.

A peculiarity of the Republican party—now undeniably the party of Trump—is its nationalistic identity and inflammatory rhetoric fueling suspicion of foreigners, dissolution of aid options for disabled citizens (and noncitizens) and the underclass, heightened advocacy of an armed electorate, and allegiance to the Christian religious community. (According to the Pew Research Center (2018), three-quarters of the white evangelical vote—20% of the overall electorate—went for Trump in the 2016 presidential election.) The real-life media phenomenon now had the power to spread his message far and wide as well.

Using Dollars for Change

Rare is the person who will admit out loud that he or she wants life to be harder for others—but with stigmas baked into American citizens' minds from an early age, the best evidence for how people *really* feel often comes down to how they choose to use their money in an attempt to mold society in their ideal image.

As a matter of self-identification, liberals traditionally support social programs to remove barriers that promote inequality; conservatives, on the other hand, are more identified with actions that would save federal monies by cutting into health and social services spending, including Supplemental Security Income for disabled Americans (Rappeport & Haberman,

2020). (One rationale, perhaps, is that after watching videos of supposedly disabled people conquering physical challenges, they deemed those in the videos fit for work.) Paarlberg, Nesbit, Clerkin, and Christensen (2018) cited several studies whose findings buttressed the argument that Republicans are more likely to favor private donations as a vehicle for social change than do Democrats—another apparent disconnection between voters' faith in government vs. private industry to do right by its nation's most vulnerable citizens. This dichotomy was illustrated when then-House Budget Committee chair Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI), describing a "tailspin of culture in our inner cities . . . of generations of men not even thinking about working," explained in an interview:

> If you're driving from the suburb to the sports arena downtown by these blighted neighborhoods, you can't just say, "I'm paying my taxes, government's going to fix that." . . . You need to get involved yourself, whether it's through a mentor program or some religious charity, whatever it is, to make a difference. (Hiltzik, 2014, March 16).

The *Los Angeles Times* columnist who quoted that episode added, "Community service and religious good works should be encouraged and celebrated, but Ryan's job is to figure out how to apply government resources to a problem that is self-evidently a government concern" (Hiltzik, 2014, March 16).

However, the argument does not end there: Paarlberg et al. (2018) discovered through an aggregate look at county-level donation habits that residents of majority-conservative and majority-liberal communities give more toward the programs their neighbors most favor. These can be the *charitable* programs toward which those donors give their money, with majority-liberal counties putting their money toward an array of widely redistributed services (including public assistance) than do conservative counties' citizens, who are more likely to engage in *philanthropic* giving and be further motivated by a decreased tax burden (Paarlberg et al., 2008). In short, liberals are more inclined to donate to causes that offer immediate results to general

society, while conservatives prefer their money to go to carefully chosen organizations, perhaps doled out over time.

One can trace this attitudinal selectiveness back to at least the early Reagan era. In a 1984 *New York Times* article by health reporter Robert Pear, the president authorized deep investigations into Americans' disability statuses in order to remove Social Security benefits abusers from the rolls—and expelling some 485,000 recipients in the process—between 1981 and early 1984. Ultimately, about 60% who appealed this decision had their benefits restored by April of 1984—a number that does not include some 100,000 who filed federal lawsuits (Pear, 1984). Ironically, from the beginning of all this, Reagan and other Republicans privately watched and listened to one of their own whose life changed a mere 10 weeks into the new president's first term: press secretary James Brady.

Brady, who sustained a lifelong brain injury and paralysis following a 1981 assassination attempt on the president, became a central advocate of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act. In an eloquent op-ed for *The New York Times* with the callout, "A social program that conservatives can support" (Brady, 1989, p. A19), Brady wrote the following statements propounding the financial and societal benefits of the pending bill:

> As a Republican and a fiscal conservative, I am proud that this bill was developed by 15 Republicans appointed to the National Council on Disability by President Reagan. . . . The Disabilities Act could save taxpayers billions of dollars by outlawing discrimination, putting disabled people on the job rolls and thereby reducing Government *[sic]* disability payments. . . . Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act will increase the acceptance, dignity and full participation of citizens with disabilities. We do not want pity or sympathy. All we want is the same civil rights and opportunities that all citizens have. (Brady, 1989, p. A19).

Today, Brady is remembered chiefly for the gun-control law bearing his name.

As for the ADA and its protections for disabled Americans, fiscal conservatives have striven to weaken them at every opportunity under the guise of saving money for both public

entities and private enterprises—exactly the opposite of what Brady prescribed throughout his *New York Times* piece (Brady, 1989, p. A19). One notable case involved H.R. 620, otherwise known as the ADA Education and Reform Act of 2017. This bill placed the burden of ADA enforcement in noncompliant businesses on the aggrieved party, while at the same time presenting itself as a potential law helpfully "educat[ing] state and local governments and property owners on strategies for promoting access to public accommodations for persons with a disability" (Congress.gov, n.d., Sec. 2). While the bill passed the House, Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL)—a veteran whose legs were amputated after she was wounded in Iraq—marshaled 42 of her fellow senators in opposition to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and successfully blocked the bill (Tammy Duckworth, U.S. Senator for Illinois, 2018).

McConnell—arguably the most powerful Republican in the nation after the president—was undeterred. Most recently, even in the throes of the COVID-19 crisis, controversy arose when his Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (known by the beneficent-sounding acronym CARES) threatened to strip protections for students receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, 2020), prompting the use of the hashtag #NotThatIDEA on social media. In short, waivers to the aforementioned disability services acts would be permitted as long as school was physically not in session—a near-universal situation during the worldwide pandemic. Ultimately, education secretary Betsy DeVos left the IDEA benefits largely untouched, leaving instructional decisions to the teachers and institutions: "With ingenuity, innovation, and grit, I know this nation's educators and schools can continue to faithfully educate every one of its students" (Strauss, 2020). In that statement, DeVos reaffirmed

the conservative tenet of personal responsibility and self-reliance—even among those who personally had to rely on others the most.

Dissonance, Framing, and Resonance

While the ADA prohibits disability-based discrimination in sectors ranging from employment to transportation to commercial facilities to education (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020), in practice the enforcement of this law, said Bogart and Dunn (2019), "is often reactionary rather than proactive. . . . This creates the impression that individuals who receive accommodations are recipients of special treatment or welfare" (p. 658).

Yet, this impression lives on many bodily typical people who, when faced with a disabled person in public, paper over their annoyance—even resentment—with a smile, as opposed to true acceptance. Again, Stella Young:

> No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. Never. Smiling at a television screen isn't going to make closed captions appear for people who are deaf. No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshop and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into Braille. It's just not going to happen. (TED, 2014a, 7:37)

Although the history of the Trump era is still being written, the incongruity between American conservatives' personal reactions to disabled bodies in media and their Christian charity (in a shared humanity sense if not a financial or even religious one) has not yet been explored. To do so would complement the formidable body of work documenting this unprecedented time in American history, adding additional color to the narrative of communication that defines this era—even if the communication starts out as an electronic transmission from thousands of miles away, subsequently translating into interpersonal discourse and even policy formation when citizens vote (or, as may be the case, abstain from voting).

In addition to its focus on seeing disabled persons primarily through a medical model while imposing limitations that create a social model, the primary theory at work regarding consumers of inspiration porn is cognitive dissonance. Briefly explained, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person espouses attitudes or beliefs that appear to be at odds with each other, and the person feels the need to fix or rationalize one or both to restore harmony. According to Festinger (1957):

> The degree to which the dissonance is bothersome for the individual will depend on two things. The more deviant his public statement is from his private belief, the greater will be the dissonance. The greater the amount of justification the person has for having made the public statement, the less bothersome the dissonance will be. (p. 96)

Goffman (1974) promoted the concept of framing theory, which involves how expectations are based on prior experience and then the resulting interpretations communicated. In simplified terms, *frames* can be another word for what we now refer to as worldview—a person or society's subjective reality rooted in its values, experiences, cultural traditions, and understanding what something is and what it is not. These frameworks, Goffman (1974) said, "provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being" (p. 22).

At the same time, though, this agency can be influenced. A component of this worldview is the sources from which a person or society receives its information; in the present day, social media plays a prominent role in shaping these frames, arguably in ways infinitely more influential than mainstream newspapers did even a generation ago. (Daily, American Internet users spend, on the average, more than four times the amount of time visiting Facebook than the most-visited news site.) ("Top Sites in United States," n.d.).

Unlike newspapers, however, social media requires absolutely no curation, editing, or fact checking necessary to allow for story significance and consequence, page count, or veridical

integrity. There is no subscription fee, few space limits, and no credentials required to create. Thus, while social media can be described as democratic (verily, the empire of free speech is broader than the Founding Fathers ever could have imagined), it also is rife with countless frames congruent with the belief systems and tastes of virtually any person who logs on, anytime. One need only know where to look—and there is no dearth of creators at work, packaging media in ways that are novel, culturally appealing, and compelling to their desired audience.

Among Goffman's events that effect frame activation is the "astounding complex" (1974, p. 28) that begs for resolution. Something amazing happens, and—similar to cognitive dissonance—in order to fit everything into the established frame, people expect and look for a resolution. Another one, though, is "cosmological interests, in some ways the largest we can have [and that] support a humble entertainment" (Goffman, 1974, p. 30); this includes human spectacle (circus performers, elite athletes, and—because the golden age of space exploration still was yet glimmering when he wrote it—astronauts) and animal tricks (such as trained seal attractions and circuses, both in which nonhuman creatures are taught, in some form, human actions). Goffman was explicit in the frame-validating role of these spectacles (1974):

> It is worth nothing that both the astounding complex (in the form of human freaks) and stunts are closely associated with circus slideshows, as if a social function of circuses (and latterly, marine museums) were to clarify for patrons what the ordering and limits of their basic frameworks are. . . . Whatever the viewers obtain from such exhibits, it is clear that interest in cosmologically grounded issues is an everyday concern of the layman. (pp. 30–31)

The body, which every person possesses, is first and foremost the vantage point from which people view others in the world. When a person with a typical body, therefore, subconsciously scans other people's bodies looking for confirmation: "[O]bservers actively project their frames of reference into the world immediately around them, and one fails to see

their so doing because events ordinarily confirm these projections, causing the assumptions to disappear into the smooth flow of activity" (Goffman, 1974, p. 39).

Congruent with this, Giorgi (2017) broke down this recognition into cognitive resonance and emotional resonance—alignment that is perceived vs. alignment that is felt. However, she posited that challenges can exist in the form of a person's life experiences or how the situation fits between the framer and the frame. All of these disturbed resonances, accordingly, result in dissonance; although cognitive dissonance—the head—is more familiarly cited, it is emotion—the heart—that moves people to impulsively "like," comment, and share on social media. While not impossible, is harder to plug a hole in emotional resonance with cognition than with more emotion.

While this is not to say that people of one political or ideological persuasion favor one over the other, Trump's gift for playing upon the sensitivities and fears of his followers appeals to both. Whether he and his followers consciously know it, he is the framer-in-chief, shaping their world into one free of dissonance—as long as they allow it.

Chapter 3

Method

Recruitment

With political affiliation hypothesized to be the most important predictor of interaction with online inspiration porn, the respondents were recruited based on their partiality to conservative or liberal ideologies. Along with this overarching category, the primary interests of investigation were those most associated with the political divide: religious (or belief) worldview, and educational level. Disability status was also included, as it is a characteristic that cuts across all social categories but also perhaps can affect a person's attitude regarding physical disability in others (as depicted in the media presented). Demographic data included sex or gender identity, age bracket, and race or ethnicity.

In order to evaluate along ideological lines possible social media reactions to images of inspiration porn, an online survey was administered to 800 Facebook account holders. In addition to the benefit of presenting this media in a format familiar to the respondents, the survey's online accessibility permitted convenient access to a pool of people who may have been difficult to assemble under other circumstances due to being at work or unreachable by telephone.

Identical questionnaires were posted on Mechanical Turk ("MTurk"), a data collection service owned by Amazon, and administered to 400 self-identified conservatives and 400 self-identified liberals. All respondents self-identified as Facebook account users living in the United States. Registered users presented these characteristics to MTurk ahead of time, and only those who fit the particular criteria were able to see and take the survey. Over the duration of the survey, which lasted six days and included compensation for the participants, periodic data

checks were conducted to verify integration between the platform and Google Forms, which hosted the actual questionnaire.

Design

The survey was created and hosted on Google Forms and administered through MTurk. Participants were presented with a statement of informed consent (Appendix A), after which those who chose to proceed were taken to a screen with three mediated images as seen on social media. After each set, respondents were asked to imagine seeing the image-caption combinations on Facebook and, using a five-point Likert scale (Not at all, A little, Somewhat, Quite a bit, A lot), rate their potential for engagement and their emotional reactions along the continuum. Engagement actions included "'Like,'" "Share," "Leave a positive comment," and "Leave a negative comment"; possible emotions included feeling "Inspired," "Irritated," "Lucky," and "Manipulated." Demographic information was collected at the end, as well as the respondents' unique worker codes in order to facilitate verification of the Google Forms-collected data against the MTurk records.

Measures

Eight hundred respondents age 18 and older—400 self-identified as politically conservative, 400 self-identified as politically liberal, and all Facebook account holders in the United States—were shown three sets of media, which are described below. (See Appendix B.)

Post 1: IHOP. The first media set—or post—involves a photo, taken from a distance, of a man reaching across a table to a woman in a restaurant. Details of their interaction is indistinct visually, but the headline (2017, March 28) reads: "Woman snaps photo of IHOP server helping disabled customer." A caption calls the event "a touching act of kindness" and notes that the photo had thousands of Facebook "likes" and shares.

Post 2: Bad attitude. The second post features a photograph of a young man in a wheelchair holding a basketball at arm's length. The scene is artfully lit, with a dark background and light dramatically illuminating the man's muscular shoulders and bald head. The bottom third of the image is a light-colored floor, drawing the viewer's gaze to the vehicle. Sharing the frame is the caption, "The only disability in life is a bad attitude," and a hashtag, #mondaymotivation (Brainfuel Solutions, 2020).

Post 3: An awesome dude. The final post includes a photo of two teenagers—a tall guy, and a petite girl with Down syndrome—dressed in color-coordinated formalwear, and the headline: "High school QB keeping a fourth grade *[sic]* promise to take a girl with Downs *[sic]* syndrome to prom is just an awesome dude" (Spags, 2015, May 13).

Respondents were instructed to imagine seeing each media set on Facebook and asked to assess their responses, on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A lot." The middle option, "Somewhat," was offered as a neutral or no-answer response.

Behavioral questions included respondents' inclination to "like," share, leave a positive comment, and leave a negative comment on the hypothetical Facebook post. Emotional questions asked the degree to which respondents would feel (in alphabetical order) inspired, irritated, lucky, and manipulated by the media presented. Demographic questions at the end collected data on respondents' sex or gender identity, age bracket, race or ethnicity, religious or faith tradition, highest educational level completed, and disability status (including that of themselves and of family members or close friends).

Chapter 4

Results

The following sections examine response patterns within salient demographic categories (e.g., political affiliation, religious or faith tradition, education, and disability status). In reviewing the data collected using a five-point Likert scale, categories of "Not at all" and "A little" were collapsed into the category of "Unlikely." Responses of "Quite a bit" and "A lot" were collapsed into "Probably." The category of "Somewhat"—third on the five-point scale—was treated as a neutral response.

Participants

Eight hundred participants were successfully recruited for the study, split evenly between conservatives and liberals. (Due to rounding, some categories may total slightly more or less than 100.) Raw data is presented in Table 1, *Key Demographics by Political Affiliation*.

Along gender lines, the overall sample was 52.6% female (52.7% conservative, 47.3% liberal), 46.5% male (47.6% conservative, 52.4% liberal), and 0.9% who identified as other/nonbinary (14.3% conservative, 85.7 liberal). Younger adults (18 to 39 years old) made up 53.9% of the sample (42.9% conservative, 57.1% liberal), and adults 40 and older made up 46.1% (58.3% conservative, 41.7% liberal). In organizing the age question, inadvertent overlapping prevented clear delineations of some brackets; in order to rectify the error, in the final data set the groupings were collapsed into two unambiguous age categories: "18 to 39" and "40 and older." Aside from those cited here, no other collapses or abridgements were made.

Table 1

Key Demographics by Political Affiliation

	Conservative	Liberal
Gender		
Female	222	199
Male	177	195
Other/nonbinary	1	6
Age		
39 and younger	185	246
40 and older	215	154
Race/ethnicity		
Asian (including South Asian)	18	29
Black or African American	17	37
Hispanic or Latino	7	18
Multiracial	12	12
Native American or Alaska Native	13	3
Prefer not to answer	0	1
White	333	300
Religious or Faith Tradition		
Agnostic or Atheist	45	190
Catholic	109	56
Evangelical Christian	97	17
Jewish (Orthodox)	0	2
Jewish (Other)	1	10
Mormon/LDS	6	1
Muslim	1	4
Other/Prefer not to answer	10	25
Protestant (Other/Mainstream)	103	53
Spiritual but Not Religious	28	42

Table 1 continued

	Conservative	Liberal
Level of Education		
Associate's degree	47	54
Bachelor's degree	166	165
Doctoral degree	8	9
High school diploma or less	44	22
Master's degree	66	79
Other/Prefer not to answer	0	1
Professional or vocational certificate	9	5
Some college but no degree	60	65
Disability Experience		
No	234	267
Other/Prefer not to answer	5	6
Yes (at least one family member or close friend, but not me)	112	82
Yes (me only)	25	24
Yes (me, and at least one family member or close friend)	24	21

Most respondents reported their race or ethnicity as white (79.1%, including 52.6% conservative and 47.4% liberal), 6.8% Black or African American (31.5% conservative, 68.5% liberal), 5.9% Asian (including South Asian) (38.3% conservative, 61.7% liberal), 3.1% Hispanic/Latinx (28.0% conservative, 72.0% liberal), 3.0% multiracial (50.0% conservative, 50.0% liberal), 2.0% Native American or Alaska native (81.3% conservative, 18.8% liberal), and 0.1% declining to answer (0.0% conservative, 100.0% liberal). (An option for Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander existed, but no respondents identified with that demographic.)

When asked about belief systems, 29.4% reported being agnostic or atheist (19.1% conservative, 80.9% liberal), 20.6% Catholic (66.1% conservative, 33.9% liberal), 19.5% nonevangelical Protestant (66.0% conservative, 34.0% liberal), 14.2% evangelical Christian

(85.1% conservative, 14.9% liberal), 8.8% spiritual but not religious (40.0% conservative, 60.0% liberal), 1.4% non-Orthodox Jewish (9.1% conservative, 90.9% liberal), 0.9% Mormon/LDS (85.7% conservative, 14.3% liberal), 0.6% Muslim (20.0% conservative, 80.0% liberal), 0.3% Orthodox Jewish (0.0% conservative, 100.0% liberal), and 4.4% other or declining to answer (28.6% conservative, 71.4% liberal).

Regarding the highest educational level reached, 41.4% of respondents reported having a bachelor's degree (50.2% conservative, 49.8% liberal), 18.1% a master's degree (45.5% conservative, 54.5% liberal), 15.6% some college but no degree (48.0% conservative, 52.0% liberal), 12.6% an associate's degree (46.5% conservative, 53.5% liberal), 8.3% a high school education or less (66.7% conservative, 33.3% liberal), 2.1% a doctoral degree (47.1% conservative, 52.9% liberal), 1.8% a professional or vocational certificate (64.3% conservative, 35.7% liberal), and 0.1% other or declining to answer (0.0% conservative, 100.0% liberal). It should be noted that 54.5% of those reporting a high school education or less and 38.4% with a bachelor's degree—as well as 54.4% of those with some college but no degree—were 40 years of age or older, effectively canceling out an in-progress education among those at the low end of the young-adult group.

One final demographic question centered on personal experience with disability, either firsthand, with a close personal contact (defined as a parent, spouse or partner, child, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, or close friend), or both. Nearly two-thirds, or 62.6%, reported having no close contacts living with a disability (46.7% conservative, 53.3% liberal); 24.3% reported at least one family member or close friend but not themselves (57.7% conservative, 42.3% liberal), 6.1% reported themselves only (51.0% conservative, 49.0%

liberal), 5.6% reported themselves and at least one personal contact (53.3% conservative, 46.7% liberal), and 1.4% declined to answer (45.5% conservative, 54.5% liberal).

Political Affiliation

Overall, out of 800 respondents (400 conservative, 400 liberal), 44.6% (59.1% conservative, 40.9% liberal) reported they would probably "like" the media presented, 21.3% (62.9% conservative, 37.1% liberal) probably would share it, 28.9% (60.2% conservative, 39.8% liberal) probably would leave a positive comment, 43.8% (60.6% conservative, 38.4% liberal) probably would feel inspired, and 15.4% (66.7% conservative, 33.3% liberal) probably would feel lucky. Regarding less positive interactions, 1.4% (72.7% conservative, 27.3% liberal) probably would leave a negative comment, 1.6% (69.2% conservative, 30.8% liberal) probably would feel irritated, and 4.0% (68.8% conservative, 31.2% liberal) probably would feel manipulated. Raw data is presented in Table 2, *Likert Responses by Political Affiliation*.

Table 2

Likert Responses by Political Affiliation

	Conservative	Liberal
Like		
probably	211	146
somewhat	118	124
unlikely	71	130
Share		
probably	107	63
somewhat	113	73
unlikely	180	264
Positive Comment		
probably	139	92
somewhat	107	91
unlikely	154	217
Inspired		
probably	212	138
somewhat	133	153
unlikely	55	109
Lucky		
probably	82	41
somewhat	125	123
unlikely	193	236
Negative Comment		
probably	8	3
somewhat	27	8
unlikely	365	389
Irritated		
probably	9	4
somewhat	38	29
unlikely	353	367
Manipulated		
probably	22	10
somewhat	46	29
unlikely	332	361

Religious or Faith Tradition

The categories included agnostic or atheist, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Jewish (Orthodox), Jewish (other), Mormon/LDS, Muslim, Protestant (other), spiritual but not religious, and other/prefer not to answer. Those religious traditions with fewer than 5.0% of respondents represented were collapsed along with other/prefer not to answer, adding up to 7.5% of all respondents; spiritual but not religious respondents were represented at 8.8% overall. Conservatives and liberals were broadly represented among Catholics (20.6% of all respondents) and mainstream/nonevangelical Protestants (19.5% of total); however, the groups with agnostics and atheists (29.4%) and evangelicals (14.3%) were notable in that the former group was largely liberal and the latter group was largely conservative.

Due to unequal numbers across the faith groups, each group's percentage is calculated against the total number of those in the sect surveyed. Raw data is presented in Table 3, *Likert Responses by Religious or Faith Tradition and Political Affiliation*.

Like. Evangelical Christians reported at a rate of 56.1% (64 out of 114 with that faith) that they probably would "like" the media presented, the highest of all the belief groups. Even though evangelical Christians comprised 14.3% of all respondents (114 out of 800), including 24.3% of conservatives (97 out of 400), among those 64 respondents who reported that they probably would "like" the media, 56—or 87.5%—identified as conservatives. This was a larger proportion of conservatives than seen in any other denomination, including Catholics (69.7% of conservatives vs. 30.3% of liberals in the "liking" group, or 53.9% of all Catholic respondents overall) or nonevangelical Protestants (66.7% conservatives vs. 33.3% liberals, with 50.0% of all nonevangelical respondents probably "liking" the media). Agnostics and atheists, while accounting for 29.4% of the total and the largest liberal bloc in the sample, said

Table 3

Likert Responses by Religious or Faith Tradition and Political Affiliation

	*		Agnostic or Atheist		Catholic		Evangelical Christian		Protestant (Other/ Mainstream)		Spiritual but Not Religious	
	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.
Like												
probably	11	19	19	51	62	27	56	8	52	26	11	15
somewhat	3	13	12	54	33	20	28	8	33	12	9	17
unlikely	4	10	14	85	14	9	13	1	18	15	8	10
Share												
probably	7	8	4	15	42	17	34	4	17	15	3	4
somewhat	3	10	10	27	31	16	23	4	39	8	7	8
unlikely	8	24	31	148	36	23	40	9	47	30	18	30
Positive Comment												
probably	9	15	9	22	47	22	36	7	33	19	5	7
somewhat	3	10	13	39	30	19	29	3	24	8	8	12
unlikely	6	17	23	129	32	15	32	7	46	26	15	23
Inspired												
probably	10	20	18	45	58	25	58	9	60	27	8	12
somewhat	4	12	16	73	40	22	29	7	28	18	16	21
unlikely	4	10	11	72	11	9	10	1	15	8	4	9
Lucky												
probably	6	9	5	7	34	9	17	3	18	11	2	2
somewhat	4	11	10	47	34	26	37	5	32	19	8	15
unlikely	8	22	30	136	41	21	43	9	53	23	18	25
Negative Comment												
probably	0	0	0	0	6	2	2	1	0	0	0	0
somewhat	2	2	1	1	13	1	7	1	2	2	2	1
unlikely	16	20	44	189	90	53	88	15	101	51	26	41
Irritated												
probably	0	1	0	0	5	2	2	1	1	0	1	0
somewhat	2	1	2	17	14	5	11	1	8	1	1	4
unlikely	16	40	43	173	90	49	84	15	94	52	26	38

Table 3 continued

	*		Agnostic or Atheist		Catholic		Evangelical Christian		Protestant (Other/ Mainstream)		Spiritual but Not Religious	
	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.	Con.	Lib.
Manipulated												
probably	0	2	0	2	13	3	4	2	3	1	2	0
somewhat	3	0	6	18	20	3	10	1	7	4	0	3
unlikely	15	40	39	170	76	50	83	14	93	48	26	39

Note. * = Other religious or faith traditions not listed here; Con.= Conservative; Lib. = Liberal

they probably would "like" the media presented at a rate of 29.8%—the lowest rate among all respondents surveyed. About 1 in 8 (12.3%) evangelical Christians explicitly reported that they were unlikely to "like" the media presented, and at the other end of the spectrum, about 1 in 3 (35.3%) agnostics and atheists reported the same sentiment.

Share. Evangelical Christians most favored sharing the media (33.3%), second only to Catholics (35.8%); among those denominations' members who said they probably would share, most were conservative (almost nine out of 10 evangelicals and a little more than seven out of 10 Catholics identified as conservative). Agnostics and atheists were the least likely to report that they probably would share (8.1%). Of those who specifically reported being unlikely to share, agnostics and atheists had the highest numbers (76.2%), and 43.0% of evangelical Christians explicitly reported that they were unlikely to share the media presented—more than the Catholics' response in that area (35.8%), but fewer than among the other denominations.

Positive comment. Compared with other religious affiliations, evangelical Christians were less likely to report that they probably would leave a positive comment: 37.7% as compared to 41.8% of Catholics and 40.0% of combined other religions. Among the 37.7% of evangelical respondents who said they probably would leave a positive comment, 83.7% identified as conservative. The opposite tendency was similarly reflected: 34.2% of evangelical respondents—

82.1% of them conservative—specifically stated they were unlikely to leave a positive comment. (The remaining 28.1% were neutral toward leaving a positive comment.) All other groups reported at rates above 38.3% that they would not leave a positive comment, with the exception of the Catholic respondents (28.5%).

Inspiration. On the whole, 57.0% of Protestants—58.8% of evangelicals (86.6% conservative) and 55.8% of other Protestants (69.0% conservative)—reported that they probably would feel inspired by the media presented, making them the most likely to respond in this way. Agnostics and atheists were the least likely to feel inspired by the media (26.8% overall). About one out of 10 (9.6% overall) evangelicals specifically reported being unlikely to feel inspired, compared with 20.5% of all respondents across all denominations.

Lucky. Among conservatives, the likelihood of feeling lucky when observing the media presented was most salient in those respondents who identified as evangelical Protestants, at 17.5% (85.0% conservative), Catholics at 26.1% (79.1% conservative), and nonevangelical Protestants at 18.6% (62.1% conservative). More than half of those surveyed, or 53.6%, did not anticipate feeling lucky, ranging from Catholics (37.6%) and evangelicals (45.6%), to agnostics and atheists (70.6%).

Negative responses. Of the 11 out of the 800 persons who said they would probably leave a negative comment, six were conservative Catholics, two were liberal Catholics, two were evangelical Christians, and one was a liberal evangelical Christian.

Of the 13 out of the 800 persons who reported that they probably would feel irritated by the media presented (nine conservative, four liberal), respondents represented all belief groups except agnostics and atheists, and respondents in each group who answered in the affirmative

numbered in the single digits, with Catholics making up more than half of all those irritated (seven out of 13).

Of the 32 respondents who said that they probably would feel manipulated by the media presented (22 conservatives and 10 liberals), all belief groups were represented. Respondents in each group numbered in the single digits except for Catholics, who represented exactly half the respondents who probably thought they would feel manipulated.

Educational Level

The categories included high school education or less, professional or vocational certification, some college but no degree, associate's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, and other/prefer not to answer. The 66 with a high school education or less accounted for 8.3% of the total respondents; the associate's, bachelor's, master's, and some college categories were collapsed into one (college educated), which represents 702, or 87.8%, of respondents; and doctoral degree holders and those with certifications were collapsed into a nonmajority category on account of their low numbers overall (17 and 14, respectively, or 2.1% and 1.8%). One person declined to self-identify. Politically, all groups were closely split between conservatives and liberals, with the exception of the group with a high school education or less; this sector consisted of exactly twice as many conservatives as liberals—44 to 22.

Again, due to unequal numbers across the educational groups, each group's percentage is calculated against the total number of those in that particular group surveyed. Raw data is presented in Table 4, *Likert Responses by Education Level and Political Affiliation*.

Table 4

Likert Responses by Education Level and Political Affiliation

	*		Associate/Bachelor/ Master/Some college but no degree		High school diploma or less	
	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.
Like						
probably	7	5	176	132	28	9
somewhat	8	6	99	111	11	7
unlikely	2	4	64	120	5	6
Share						
probably	3	2	91	56	13	5
somewhat	5	2	96	66	12	5
unlikely	9	11	152	241	19	12
Positive Comment						
probably	5	2	117	83	17	7
somewhat	5	1	94	85	8	5
unlikely	7	12	128	195	19	10
Inspired						
probably	7	6	176	122	29	10
somewhat	7	6	116	138	10	9
unlikely	3	3	47	103	5	3
Lucky						
probably	3	0	64	39	15	2
somewhat	1	5	115	110	9	7
unlikely	13	9	160	214	20	13
Negative Comment						
probably	0	0	7	2	1	1
somewhat	2	0	25	8	0	0
unlikely	15	15	307	353	43	21
Irritated						
probably	1	0	7	3	1	1
somewhat	2	1	34	27	2	1
unlikely	14	14	298	333	41	20

Table 4 continued

	*		Associate/Bachelor/ Master/Some college but no degree		High school diploma or less	
	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.
Manipulated						
probably	1	0	7	3	1	1
somewhat	2	1	34	27	2	1
unlikely	14	14	298	333	41	20

Note. * = Other educational attainment not listed here; Cons. = Conservative; Lib. = Liberal

Like. Respondents who reported having a high school education or less were the most likely to "like" the media (56.1%), and 75.7% of those who said they would probably "like" it were conservative. In the nonmajority education group, 37.5% were likely to say they would "like" the posts, with seven of the 12 respondents (58.3%) in the conservative group. Across all educational levels, relatively few of those with a high school education or less reported explicitly that they probably would not "like" the media (16.7%), with college-educated respondents at 26.2%.

Share. The percentage of respondents with a high school education or less who said they would probably share the media was 27.3%, and 72.2% of them were conservative. Across all educational levels, more conservatives than liberals were likely to share it. From that same high school demographic, 47.0% specifically said they were unlikely to share the media, contrasted with 62.5% in the education group consisting of those with doctoral degrees, technical or vocational certification, and other/decline to answer.

Positive comment. The respondents most likely to leave a positive comment were those with a high school education or less (36.7%, with 70.8% of them conservative); while the respondents least likely to leave a positive response were those with doctoral degrees, technical or vocational certificate, and other/decline to answer (21.9%, with five out of the seven

respondents being conservative). Of those who expressly reported a lack of interest in leaving a positive comment, 59.4% of members of the nonmajority education group reported that they were unlikely to comment positively, as opposed to 46.0% of bachelor's degree holders.

Inspiration. Across all educational levels, more conservatives than liberals said they probably would feel inspired. More than half (59.1%) of respondents with a high school education or less reported that they probably would feel inspired, with three out of four (74.4%) of them identifying as conservative. In the other two educational groups, less than half of respondents reported that they would probably feel inspired; of those who reported they would feel inspired, 58.8% were conservative. Of respondents with high school educations or less, only 12.1% said they were unlikely to feel inspired, while 21.4% of those with college educations reported this unlikelihood.

Lucky. Slightly more than 15% of all respondents (123 out of 800) reported that the media presented probably would make them feel lucky. Across all educational levels, twice as many conservatives as liberals were likely to report that they would feel lucky. A quarter of respondents with a high school education or less reported they probably would feel lucky (25.8%), nearly eight out of nine them conservative, while a smaller amount (14.7%) of those with a college education reported the same feeling. More than half the respondents (53.6%) specifically reported that they would be unlikely to feel lucky; these respondents were relatively evenly distributed across both political affiliations and educational levels.

Negative responses. Of the 11 persons who said they would probably leave a negative comment, 63.6% were conservative and college educated. A majority (53.8%) of the 13 persons who said the media would probably irritate them were conservative and college educated. Almost all the respondents who reported that the media would probably make them feel

manipulated (87.5%) were college educated, split politically about two-thirds to one-third between conservatives (67.9%) and liberals (32.1%).

Disability Status

There were four categories regarding disability status: None (neither oneself nor a family member or close friend living with a disability), Yes (oneself only), Yes (a family member or close friend, but not oneself), and Yes (both oneself and a family member or close friend). Because of important differences among the Yes categories, they were not collapsed.

Out of the 800 people surveyed, 501 (62.6%) said they neither had a disability nor had a close family member or friend with a disability. One hundred ninety-four (24.3%) reported having a family member or close friend with a disability but not themselves, 49 (6.1%) reported themselves only as having a disability, 45 (5.6%) reported both themselves and someone close to them as having a disability, and 11 (1.4%) declined to identify their status.

Due to unequal numbers across the disability status groups, each group's percentage is calculated against the total of those in that particular group surveyed. Raw data is presented in Table 5, *Likert Responses by Disability Experience and Political Affiliation.*

Like. Of people without experience of disability in their personal lives, whether in their own existence or that of a family member or close friend, 39.7% (199 out of 501) reported that they probably would "like" the media presented, with 58.3% of those identifying as politically conservative. Of those with a close contact living with a disability, 55.2% answered that they probably would "like" the media; 63.6% of those were conservative). Over half (55.2%) of those who reported having a disability themselves probably would "like" it and 48.1% of those respondents were conservative. Under half (42.2%) of those with a disability themselves and someone close to them also with a disability reported that they probably would

Table 5

Likert Responses by Disability Experience and Political Affiliation

	No		Other/Prefer not to answer		Yes (at least one family member or close friend, but not me)		Yes (me only)		Yes (me, and at least one family member or close friend)	
	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.
Like										
probably	116	83	2	3	68	39	13	14	12	7
somewhat	67	89	1	1	31	21	11	6	8	7
unlikely	51	95	2	2	13	22	1	4	4	7
Share										
probably	53	29	2	2	33	20	12	7	7	5
somewhat	60	42	0	0	37	19	8	10	8	2
unlikely	121	196	3	4	42	43	5	7	9	14
Positive Comment										
probably	73	44	1	2	42	27	13	11	10	8
somewhat	58	55	2	1	35	23	6	9	6	3
unlikely	103	168	2	3	35	32	6	4	8	10
Inspired										
probably	118	77	3	3	64	38	12	13	15	7
somewhat	77	109	0	1	38	27	10	5	8	11
unlikely	39	81	2	2	10	17	3	6	1	3
Lucky										
probably	35	22	2	2	27	10	11	4	7	3
somewhat	75	77	0	1	39	28	3	8	8	9
unlikely	124	168	3	3	46	44	11	12	9	9
Negative Comment										
probably	2	0	0	2	2	0	4	1	0	0
somewhat	9	4	2	0	10	0	4	1	2	3
unlikely	223	263	3	4	100	82	17	22	22	18

Table 5 continued

	No		Other/Prefer not to answer		Yes (at least one family member or close friend, but not me)		Yes (me only)		Yes (me, and at least one family member or close friend)	
	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.	Cons.	Lib.
Irritated										
probably	3	0	0	2	3	0	3	1	0	1
somewhat	17	18	2	2	11	3	4	3	4	3
unlikely	214	249	3	2	98	79	18	20	20	17
Manipulated										
probably	11	3	0	3	6	1	4	2	1	1
somewhat	25	17	2	1	11	6	4	3	4	2
unlikely	198	247	3	2	95	75	17	19	19	18

Note. Cons.= Conservative; Lib. = Liberal

"like" the media; of those respondents, 63.2% were conservative. Respondents who were the only persons in their circle living with a disability doubted the most that they would "like" it (10.2%), and those without a close experience were nearly three times as likely to avoid hitting the "like" button (29.1%).

Share. Of the 170 respondents who said they probably would share the media on Facebook, percentages ranged from 16.4% (64.6% conservative) who did not have a personal experience of disability, to 38.8% (63.2% conservative) who had a disability but no similar close contact. Respondents living with a disability but without also affected close contacts doubted the least that they would share (24.5%), vs. 63.3% among those without personal disability experience.

Positive comment. Those who reported that they probably would leave a positive comment ranged from 23.4% among those with no personal disability experience up to 49.0% from those having a disability themselves (54.2% conservative), but with no one else in their

immediate group having a disability. The only group where liberals outnumbered conservatives was the one composed of respondents who declined to note their disability status, and that group numbered only three respondents. Regarding the unlikelihood of leaving a positive comment, those reporting no disability experience had the highest numbers (54.1%), as opposed to persons living with disabilities without anyone else close to them, declined to leave a positive comment (20.4%).

Inspiration. The only discrete group (that is, of those who supplied an answer) that saw more than half (51.0%) probably feeling inspired was of those individuals living with a disability themselves, but having no friends or family members also with a disability; respondents in this group were split nearly evenly between conservatives and liberals (48.0% to 52.0%, respectively). On the other end of the spectrum, 38.9% of those who reported that neither they nor anyone close to them was living with a disability said that they probably would feel inspired when viewing the media presented; 60.5% were conservative, congruent with the overall political slant of those who felt that way. Those who reported having a family member or close friend with a disability—either separately or in conjunction with their own personal experience—and 58.7% of those who answered affirmatively were conservative. More than one in five respondents said they would be unlikely to feel inspired when viewing the media presented, ranging from 13.9% of those who both experienced disability firsthand and had a disabled person in their lives, to 24.0% of those without any of that experience. (More than a third who answered as such declined to identify their status; however, that group consisted of only 11 individuals.)

Lucky. Among those who reported that they probably would feel lucky looking at the media presented, the distribution of disability identity and political ideology was similar to those

who said they probably would feel inspired. Percentages of respondents who specifically reported that they were unlikely to feel lucky upon viewing the media presented ranged from 40.0% of those living with a disability along with a family member or close friend with a disability, to 58.3% of those with no one disabled in their personal network.

Negative responses. Even though the members of each group who said they probably would leave a negative comment numbered in the low single digits, those living with a disability or having someone close who did were almost twice as likely to do so as those who were not or who declined to answer (seven to four), with six of the seven conservative. Of the 13 persons overall who said that they probably would feel irritated upon seeing the media presented, eight reported having a disability themselves or knowing someone who did; six of the eight were conservative.

Of the 32 persons surveyed who said the media would probably make them feel manipulated, fewer than half (15) lived with a disability or had someone close to them who did. Out of the 22 conservatives who reported a likelihood to feel manipulated, half did not identify as disabled. Among liberals liable to feel manipulated, the numbers were smaller but more evenly distributed, with three not living with a disability; four doing so personally, having a close associate who did, or both; and three declined to answer.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Demographic Convergence and Limitations

A note on labels. Although "conservative" does not always equal "Republican" and "liberal" does not always equal "Democrat," the alignment of the two tend to parallel each other ideologically in American politics. With that in mind, comparisons of this study's data with external survey data will assume ideological alignment.

Limitations of the study stem mainly from the opt-in nature of the survey. Although the purposively sampled group of 800 respondents is not random but instead composed of individuals who elected to join the study, Clifford, Jewell, and Waggoner (2015) suggested that from a political and psychological disposition standpoint, there is great congruence between MTurk workers and the general population as measured by samples from American National Election Studies benchmark data.

Based on each demographic's most prominent presence, the majority of survey respondents skewed young, white, nondisabled, agnostic or atheist, male, liberal, and with a college education. However, taken together, the majority of persons to positively interact with the inspiration porn—that is, likely to "like," share, leave a positive comment about, or a combination of these three—tended toward the characteristics of being at least 40 years old, white, disabled, evangelical Protestant female conservatives with a high school education or less.

Race and ethnicity and political divisions. In the survey, respondents who identified as Black or African American were severely underrepresented (6.8% vs. 13.4% nationally), as were Hispanic/Latinx respondents (3.1% vs. 18.3% nationally). Although multiracial and Native American/Alaska Native respondents proportionally outnumbered those in the general

population (see Table 6), those numbers were small overall. The present sample consisted of 3.3% more white respondents than seen in the general population ("Quick facts," n.d.). Comparison data based on national percentages is presented in Table 6, *Race/Ethnicity Comparison to National Data*.

Table 6

Race/Ethnicity Comparison to National Data

	Study	Nationally	Study vs. nationally
Asian (including South Asian)	5.9%	5.9%	± 0.0%
Black or African American	6.8%	13.4%	- 49.3%
Hispanic/Latinx	3.1%	[1]	N/A
Multiracial	3.0%	2.8%	+ 7.1%
Native American or Alaska Native	2.0%	1.3%	+ 53.8%
White	79.1%	76.3%	+ 3.7%
Other	0.1%	N/A	N/A

[1] Although 18.5% of respondents at the national level identified as Hispanic or Latinx, they included those of any race.

Along party lines, however, conservative Asian and Black or African-American respondents were very overrepresented in the sample compared with those who identified as Republicans in at the national level; similarly, liberal Asian and Black or African-American respondents were underrepresented in the sample compared with those who identified as Democrats at the national level. Liberal Hispanic or Latinx and white respondents were uniformly represented compared with Republicans at the national level, but were somewhat overrepresented when compared with Democrats at the national level. Comparison data based on national percentages is presented in Table 7, *Race/Ethnicity Comparison to National Data by Political Affiliation*.

Table 7

Race/Ethnicity Comparison to National Data by Political Affiliation

	Study		Nationally		Study vs. Nationally	
	Conservative/ Republican	Liberal/ Democrat	Conservative /Republican	Liberal/ Democrat	Conservative /Republican	Liberal/ Democrat
Asian (including South Asian)	38.3%	61.7%	17.0%	72.0%	+ 125.3%	- 14.3%
Black or African American	31.5%	68.5%	10.0%	83.0%	+ 215.0%	- 17.5%
Hispanic/ Latinx	28.0%	72.0%	29.0%	63.0%	-3.4%	+ 14.3%
Multi-racial	50.0%	50.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native American or Alaska Native	81.3%	18.8%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	52.6%	47.4%	53.0%	42.0%	- 1.1%	+ 12.9%
Other	0.1%	0.1%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Religious or faith tradition and political divisions. Regarding religious and faith traditions, evangelical Christians in the sample were very much underrepresented in the survey compared with the general population (14.2% vs. 25.4%). Catholics were almost exactly represented between the two groups, and nonevangelical Protestants were somewhat underrepresented (see Table 8). However, national survey information from the Pew Research Center (n.d.) did not have a category for “Spiritual but not religious”; while agnostics and atheists in particular added up to 7.1%, the overarching category of “Unaffiliated” (including

"Nothing in particular"), plus "Don't know," came to 23.4%. It is unclear how many of those who selected "Agnostic or atheist" in the survey considered themselves unaffiliated. Comparison data based on national percentages is presented in Table 8, *Religious Tradition Comparison to National Data*.

Table 8

Religious Tradition Comparison to National Data

	Study	Nationally	Study vs. nationally
Agnostic or atheist	29.4%	N/A[2]	N/A
Catholic	20.6%	20.8%	+ 0.1%
Evangelical Christian	14.2%	25.4%	- 44.1%
Protestant (other)	19.5%	21.2%[3]	- 8.0%
Spiritual but not religious	8.8%	N/A[2]	N/A
Other	7.5%	9.2%[4]	- 1.8%

[2] Unaffiliated/Atheist/Agnostic/Nothing in Particular/Don't Know added up to 23.4%.
[3] Includes Mainline Protestant and Historically Black Protestant.
[4] Includes other Christian sects (3.0%), Non-Christian Faiths (5.9%).

A Pew Research survey taken the same month as this study (Lipka & Smith, 2020) asked for whom respondents would vote if the 2020 presidential election were to be held then. Among most of the major faith groups listed, the Pew respondents' answers showed congruence with those of this study's respondents. Similar portions of evangelical Christians would support Trump, while Catholics showed disparity; more than 40% more Catholics in this study supported Trump than did their national counterparts, who were 11% more likely to vote for the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden. It is notable that Biden is very vocal about his Catholic faith; it is possible this commonality has contributed to his popularity among his fellow Catholics. Comparison data based on national percentages is presented in Table 9, *Religious or Faith Tradition Comparison to National Data by Choice of 2020 Presidential Candidate – June 2020*.

Table 9

Religious or Faith Tradition Comparison to National Data by Choice of 2020 Presidential Candidate – June 2020

	Study		Nationally		Study vs. Nationally	
	2020 – Trump	2020 – Biden	2020 – Trump	2020 – Biden	2020 – Trump	2020 – Biden
Agnostic or atheist[5]	19.1%	80.9%	18.0%	77.0%	+ 6.1%	+ 5.1%
Catholic	66.1%	33.9%	47.0%	52.0%	+ 40.6%	- 34.8%
Evangelical Christian	85.1%	14.9%	82.0%[5]	17.0%[5]	+ 3.8%	- 12.4%
Protestant (other)[6]	66.0%	34.0%	69.7%	27.4%[6]	-5.3%	+ 24.1%

[5] Includes white evangelicals; no separate Protestant category existed.
[6] Includes white nonevangelicals and Black Protestants; no separate Protestant category existed.

Gender and political divisions. The difference between female and male respondents vs. the distribution in the general population came to 1% or less. No information was available for those in the general population who identified differently (Howden & Meyer, 2011). Comparison data based on national percentages is presented in Table 10, *Gender Comparison to National Data.*

Table 10

Gender Comparison to National Data

	Study	Nationally	Study vs. nationally
Female	52.6%	50.8%	+ 0.4%
Male	46.5%	49.2%	- 0.5%
Other	0.9%	N/A	N/A

Today, 49% of American voters—including independents—find common interests with the Democratic Party, and 44% lean toward or identify with the Republican Party (Pew Research

Center, 2020). Along gender lines, this study's respondents diverged from those at the national level in that liberal women and conservative men were relatively underrepresented in the study Comparison data is presented in Table 11, *Gender Comparison to National Data by Political Affiliation.*

Table 11

Gender Comparison to National Data by Political Affiliation

	Study		Nationally		Study vs. Nationally	
	Conservative/ Republican	Liberal/ Democrat	Conservative /Republican	Liberal/ Democrat	Conservative/ Republican	Liberal/ Democrat
Female	52.7%	47.3%	38.0%	56.0%	+ 38.7%	- 15.5%
Male	47.6%	52.4%	50.0%	42.0%	- 4.8%	+ 24.8%
Other	14.3%	85.7%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Further Discussion and Limitations

Education. The Pew Research Center (2020) reported that among voters with a high school education or less, 48% identified as Republican and 44% as Democrat. This represented a more even split than in this survey, which had 66.7% of those at that educational level being conservative and 33.3% as liberal. Further, those without college experience represented 33% of registered voters at the national level, and 8.25% in this study. This gap reveals a limitation in the respondent recruitment; approximately seven out of eight reported having some college or other training, compared with two out of three at the national level.

In this study, both conservatives and liberals reported the same top three higher education achievements of bachelor's degree, master's degree, and some college but no degree. However, despite the achievement of a college education, the specific achievements varied widely: While

liberals were almost 20% more likely than conservatives to hold a master's degree, they were also 8% more likely than to have attended some college but not earned a degree.

It is notable that exactly twice as many conservatives than liberals surveyed for this study reported having a high school diploma or less (11% vs. 5.5%). While it is reasonable to expect this educational level among very young adults (all respondents were 18 and older), the distribution of respondents with a maximum educational level of high school is rather constant once the mid-20s are reached, ranging between 1% and 2% in each age bracket (a mean of 12, or 1.5% overall, with those respondents over 40 less likely to have pursued education beyond their teens). Among both parties, respondents holding doctoral degrees and professional or vocational certification numbered in the single digits.

Disability. Other demographic information proved problematic when comparing the survey respondents to Americans nationally. Although 61.4 million American adults (25.7%) live with a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), this survey's respondents reported 6.1% for themselves. Those who reported that they did not have a disability—including those with a close contact who did—amounted to 86.9% of the survey respondents. The variation may be at least partially explained by the fact that more than half of the respondents were 39 years of age or younger; although disability can happen at any age, many people face disability for the first time later in life. This also aligns with the educational attainment differences between this study's respondents and the general public; as more undereducated people are likely to work in fields that pose physical risk, the more likely they are to become physically disabled on the job.

Clearly disability has a large place in the lives of Americans, with more than a third of the overall sample reporting themselves or a close family member or friend as living with a

disability. In all three categories—themselves only, a close family member or friend, or both—conservatives were more likely to disclose this.

Age. Because of differing age brackets used by national survey organizations, it was not possible to draw comparisons between this study's sample and national demographics. It is suggested that future studies consider the use of those brackets. However, the favoring of younger respondents (53.9% were 39 and younger) appears to be approximately consistent with the makeup of the United States population, with 60.6% under the age of 45 (Howden & Meyer, 2011).

A History of Inspiration Porn

The concept of inspiration porn in modern popular culture is not a new one, even though the term, coined by Stella Young (TED, 2014a), is relatively recent. Social media is the latest innovation in modern history—dating from Dickens' Tiny Tim in the 1840s—to feed the public's fascination and perpetuate the spreadability of this media. By turns, inspiration porn allows its consumers to feel generous, blessed, sympathetic, motivated, or even superior. It offers feel-good moments involving others leading their lives when they may see their own lives as mundane. It is expected that people look for uplifting news among the grimness; in a time when social unrest and a pandemic threaten any bit of emotional tranquility, the "need" for uplifting media rises; however, with a potential increase of this consumption comes more opportunity for exposure to media that does not accurately depict the lives, challenges, and struggles of those most in danger of being left behind in our society.

Inspiration porn in popular culture. Popular culture has not shied away from disability imagery, particularly when it involves children. Charles Dickens' poor and innocent character of Tiny Tim, symbolizing the opposite of the miserly "old sinner" Ebenezer Scrooge (who, in as

early as Stave I of 1843's *A Christmas Carol*, also endorsed the reduction of the "surplus population"), was firmly enshrined in the popular imagination as a transformational figure whose purpose was to serve as a catalyst for Scrooge's redemption at the end of the story.

A form of inspiration porn also exists as propaganda. A few decades after Dickens' holiday masterpiece was published, the British charity The Guild of the Poor Brave Things used Christian evangelicalism-steeped letters—ostensibly from children disabled by work injuries, congenital conditions, or acquired diseases such as smallpox—to raise money (White, 2013). The Guild made hearts soar with dispatches such as this one:

> "O! I am so glad to be a cripple!" said a happy-faced girl one day when away in the country. "Glad?" questioned someone. What DO you mean? And she answered, "I can't help being glad. It is so beautiful to belong to the Guild, and I couldn't unless I had lost my leg." (White, 2013)

The Guild, whose motto was "Laetus sorte mea," or "Happy in my lot," also held public exhibitions of children singing of their misfortunes and how those misfortunes brought them closer to their Savior. The organization existed under various appellations until 1987 (White, 2013).

Well into the 20th century, people who watched some adaption or another of *A Christmas Carol* every December or sent checks to their favorite children's organization discovered another heart-tugging story played out virtually in their own homes midyear as well. Television gave so-called "poster children" an audience unprecedented by past mediums of exposition: Most notably, the entertainer Jerry Lewis presented his Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) telethon for decades, displaying the children's disabilities to millions of Americans at any time of the day or night over Labor Day weekend and raking in millions. Perhaps a latent Christianity (à la Dickens, if not Scrooge) induced these charitable acts benefiting organizations such as the MDA and Easter Seals, albeit at a safe distance from the corruption these disfigured, deformed,

or otherwise disabled children had somehow experienced—be it through their parents' presumed sinfulness or general misfortune. Regardless, the avatar of the poster child served the dual purpose of raising awareness of (and funds for) afflicted youth and allowing the general public to contribute to the children's physical well-being and their own spiritual or emotional salvation—without the trouble of having to make actual physical contact with them.

Still, barring an early death from the disease at hand or other circumstances, these children typically grew up and lived out their remaining decades with their impairments. At least two United States presidents are considered to have had "overcome" (but, realistically, not entirely vanquished) serious physical conditions: Franklin D. Roosevelt lived roughly the last third of his life unable to walk independently due to polio, and John F. Kennedy, as well, lived the last third of his life battling the effects of adrenal disease and the side effects of the medications used to treat it. Perhaps Roosevelt and Kennedy would have been poster children for their respective maladies had they not acquired them as adults. In a way, Roosevelt did serve as a kind of poster child:. To this day, the American 10-cent piece is a reminder of Roosevelt's role in creating the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis—now known as the March of Dimes ("A history of the March of Dimes," n.d.).

Lewis lived long enough to see the rise of the World Wide Web, but it is doubtful he ever imagined the platform available to any parent with a camera phone and an Internet connection. Today's version of a modern-day freak figure or inspirational poppet—depending on your point of view—is on display at one's fingertips, ready over and over again to manifest a miracle that neither Lewis nor most certainly Dickens realistically thought possible . . . and at the touch of a keyboard.

Children are an obvious subject for inspiration porn, but adults are well represented as well. The supercrip archetype is widely represented in this regard. One popular figure is former Olympian Oscar Pistorius (later convicted of the murder of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp), alternately pictured running alone or alongside a child also wearing the prosthetic blades he made famous, combining the fascination of the young body with the athletic. Even less famous disabled athletes—particularly amputees—are frequent subjects of this image sharing: swimmer Jessica Long carrying her prostheses as she walks an aisle on her residual limbs, accompanied by a caption, "No excuses," and a tagline for a fitness website ("Keep the drive alive," n.d.); and tattooed fitness coach Zack Ruhl doing "incredible pushups in his wheelchair" and bench pressing over 400 pounds (truly, 2016) . . . to name a couple of examples.

At the same time, however, teenagers tread the fine line between childhood pity and adult empowerment: a boy takes a wheelchair-using girl to a dance "even in her condition" (CBC Radio, 2016); a young-looking college-age woman with Down syndrome competes in a beauty pageant and wins a "spirit award" (Inside Edition, 2017). More visibly, on *America's Got Talent*, singer Mandy Harvey brought judges and audience members to tears with her clear soprano voice and original song, "Try"—but not before the segment dramatically led with—*cue the sad music!*—more than a minute of exposition about how she had lost her hearing as a teenager (America's Got Talent, 2017).

What's So Pornographic About Inspiration?

The original sense of the word *pornography* referred to writing about prostitutes, but its best-known definition—that is, media used to elicit sexual excitement—only appeared to gain currency in the mid-19th century (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The second linguistical revolution

regarding the word *pornography*/*pornographic*/*porn* is underway in social media, as seen in ubiquitous hashtags for #foodporn, #travelporn, #carporn, et cetera.

Inspiration porn, like other kinds of pornography, fills many needs, with the added benefit of appearing innocuous enough to be made available to all ages without a second thought. It offers its consumers escapism and a glimpse into the lives of others who may not be like them in some way. Like its less wholesome counterparts, though, inspiration porn does not accurately reflect the lives of the persons depicted and even can lead to unrealistic expectations. Even if individual subjects are not harmed, inspiration porn damages society in a particularly insidious way: It can influence people to believe that in some small way they are moving society to the next level—again, slacktivism—when, in reality, they are moving nothing but their own emotions, leaving their disabled neighbors on the ground floor while the elevator button remains out of reach.

Why the Survey's Media are Pornographic

The three sets of media presented to the survey participants are problematic images in the way they were presented—that is, in the context of their ostensibly "inspirational" purpose. (A visual facsimile of the survey can be found in Appendix B).

Post 1: IHOP. Although the server went above and beyond in his service and in a public space aiding a customer, that does not change the fact that the photo was an intrusion—albeit one that appears to have been surreptitiously from a distance—and apparently posted without the permission of any of the people in it. Many people need help with basic tasks, and sometimes they want to go out to a restaurant as most anyone might enjoy. The very fact that someone decided to snap a picture and post it to the Internet under the guise of telling IHOP about an employee's act of kindness—and then that that photo "went viral" (or, more accurately, was

spread)—publicly perpetuates the trope of the bighearted able person aiding a helpless disabled person.

Post 2: Bad attitude. The image of the wheelchair basketball player and the Scott Hamilton quote about a bad attitude being the only disability in life, used together, are presented as motivational—it is explicit in the accompanying hashtag #mondaymotivation. The man pictured (Nicolas Hausammann, a Swiss Paralympic athlete) is suited up and apparently ready to take on an opponent or opponents, and, per the caption, his positive attitude renders him if not able, per se, then at least not *dis*abled. Although a bad attitude can hinder a person in life, it cannot be the reason Hausammann uses a wheelchair; therefore, changing his attitude is not going to change his body. The caption, "The only disability in life is a bad attitude," reduces physical disability to a mental outlook that can be changed and implies that those with disabilities who are not as successful as Hausammann are to blame for their own failures because they are disabled by their own negativity.

Post 3: An awesome dude. The picture of the teenage couple and caption suggest the young man did something extraordinary in taking his childhood friend with Down syndrome to prom. The story is all about him, with the "girl with Downs" playing a supporting role—Ben Moser, the jock who could have taken *anyone* to the big dance, kept a promise he made to his classmate, Mary Lapkowicz, when he was probably 10 years old. Despite the fact that many friends, including childhood friends, agree to go to prom together, enough news outlets found this story compelling enough to report it widely—but this particular blog's take is especially patronizing. (The blog post goes on to praise Moser's "move" and crudely encouraged high school girls to have sex with him because he is "so chill." Lapkowicz is acknowledged to "almost definitely [have] had a rough go of things.") The ableist assertion that Moser is "an

awesome dude" for choosing Lapkowicz as his prom date and "legit [making] the life of this girl" stems from her status as a disabled person; had he kept a seven-year-old promise to the girl who ended up becoming the head cheerleader, that would not have been as notable.

Media Interaction Among Conservative Evangelical Christians Without College Educations

As predicted in the hypothesis, reactions to the media varied between conservative and liberal respondents, with conservative evangelical Christians without a college education reacting most positively. Without individual interviews or more extensive questioning, it is impossible to fully know the motivations of those who predicted they might "like," share, or leave a positive comment. It is even more of a mystery why some reported the probability of feeling lucky, or inspired . . . or irritated, or manipulated. This part of the discussion will focus on the characteristics of religious tradition, education, and disability status most salient in conservative respondents.

The fact that there is a dearth of published work on this specific topic of inspiration porn and persons representing these particular social demographics makes it ripe for investigation. Many people who voted for the Republican president, as an article of faith, consider themselves Christians—followers of Jesus Christ, who championed the weak and oppressed—with 77% of white evangelicals (20% of the overall electorate) casting their ballots for him (Pew Research Center, 2018). Along with social media playing such a significant role in powering the Trump juggernaut, it also has served to facilitate the sharing of memes, stories (true and false), and images, both still and video.

A break from the controversies of the news is the ostensibly innocent and uplifting spreadable media of people Trump himself undoubtedly would shun if not for cameras—and

even might in spite of them. AARP cited data from research group eMarketer (a division of the German multimedia giant Axel Springer SE) suggesting the growth of the social media site Facebook among Americans 55 and over; Trump, similarly, was more popular than Democrat Hillary Clinton in both the 50-to-64 and 65-and-over demographics (Schaffel, 2018). This potential overlap of older Americans, Facebook users, conservative voters, and white evangelicals suggests that people who identify with at least one of these groups are more likely to share inspiration porn images and videos than people who hold liberal or nonevangelical ideologies (or both).

Regardless of the age or ideology of those spreading the media, it is undeniable that there are more spectators than performers. If somebody "likes" or comments on a post, it is possible that that person's Facebook friends will see it on their own feeds; they almost certainly will if they visit that person's page. If a user shares the media, it is more likely to be seen, interacted with, and given a breath of new digital life.

Inspiration porn through the eyes of the respondents. The most salient characteristics of those respondents with the greatest likelihood of positively interacting with the inspiration porn presented were conservative political affiliation; evangelical Christianity; an education limited to high school; and personal experience with disability, typically firsthand but also possibly including a close friend or family member (defined as a parent, spouse or partner, child, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, or nephew). This section will explore these prominent characteristics and pose questions based on those identities, calling to account those respondents' inspiration porn consumption.

Evangelical Christianity. Despite the prevalence of Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism across both liberal and conservative populations (in the survey, about one in seven

and two in seven, respectively), the popularity of evangelical Christianity appears far and away a dominant phenomenon among politically conservative Americans (as seen with 24.3% of conservative respondents) when compared with political liberals (4.3% of liberal respondents). Conservative religious communities are known for having a foothold in societies with a strong sense of tradition, family, and faith—in God, in leaders, and often an inextricable mixture of the two. This ethos can manifest in an acceptance of the lot this life has given these believers (including the anticipation of a better life after their days on earth are through), belief in a paternalistic government to lead the way during those days (a preference that has not gone unnoticed by politicians seeking to court this formidable voting bloc), and resistance to change (as seen in skepticism of and even opposition to movements and laws involving social developments). It should be noted that Orthodox Judaism, whose adherents tend to be more socially conservative than other Jewish Americans (Pew Research Center, 2020), shares many of these characteristics with evangelical Christianity; however, a scant two out of 800 respondents—both liberals—identified themselves as such.

The Christian Gospels are rife with stories of Jesus healing his followers of afflictions of the body, mind, and soul—even admonishing them not to talk about it, lest the public focus on him and not their faith that brought these miracles into existence. (Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45, and Luke 5:12-15 all relate what appears to be the same episode involving a leper.) For evangelical Christians, these are not folktales or literary allegories; to this day, many evangelical Christians believe in—and even expect—extra-scientific cures as a very present and plausible article of faith rooted in the imperishable power of Christ at work in America.

With that in mind, do evangelical Christians see this media, referred to here as inspiration porn, as a sign of God's grace? When a disabled person is helped by a nondisabled or typical

person, is that not a blessing for both? When a paralyzed person learns to move again, a deaf person sings with clarity, or an amputee improvises writing using other faculties, does that not show that their faith has healed them? In "liking," sharing, and commenting on these media, do evangelical Christians see their actions as but another way of spreading the Good News?

Even more prevalent among liberal Americans is a profession of agnosticism or atheism. Even though these respondents appear on the surface to be the ideological opposite of evangelical Christians, nearly three out of 10 (29.8%) agnostics and atheists overall did report a likelihood of "liking" the media presented—and more than one out of four (26.8%) reported at least a probable twinge of inspiration. Clearly, the absence of a religious identity or belief does not preclude feeling cheered—even inspired—when witnessing the triumphs of one's fellow human over seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Limited formal education. Self-reliance is another tenet of political conservatism, as opposed to the so-called "social safety net" embodied in American liberal society by laws benefiting those affected by poverty, disabilities, job loss, and so on—but also working parents, retirees, and those seeking affordable health insurance or assistance with college tuition. While conservatives also avail themselves of these options, a culture of individual independence runs deep in the conservative psyche.

The proud American tradition of hard work is seen across all 50 states and the territories, but areas dominated by blue-collar industry in particular tend to run conservative. Occupations in manufacturing, construction, and utilities—to name just a few industries necessary to the health of the nation's infrastructure—often involve on-the-job training that does not require education beyond high school (or, in the case of apprenticeships, a college degree). As a result, many people in conservative-dominated areas can get by with jobs that do not expect education beyond

high school or an abbreviated vocational training program. An example of a negative effect of this limit can be seen in the move away from coal mining to more environmentally beneficial forms of energy; even though miners work dangerous jobs that endanger their health and lifespans, many are hesitant to change their profession because of the limitations of their rudimentary skill set. The conservative emphasis on tradition, as well, imbues many blue-collar workers with a fierce sense of loyalty: Did this livelihood not grant at one time dignity and stability to their families, perhaps going back generations? If a high school education was good enough for their grandfathers doing the same job, why would things be any different now? Even if new career options were possible, what kind of man (or woman) would gamble the security of one's family on an unknown future? And, when leaders promise a renaissance in the industry (Volcovici, 2017), could prosperity be far behind?

On the other side of the coin, it stands to reason that the more education one has, the more likely that person will be to live in an area with greater opportunities for positive social and economic mobility, be more aware of myriad concerns that may not affect more insular communities, and reconsider one's options when those opportunities and concerns demand adaptation.

Do many conservatives working in positions that do not require higher education, when seeing a disabled person "overcome" obstacles, believe that a bit of extra effort is all that it takes? If a toddler receives a cochlear implant and hears voices for the first time as her mother weeps (Cook Children's Health Care System, 2018), do they consider the "problem" of deafness to have been fixed, without considering that the child's hearing and speech still may be imperfect despite the years of therapy ahead? When Mandy Harvey plays her ukulele and sings about how she needs to "Try," do they nod their heads and say, *See, this lady can't be deaf* when offstage,

she navigates the world without the sounds they take for granted? (Three years after her *America's Got Talent* appearance, one of the first autocomplete suggestions for "Is Mandy Harvey . . ." on Google—after, "Is Mandy Harvey married?"—is, "Is Mandy Harvey really deaf?")

In "liking," sharing, and commenting on these media, do a lot of undereducated, blue-collar conservatives assume that disabled persons should not complain about inaccessibility, but need only pull themselves up by their bootstraps?

Elevated incidence of disability. Picking up the thread of low education and blue-collar work, the higher percentage of conservatives with disability experience among those surveyed overall was not unexpected. Not only do certain professions—particularly in conservative areas, or which require noncollege training—have a higher incidence of injury to the worker, but there also is an overlap between areas where such factors are prevalent and its citizens' failing health. Rates of smoking, obesity, heart disease, and diabetes are greater in the typically conservative-leaning Southern states than in the rest of the country (United Healthcare, 2019). The reasons can be cultural (for example, Southern cuisine is known for its rich, calorie-dense dishes), but injury itself promotes a lack of healthy habits: Exercise can help stave off many chronic illnesses, but how can one easily exercise when nursing a back injury?

Although deteriorating health is a concern across America, it is particularly prevalent in conservative states. It is worth noting that five out of the six states with the highest rates of citizens receiving Social Security disability benefit payments—7% or more—overwhelmingly went for Trump in 2016 (Social Security Administration, 2017), awarding him as much as 68% of the vote (Federal Election Commission, 2017). (The sixth, Maine, is the only one in the North, and was the only state out of the six to go for Hillary Clinton.) The left-leaning Center on Budget

and Policy Priorities speculated that areas with higher rates of Social Security disability benefit payments are marked by a population that is less educated and likelier to go into physically demanding blue-collar industry, is older and thus more likely to develop age-related conditions than younger persons, and has fewer immigrants who may not qualify for such benefits or who avoid the unhealthy lifestyle habits that endanger the health of so many native-born Americans (Ruffin, 2015).

In the case of disabled social media users, the interaction with inspiration porn can be regarded as more inspiring and less pornographic—a genuinely uplifting, nonpatronizing action. Perhaps to those living with these challenges, "The only disability in life is a bad attitude" is a healthy attitude to have, but realistically there is more to it than outlook. They know the pain of being different in a world not built for them—the explaining; the medical interventions; the knowledge that things may never be as good as they once was, or as effortless as they are for others . . . and yet, perhaps buoyed by these media, they press on.

Even though this study focuses on conservative respondents, liberal respondents should be mentioned here too. Although liberals were less likely to positively interact with the media presented, the incidence of positive interaction was higher among those with a personal experience with disability overall. Are conservatives—and liberals—who live with or are close to someone with disabilities especially likely to interact with the media out of a sense of solidarity? Do they celebrate the subjects' accomplishments as vicarious victories? When a teenager with cerebral palsy makes headlines on CNN for participating in a race (Prior, 2019), does it make them feel like getting up and pushing through their impairments or pain? Does this mean that these conservatives in particular are more sympathetic to or supportive of others with a

similar predicament, even when their leaders put down fellow disabled citizens or even enact laws that make that world harder for them to navigate?

Theoretical Frameworks as Explanations of Interaction

Aside from the superficially emotive nature of the people and events depicted, what makes inspiration porn so appealing? Presented here are two theoretical frameworks to help explain its popularity, along with some questions to ask when encountering such media.

Framing theory. In understanding the appeal of inspiration porn, it is helpful to understand the role of framing on their perceptions. It involves one's own point of view, but also the source of the media. Because humans naturally tend to associate with others with similar values and tastes, the mere existence of a particular social media artifact on a contact's Facebook page may serve as an endorsement, a recommendation, or even an urgent call to action.

Pulling back from the narrow focus on social media, framing involves the ability to "locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences" to make them meaningful (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Goffman wrote about social frameworks, which are subject to manipulation under the eye of those around us. In this age, Facebook has come to serve as a labyrinth of social frameworks—as intertwined as it is vast.

Within the primary framework—the collective way a culture views the world, which includes social frameworks—is the spectacle of what Goffman (1974) referred to as cosmological interests: "the exhibition of stunts, that is the maintenance of guidance and control by some willed agency under what are seen as nearly impossible conditions" (p. 30). Goffman included in this type of exhibition animal acts, sideshow "freaks," and vaudeville performances, and stressed the inherent voyeurism of humans:

> The primary perspectives, natural and social, available to members of a society such as ours, affect more than merely the participants in an activity; bystanders who merely look

> are deeply involved, too. It seems that we can hardly glance at anything without applying a primary framework, thereby forming conjectures as to what occurred before and expectations of what is likely to happen now. (p. 38)

Although circuses as Goffman knew them are largely extinct, there exists "reality" television and endless curiosities online presented as news. All of the aforementioned abilities required of framing (to "locate, perceive, identify, and label") are easily applicable to inspiration porn. To *locate* it, peruse any entertainment website for sensational stories. Or, simply type "inspirational disability stories" into the Google search bar, or click on a social media hashtag to that effect. Outlets with names including phrases such as "good news" or "positive" also traffic in this media—code words for stories designed to tug at the heart. By clicking on that media, how is that fueling the demand—and what agency did the persons depicted have in its creation? Goffman (1974) addressed this in what he called the documentary frame, particularly its limits:

> [T]here is the issue of a document's permissible use even after its subjects have freely given their consent . . . In these cases, the concern is not with the document per se but with the rights of the persons documented, and behind this a concern for their interests on occasions when they might be tempted unwisely to consent to publicity. (p. 70)

The act of how one may *perceive* can vary, as one person's inspiration is another one's exploitation. Ask: *Why are we seeing this? Does the person depicted think he or she is inspirational? Is there a voyeuristic feeling to this—and if so, how do I feel about that?* Goffman (1974) discussed how the context of an event—in our case, social media—shapes one's worldview, which then influences the user to seek out media that fits that worldview:

> Organizational premises are involved, and these are something cognition somehow arrives at, not something cognition creates or generates. Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting. (p. 247)

How does one *identify* inspiration porn? It can be tricky at times: *Is this really newsworthy? Is it simply a person with differences going about his or her daily life? What are*

my expectations of what this person can do? Does he or she exist to make me feel good about myself? Goffman (1974) considered the possibility that life might exist beyond our own frameworks, even as we brush it aside:

> It is obvious that a given appearance can on different occasions have different meanings. He who cleans off his dinner plate can be seen as starved, polite, gluttonous, or frugal. But usually the context, as we say, rules out wrong interpretations and rules in the right one. (Indeed, context can be defined as immediately available events which are compatible with one frame understanding and incompatible with others.) And when the context might not suffice, participants take care to act out requisite evidence, here, as it were, helping nature to be herself. (p. 440)

The fourth and final part of framing involves assigning a *label* to those depicted. *How is the person (taken alone) or that person's action (when activity is involved) described? "Inspirational"? "Amazing"? "Uplifting"? If so, why is that, and what does it say about the creators and consumers of this media? And, what devices, such as editing or description, are used to present the person as "other"? Is he a blind athlete, or an athlete? Is she a deaf singer, or a singer? If you take away those modifiers, does that make the person's actions less than extraordinary?* Goffman (1974) described the use of framing to demonstrate exceptionality:

> [An] example of the framing devices employed to achieve orientation in drama . . . is the techniques through which the social identity of characters is effectively established and maintained. When an American movie involves persons who are foreign, it is rare that they are restricted to the language they would likely speak. Instead English is used but often with a corresponding "accent." The accent stands for the foreignness. (p. 240)

As Stella Young said: "Disability doesn't make you exceptional, but questioning what you think you know about it does" (TED, 2014a, 8:54).

Cognitive dissonance. Humans, by nature, seek to avoid discomfort—physical discomfort, but also contradictions or competing situations that create a feeling of disagreement or disequilibrium. The resolution one seeks when faced with two competing concepts is what Festinger (1957) described as "cognitive dissonance":

> Persons are not always successful in explaining away or rationalizing inconsistencies to themselves. For one reason or another, attempts to achieve consistency may fail. The inconsistency then simply continues to exist. Under such circumstances—that is, in the presence of an inconsistency—there is psychological discomfort. (p. 2)

In addressing this search for resolution, Festinger (1957) put forth two hypotheses: that the psychological discomfort of this dissonance is a motivation in itself to seek and achieve a resolution (or "consonance"), and that once faced with dissonance, the person dealing with it "will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance" (p. 3). Several years later, he explained how to defuse this potentially explosive emotional situation:

> There are two major ways in which the individual can reduce dissonance in this situation. He can persuade himself that the attractive features of the rejected alternative are not really so attractive as he had originally thought, and that the unattractive features of the chosen alternative are not really unattractive. He can also provide additional justification for his choice by exaggerating the attractive features of the chosen alternative and the unattractive features of the rejected alternative. In other words, according to the theory the process of dissonance reduction should lead, after the decision, to an increase in the desirability of the chosen alternative and a decrease in the desirability of the rejected alternative. (Festinger, 1962, p. 95)

In short: If a person is uncomfortable, he or she will try to figure out a way to make things comfortable, or at least reduce the feeling of being ill at ease. This can be done by denying the appeal of at least one of the discomforting factors. Then, he or she will make every effort not to run into that discomfort again.

This is where the real contradiction of conservative Trump voters and inspiration porn comes in. While the concept of rugged individualism has been paramount in the American story from the beginning, the appeal of inspiration porn can be explained through that lens—that grit (and a sprinkling of faith in oneself) can serve to propel one over most any obstacle, including physical disability—regardless of political affiliation (or lack thereof). For many, Trump offends on a personal level—and, nevertheless, perhaps in the spirit of his iconoclasm, they are still willing to let it slide.

A *New York Times*–Sienna College poll from June 2020 showed Trump lagging behind Joe Biden in the race for the White House, and the reasons many traditional Republicans continue to back him were the same as they had been four years ago: the issues. To wit:

> Tom Diamond, 31, a Republican in Fort Worth, Texas, said he planned to vote for Mr. Trump but would do so with real misgivings. He called the president a "poor leader" who had mishandled the pandemic and said Mr. Biden seemed "like a guy you can trust." But Mr. Trump held views closer to his own on the economy, health care and abortion. . . . "Part of you just feels icky voting for him," Mr. Diamond said. "But definitely from a policy perspective, that's where my vote's going to go." (Cohn, 2020, June 26)

Then-candidate Trump, when asked whether he ever felt the need to ask God for forgiveness, replied at the 2015 Family Leadership Summit, "When we go in church and when I drink my little wine—which is about the only wine I drink—and have my little cracker, I guess that is a form of asking for forgiveness. And I do that as often as possible, because I feel cleansed, OK?" (CNN, 2015a). In doing so, he offended Catholics who regard communion as the actual body and blood of Christ. Even members of other faiths—Trump identifies as a Presbyterian—would not refer to the communion host as a snack.

When Trump created a fake "university" that swindled some 5,000 customers who signed up for three-day seminars to the tune of nearly $1,500 each, even the conservative *National Review* said it was "designed to be a scam" (Tuttle, 2016). In doing so, Trump engaged in predatory practices used by for-profit colleges that promise careers for veterans and working-class Americans—a bloc that traditionally includes a considerable proportion of conservative voters—then cashing in on government-backed loans when so many of them default (Hernandez, 2018).

When Trump mimicked Serge Kovaleski, the disabled reporter who had challenged Trump's claim of witnessing "thousands and thousands" of New Jersey Arabs cheering as the World Trade Center buildings collapsed in 2001 (Kessler, 2015), he made a face and pulled up

his hands in a mocking impression: “You ought to see this guy: ‘Aah, I don’t know what I said! Aah, I don’t remember!’” (CNN, 2015b). In doing so, he mocked every person with a disability—a likelihood for many blue-collar workers and others at risk of livelihood-ending injury—as well as those raising a disabled child or living with a life-altering condition.

All of these episodes raise questions about the incongruity of those who consume inspiration porn with their personal convictions and experiences.

Why would 87.5% of conservative evangelical Christians surveyed “like” the media shown, 89.5% want to share it, and 83.7% feel like leaving a positive comment? What about the probably overlapping 86.6% who felt inspired, 85.0% who felt lucky (or blessed)? How do they, as conservative evangelicals, reconcile their support of a man who treats faith and religion so cavalierly—along with so many other aspects of his private and public life—with these feelings of compassion?

Among conservatives with a high school education or less surveyed, 75.7% probably would “like” the media, 72.2% be inclined to share it, and 70.8% up for leaving a positive comment. Furthermore, 74.4% reported that they probably would feel inspired, and 88.2% probably would feel lucky. How do they, as conservatives and likely underemployed workers, reconcile their support of a man who preyed on people in the name of education with these positive Facebook interactions?

Of those conservatives surveyed living with a disability or who are close to someone who is, how about the more than 62.0% of those with a disability, with or without a close contact, who were the most likely to “like” the media? Or the similar numbers of those in the same situation who would strongly consider sharing? More than half said they would probably leave a positive comment and probably would feel inspired, and a few less—but still 40%—were likely

to feel lucky. How do they, as conservative Americans with a close experience of disability in their lives, reconcile their support of a man who has mocked disabled people in front of cheering crowds of supporters with their recognition of the struggles disabled people face, simply being?

Certainly, conservatives and likely Trump voters have their reasons. It is easy to compartmentalize, to separate a person's words and actions from what one believes that person to be deep down. When one of his supporters shares a video of a teenager with Down syndrome doing ordinary things and appends a phrase about how inspirational it is, chances are the president has no place in that compartment. And, when Trump uses ableist rhetoric to put down an opponent—attacking the other person's energy level, mental faculties, or sanity—it is possible to get swept up in the moment, perhaps smile, and agree that he is saying what everyone is thinking . . . and give silent thanks that you are not as bad off as his rival.

Conclusion: Revelations and Future Initiatives

Given the overlap between religious conservatism, low educational attainment, and higher disability rates in politically conservative populations when compared with politically liberal ones, a propensity for right-leaning individuals to positively interact with inspiration porn was expected. Similarly, secular or humanistic beliefs, a propensity toward higher education, and a healthier population anticipated a decreased rate of interaction with such media. The gulf was unnavigable . . . or was it?

I expected the liberals surveyed to immediately recognize the exploitative and sensationalistic aspect of the inspiration porn, but the results suggested the opposite. Statistically, conservatives were more susceptible to responding to the pathos of the media than liberals were to reject it. Furthermore, among those who acknowledged it, conservatives were more likely than liberals to recognize the manipulative nature of the media and even to state that they probably

would leave a negative comment. In other words, the conservatives, on the whole, were more likely to interact with inspiration porn more so than liberals did, but liberal respondents were not inclined to ignore the media at the same rate as evangelical Christians were to interact with it. That suggests that the consumption of this media is not necessarily a chiefly passive pastime, but that there is something more complex going on: discernment. Those who "like," share, or comment seem to have a concept of what makes this media worthy of their clicks; there may be a quiet solidarity involved, or simply an aesthetic trigger that signals to some people that what they are seeing is beautiful. It is a reality show with the best kind of reality: the perception of a happy ending . . . if only until the end of the post or video clip.

Further research might examine how social media beyond inspiration porn alternately benefits and harms disabled persons. How are impressions formed or prejudices shattered? What can be done to make human beings, as Ted Kennedy, Jr., said, regarded as humans and not as foreign objects, and understood and respected and not feared or pitied (C-SPAN, 1984)? Who can, as he suggested, be motivated to face up to those challenges—even to push for effective legislation and social change—in a way that takes more effort than tapping the image of a heart before scrolling away?

Afterword

A Note on Social Climate

This study, conducted amid the COVID-19 global pandemic and worldwide demonstrations following the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, surveyed 800 Americans of varying backgrounds, most notably political ones. Data collection took place at a moment when emotions burned particularly brightly: Across America, civilians clashed with law enforcement (including the National Guard) and government leaders over laws, traditions, and practices woven throughout America's social fabric. Some of those clashes—including in Louisville, where Breonna Taylor had been shot to death in her bed by police two months before—turned deadly. At the same time, civilians clashed with one another over competing definitions of what constituted freedom, and where the wearing of protective face masks in public fit into that—and for whom. All of this was documented at the macro level in the mass media, but the movements—fueled by harrowing video of Floyd's death and images of exhausted medical personnel pleading for people to stay home—burrowed their way into the American consciousness at the micro level, on social media. Person by person, share by share, comment by comment, the expression "national conversation" took on a new and magnified definition in the late spring of 2020.

All of this is to note that the fight for rights for and recognition of society's marginalized persons is ongoing and fraught, with one's political affiliation holding more influence than perhaps ever—not just influence over one's views of, say, foreign policy or the economy, but also influence over one's health and safety habits, interpersonal relationships, and attitudes toward others outside the same ideological group. Social media, designed to connect, has in

many instances served to close off individuals from one another, brought them closer to those more like them, or—paradoxically—both.

Savvy social media creators, too, have recognized that emotionally appealing content can cause users to prioritize their hearts before their heads, sharing information that fits their worldview but may not check out factually, or even shaping that worldview by appealing to users' feelings, lowering their tolerance for logic and filling a need.

It is unknown what kind of responses those same 800 participants might have been given had the survey been administered a month earlier or a month later. Would any have considered different points of view, or remain rooted in their convictions? Were hearts already open? Regardless, it is important to remember that this study captured a moment in a very tumultuous time—and, perhaps in a generation or two, it will be dated and its content inconceivable that anybody would regard different kinds of people as they did in the early 21st century.

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Woman snaps photo of IHOP server helping disabled customer. (2017, March 28). Retrieved from https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/woman-snaps-photo-of-ihop-server-helping-disabled-customer

APPENDIX A

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

Subject Informed Consent

You are being invited to complete an online questionnaire about images of disability in social media. There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with your participation in this study. Your participation may or may not benefit you directly. However, the information learned in this study may be helpful to others. The data you provide will be used for a graduate-level research project sponsored by the Department of Communication at Bellarmine University. Your completed questionnaire, along with those of several hundred of your fellow participants, will be stored on a secure server at Bellarmine University. Individuals from the Department of Communication and the Bellarmine University Institutional Review Board may inspect these records. While absolute confidentiality is not guaranteed, in all other respects the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your identity will not be disclosed.

The purpose of this study is to explore people's thoughts and emotions while viewing images of physically disabled persons, and to discover how likely people may be to like, share, or comment on these images if they were to see them on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Most people can expect to spend five minutes to complete the 30-question survey, which will involve rating media and your interactions with it on a five-point scale, as well as several demographic questions. By submitting the MTurk HIT, you acknowledge you have voluntarily agreed to participate. You are free to decline to answer (demographic questions) or provide a neutral answer (other survey questions) should you feel uncomfortable or consider that you may be rendered prosecutable under law. Any provided identifiable private information collected as part of this research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Participation is voluntary, and you will be compensated via the MTurk system at $0.85 for the completed survey. There is no proration for an incomplete survey; if you do not wish to participate, you may decline this MTurk HIT with no penalty.

You acknowledge that all your present questions have been answered in language you can understand. If you have any questions about the study, please contact Dr. Kyle Barnett at kbarnett@bellarmine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at 502-272-8032. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject, in confidence, with

a member of the committee. This is an independent committee composed of members of the University community and lay members of the community not connected with this institution. The IRB has reviewed this study.

Sincerely,

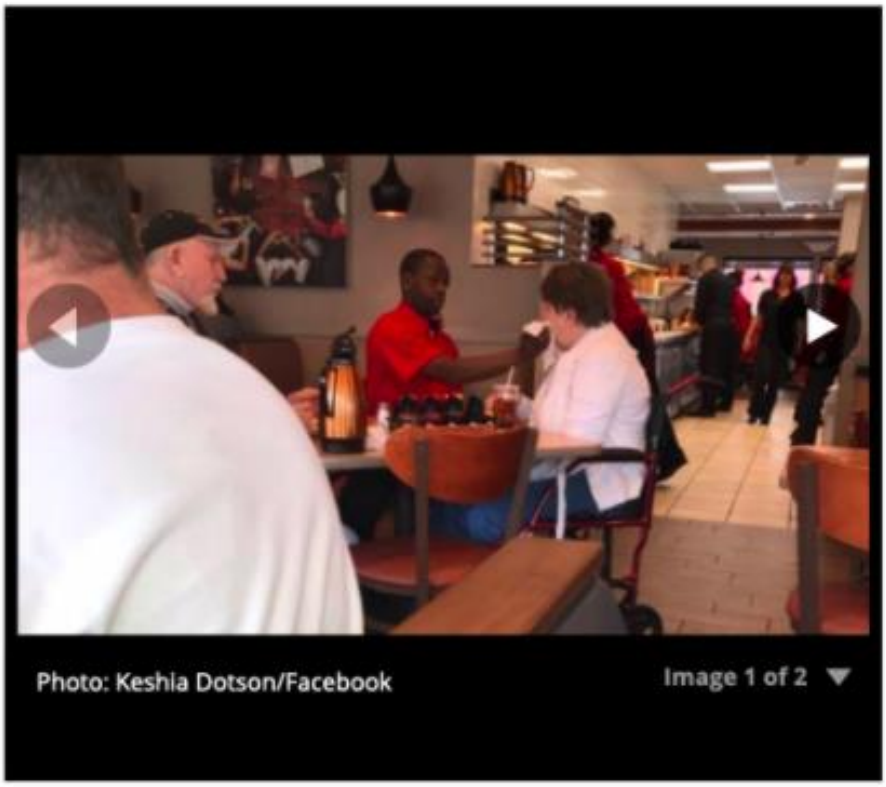
Dr. Kyle Barnett
Department of Communication

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Woman snaps photo of IHOP server helping disabled customer

Published March 28, 2017 | News | FOX 5 Atlanta



An Illinois woman shared a photo on Facebook of a touching act of kindness, and the image has quickly garnered thousands of likes and shares.

Imagine seeing the above post on Facebook. Please rate how you would interact with it and how you feel seeing it, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot).

Post 1: How likely would you be to 'like'/share/comment... *

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
'Like' it?	○	○	○	○	○
Share it?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment positively?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment negatively?	○	○	○	○	○

Post 1: This post makes you feel... *

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
Inspired	○	○	○	○	○
Irritated	○	○	○	○	○
Lucky	○	○	○	○	○
Manipulated	○	○	○	○	○

Imagine seeing the above post on Facebook. Please rate how you would interact with it and how you feel seeing it, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot).

Post 2: How likely would you be to 'like'/share/comment... *

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
'Like' it?	○	○	○	○	○
Share it?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment positively?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment negatively?	○	○	○	○	○

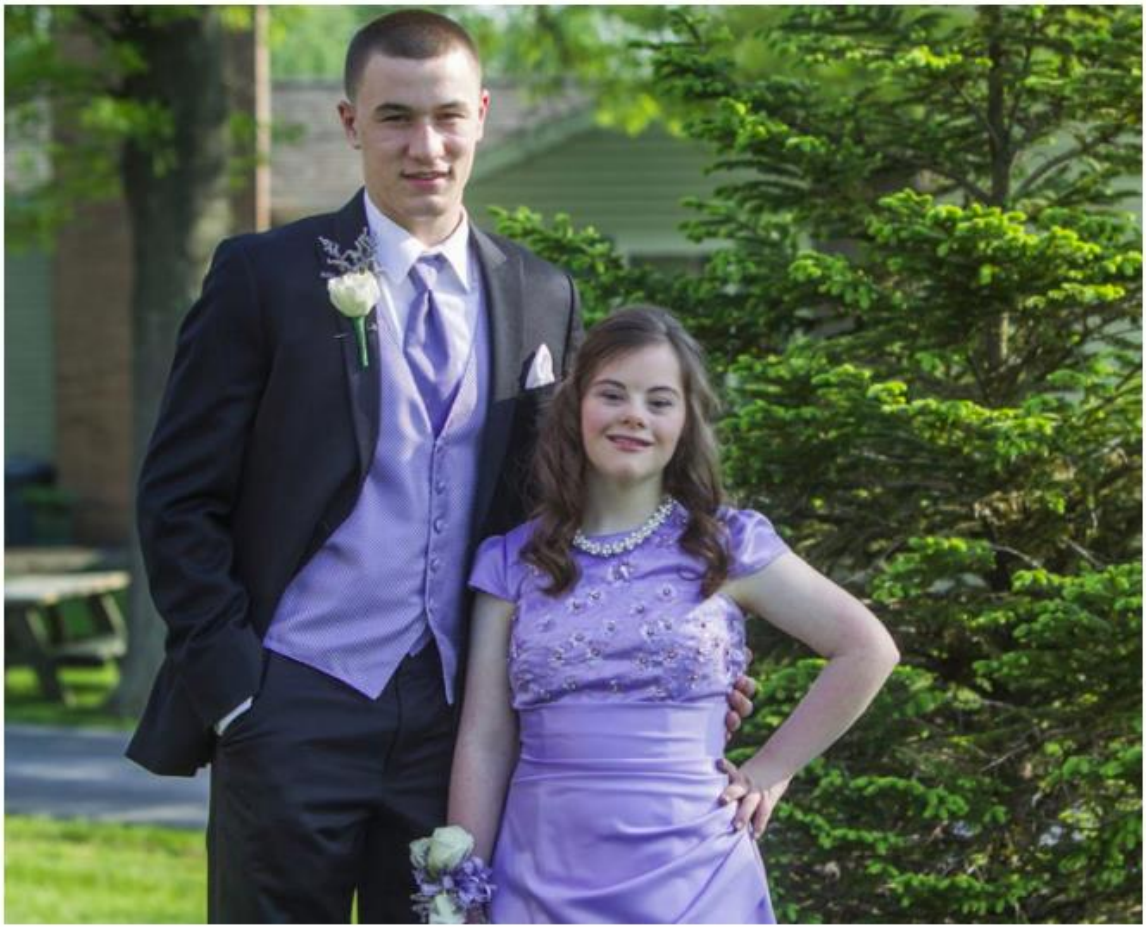
Post 2: This post makes you feel... *

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
Inspired	○	○	○	○	○
Irritated	○	○	○	○	○
Lucky	○	○	○	○	○
Manipulated	○	○	○	○	○

High School QB Keeping A Fourth Grade Promise To Take A Girl With Downs Syndrome To Prom Is Just An Awesome Dude

Chris Spags
5/13/2015 5:25 PM

22



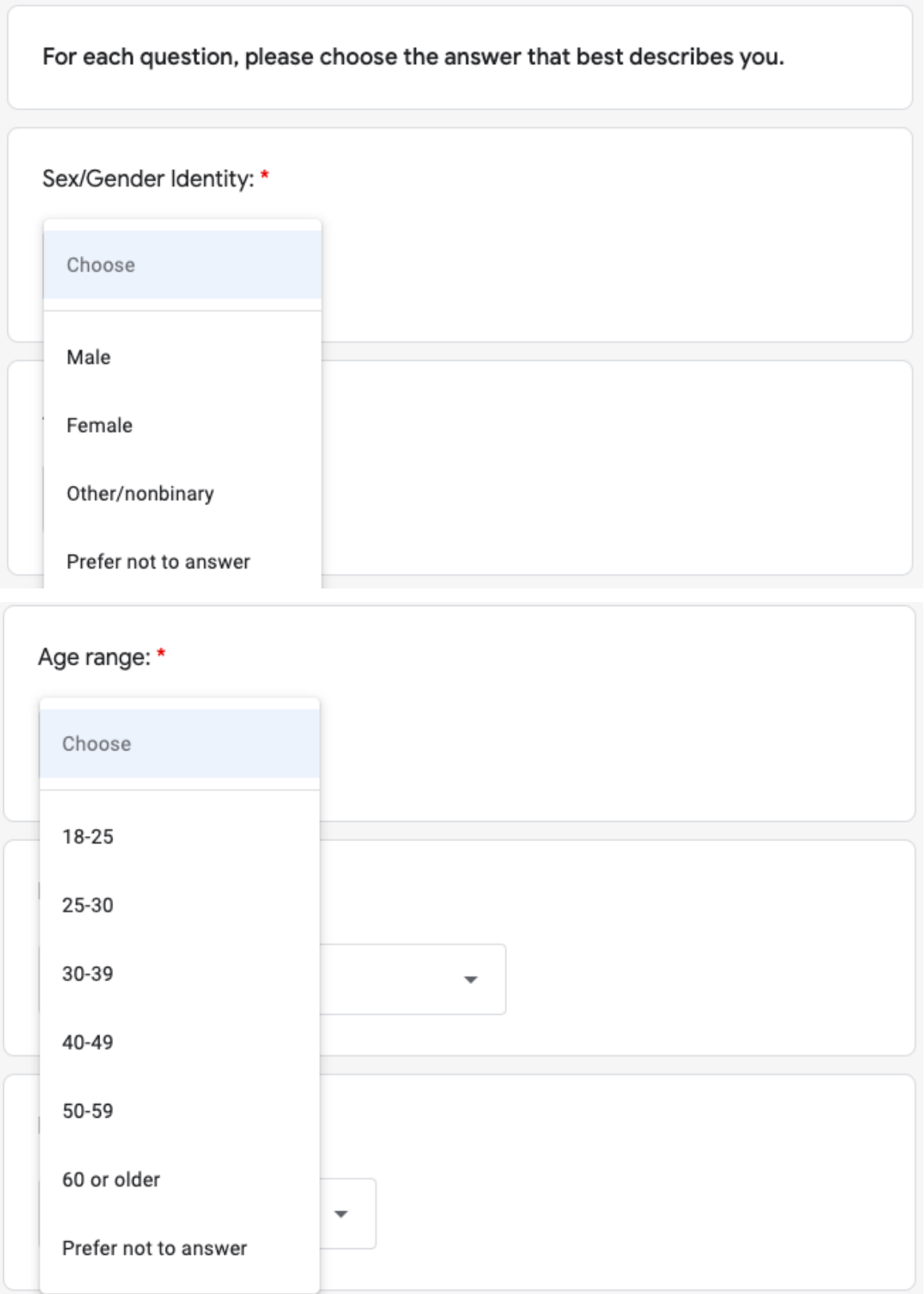
Imagine seeing the above post on Facebook. Please rate how you would interact with it and how you feel seeing it, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot).

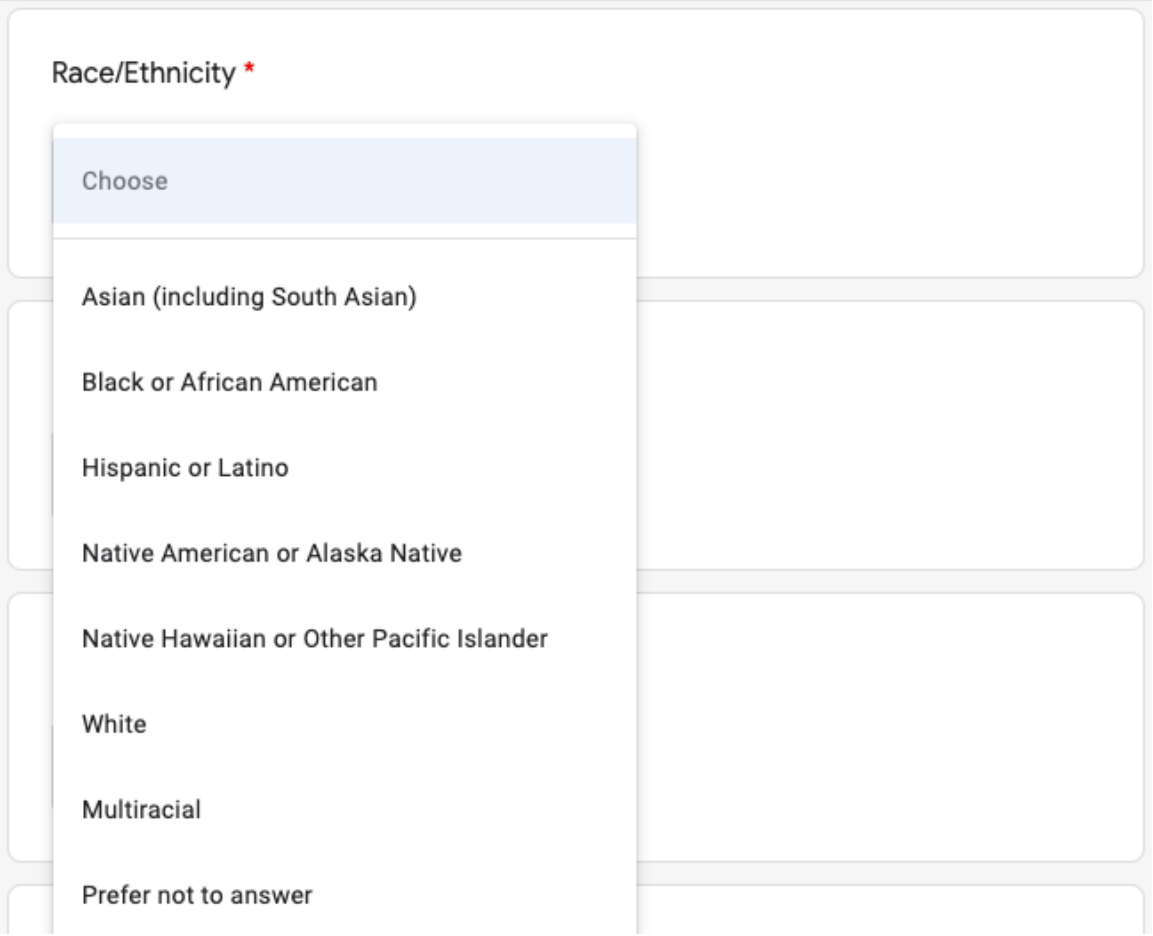
Post 3: How likely would you be to 'like'/share/comment... *

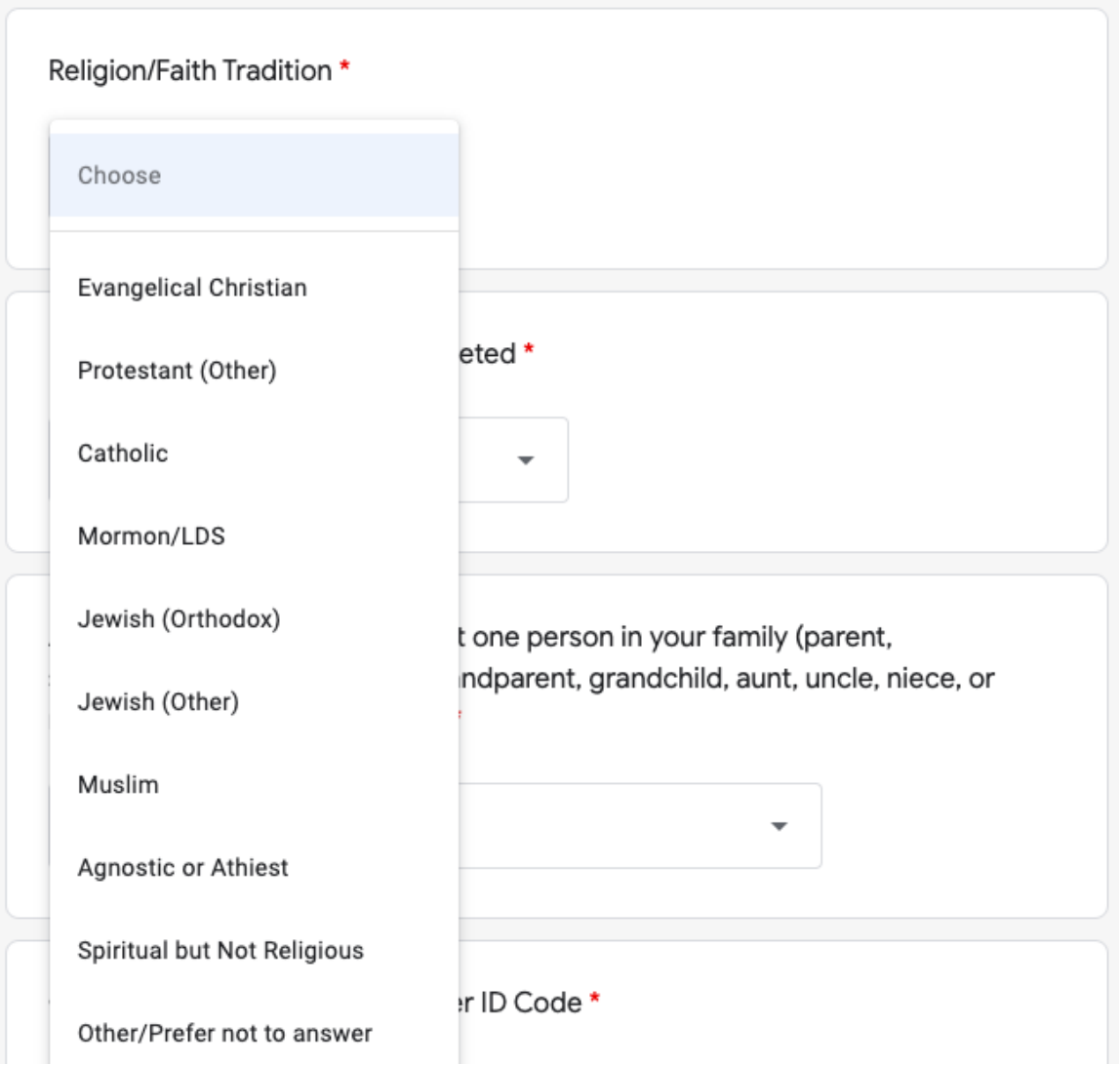
	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
'Like' it?	○	○	○	○	○
Share it?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment positively?	○	○	○	○	○
Comment negatively?	○	○	○	○	○

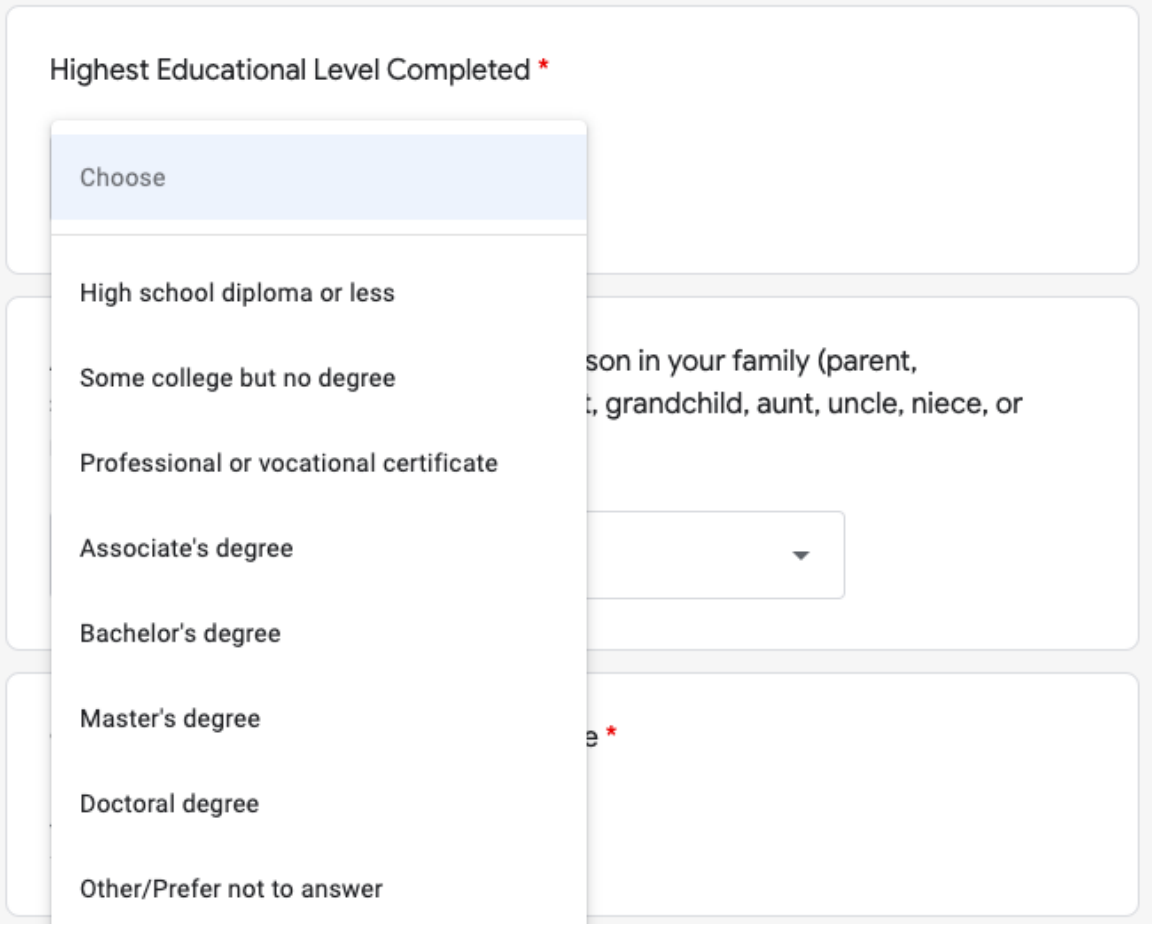
Post 3: This post makes you feel... *

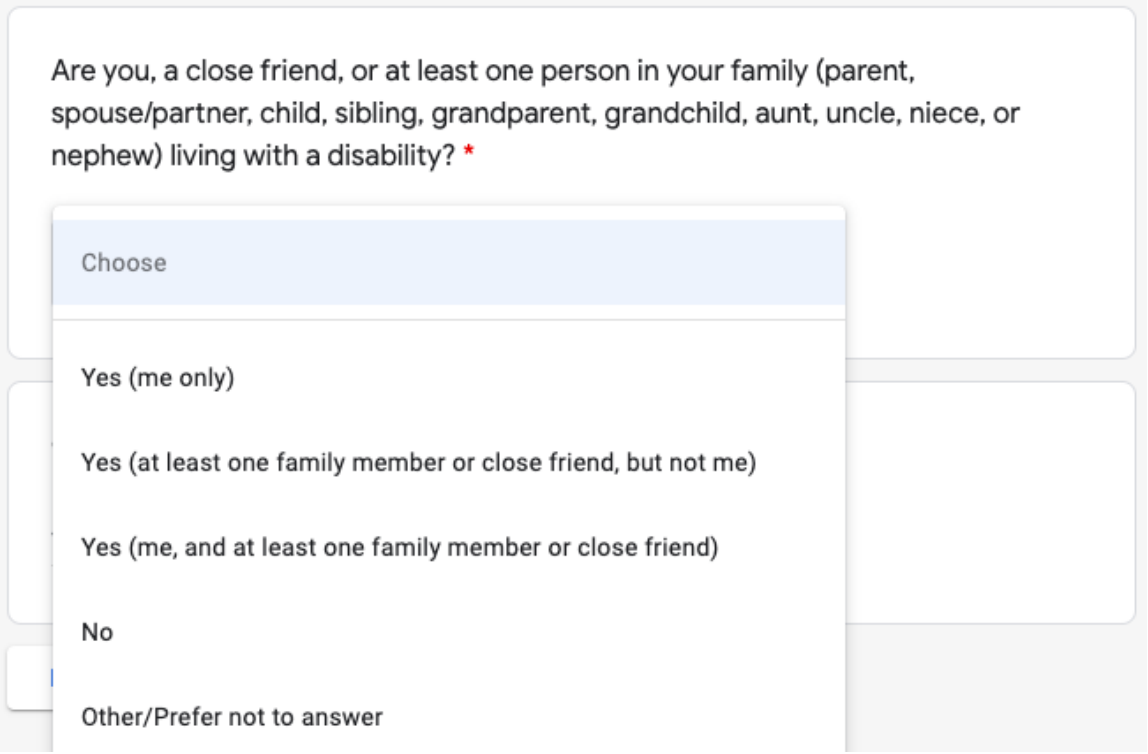
	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot
Inspired	○	○	○	○	○
Irritated	○	○	○	○	○
Lucky	○	○	○	○	○
Manipulated	○	○	○	○	○

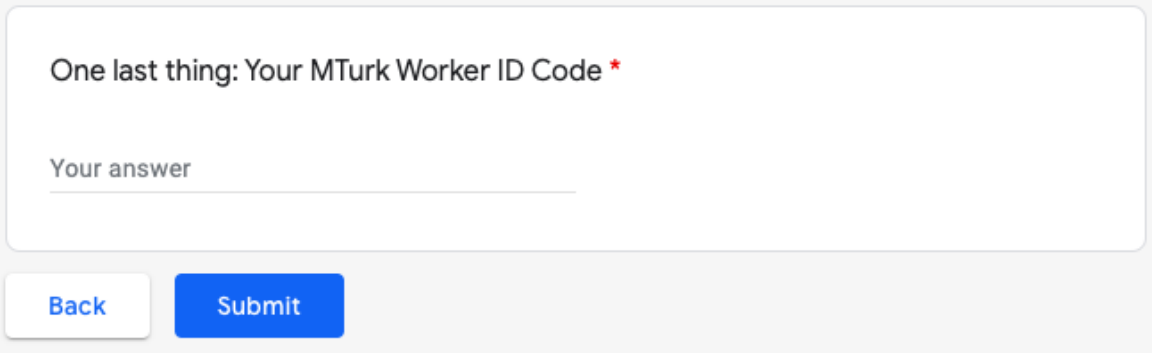

For each question, please choose the answer that best describes you.
Sex/Gender Identity: *
Choose
Male
Female
Other/nonbinary
Prefer not to answer
Age range: *
Choose
18-25
25-30
30-39
40-49
50-59
60 or older
Prefer not to answer


Race/Ethnicity *
Choose
Asian (including South Asian)
Black or African American
Hispanic or Latino
Native American or Alaska Native
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
White
Multiracial
Prefer not to answer


Religion/Faith Tradition *
Choose
Evangelical Christian
Protestant (Other)
Catholic
Mormon/LDS
Jewish (Orthodox)
Jewish (Other)
Muslim
Agnostic or Athiest
Spiritual but Not Religious
Other/Prefer not to answer
eted *
t one person in your family (parent,
ndparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, or
r ID Code *


Highest Educational Level Completed *
Choose
High school diploma or less
Some college but no degree
Professional or vocational certificate
Associate's degree
Bachelor's degree
Master's degree
Doctoral degree
Other/Prefer not to answer
son in your family (parent,
, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, or
e *


Are you, a close friend, or at least one person in your family (parent, spouse/partner, child, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, or nephew) living with a disability? *
Choose
Yes (me only)
Yes (at least one family member or close friend, but not me)
Yes (me, and at least one family member or close friend)
No
Other/Prefer not to answer


One last thing: Your MTurk Worker ID Code *
Your answer
Back
Submit