**“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.” The objective of this study is to describe an observed association between the popularity of inspiration Porn and the political, religious, educational, and disability-related social identities of those adults who consume it. The article takes a quantitative approach to analyze which religious, and socio-economical groups of people support and share inspirational porn of people with disabilities. It should be understood that these forms of media harm people with disabilities and neglect to help them in their true integration to society as a whole.

*Keywords:* inspiration porn, politics, Facebook

**“The Only Disability in Life Is a Bad Attitude”:**

**So-Called “Inspirational” Media in The Age of Trump**

This study explores the divergence between American conservatives and liberals surrounding the social media consumption of what disability activist Stella Young called “inspiration porn”: depictions of people with physical disabilities 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 (Young, 2014). One example is a picture of an elite athlete who happens to be an amputee, and often accompanied by a quote such as one made famous by Olympic figure skater Scott Hamilton: “The only disability in life is a bad attitude” (The Associated Press, 1997, p. B18).

As a matter of self-identification, liberals traditionally support social programs to remove barriers that promote inequality and are known for being more broad-minded regarding gender roles and philosophies. Alternatively, conservatives are more identified with laws and customs promoting adherence to traditional gender roles, Judeo-Christian morality, patriotism and nationalism, and limited government intervention. This extends to the saving of federal monies by cutting into health and social services spending, including Supplemental Security Income for disabled Americans (Rappeport and Haberman, 2020). The hypothesis is that, with these differences in mind, conservatives are more likely than liberals to positively respond due to this 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 contribute to what makes 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—that Donald Trump’s base of less educated, evangelical Christian conservatives (Tyson, 2018) are fonder of inspiration porn as seen on Facebook than 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 supporter—even when Trump himself hardly is a traditional conservative. This is because of the base’s tendency to espouse a religious belief in extra-scientific phenomena (Packer & Oden, 2004); favor limited government and self-reliance (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.); and fit the traditional image of workers taking pride in challenging physical labor as a means to improve one’s circumstances, as opposed to a job that may involve less physical exertion but require higher levels of formal education (Express Employment Professionals, 2018).

**Stigma and Supercrips**

Stigma lies at both the root and as a manifestation of the social model of disability. Goffman (1963) described the difference between the *virtual social identity* (what one might assume another person to be like) and the *actual social identity* (the person’s actual attributes). He then discredited the use of attributes to describe a person—congruent with what Young spoke of when she cited the medical model, which puts the responsibility on disabled individuals to adapt to mainstream society—in favor of relationships, à la the social model, which compels society to accommodate everybody regardless of ability (Young, 2014). However, he acknowledged, despite social conventions dictating 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, often of a supernatural cast” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). The resulting archetype is the “supercrip”—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). These images, particularly when coupled with a pithy caption, communicate the fallacy that an extra bit of effort and a positive attitude can vanquish any challenge that people with disabilities face in life based on their given disability.

These mediated triumphs do not mean that 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, beget a weak regime (Davis, 1995). Stigma, in the form of fear, stereotyping, and social control, motivates societies to marginalize their weakest members (Coleman-Brown, 1986). 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**

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” (*USA Today*, 2016). However, many of those same supporters, when faced with the image of a disabled person “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. In doing this, they rationalize that they are not following Trump’s example of stigmatizing other humans to make themselves feel better about themselves. Alternately, inspiration porn consumers can be engaging in “slacktivism”—performative displays of support or awareness through nominal effort, such as simply “liking” a post.

Inspiration porn is designed to be seen and shared. If somebody “likes,” shares, 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. Often accompanied by platitudes drawing attention to the novelty of the subjects’ actions or perceived attitudes, they become spectacle for the nondisabled or typical viewer, evoking emotions such as wonder, pity, gratitude, or self-reproach that moves some social media users to interact with these image-caption combinations, ensuring the propagation of the media far and wide among the users’ networks.

A peculiarity of the Trump-era Republican Party is its inflammatory rhetoric fueling suspicion of outsiders, dissolution of aid for disabled and underclass Americans, and allegiance to a Christian identity. Three-quarters of the white evangelical vote—20% of the overall electorate—voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Pew Research Center, 2018), allowing the real-life media phenomenon the power to spread his message far and wide as well. More than half of American adults get at least some of their news from social media (Shearer & Grieco, 2019)—but those who rely on social media *primarily* for news are more likely to be exposed to content not necessarily based in fact (Mitchell et al., 2020). This polarized media landscape mirrors a polarized America.

**Dissonance, Framing, and Resonance**

While the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 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 “creates the impression that individuals who receive accommodations are recipients of special treatment or welfare” (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, p. 658). This impression exists among 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.

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 color to the narrative of Trump-era communication—even if the communication originates as an electronic transmission from thousands of miles away, subsequently translating into interpersonal discourse and even policy formation when citizens vote (or abstain from voting).

An event that effects a change in how humans perceive, categorize, and interpret the world around them is what Goffman called the “astounding complex” (1974, p. 28). Something amazing happens, and—similar to Festinger’s concept of cognitive dissonance (1957)—to fit everything into the tidy frame they have created, people expect resolution. In the inspiration porn narrative, the crowd-pleasing happy ending shows the person depicted “overcoming” their disability, and the specter of ableism is pushed out of the audience’s mind because there is no disability here—as disability does not fit into this frame of “normal.”

Complicating this personal frame design is the concomitant existence of social frameworks (Goffman, 1974), which are subject to manipulation by others, forcing humans to adapt their frames as they recognize and are recognized by others in their social circle—in this case, those who share a common political ideology. Giorgi (2017) broke down this mutual 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 sits 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. It is this path of least resistance that Trump uses to his advantage.

**Method**

With political affiliation hypothesized to be the most important predictor of interaction with online inspiration porn, participants 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; although socially and politically agnostic, it can affect a person’s attitude regarding disability in others.

The main author chose this topic—based on an original graduate thesis—due to interest in disability studies, communication studies, and social media. The coauthors, members of the thesis committee, were chosen for their expertise in communications, as well as with research design and analysis.

**Participants**

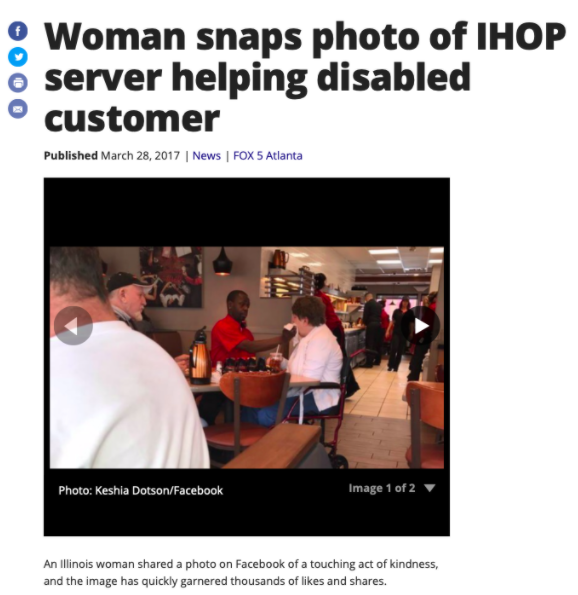
A total of 800 workers recruited through the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) data collection platform—400 conservatives and 400 liberals, all Facebook account users living in the United States—completed the study, which took place in mid-2020. Exactly 400 members of each political affiliation were permitted, screened ahead of time through their own self-identification to MTurk.

**Procedure**

Survey respondents were provided with three real image-caption “posts” as seen on Facebook (Figures 1–3) and, using a five-point Likert scale (Not at all, A little, Somewhat, Quite a bit, A lot), rated their potential for engagement and their emotional reactions. Engagement actions included “‘Like,’” “Share,” “Leave a positive comment,” and “Leave a negative comment”; possible emotions included feeling “Inspired,” “Irritated,” “Lucky,” and “Manipulated.” Finally, participants reported their 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—defined as a parent, spouse or partner, child, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, or nephew—or close friends). Results were collected via the MTurk platform and nonidentifying user codes cross-checked against those provided by the participants at the end of the survey to ensure fidelity.

**Figure 1**

*FOX 5 Atlanta (2017)*



**Figure 2**

*Spags (2015)*



**Figure 3**

*Brainfuel Solutions (2020)*



**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, 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 “Somewhat” answer was treated as a neutral response.

**Participants**

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) represented 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).

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).

Concerning 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 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).

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).

Respondents largely felt strongly about their preference to react positively, but very few reported a likelihood to leave a negative comment, feel irritated, or feel manipulated: Those responses represented less than 4% in each category.

**Political Affiliation**

Overall, out of the 800 respondents, 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.

**Religious or Faith Tradition**

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; 8.8% of respondents identified as spiritual but not religious. Conservatives and liberals were broadly represented among Catholics (20.6% of all respondents) and mainstream/nonevangelical Protestants (19.5% of the 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 largely conservative.

***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. Although evangelical Christians comprised 14.3% of all respondents (114 out of 800), including 24.3% of conservatives, among those 64 respondents who reported that they probably would “like” the media, 56—or 87.5%—were 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 “like” group, or 53.9% of all Catholic respondents) 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 they probably would “like” the media presented at a rate of 29.8%—the lowest rate among all respondents surveyed. About one in eight (12.3%) evangelical Christians explicitly reported that they were unlikely to “like” the media presented; at the other end of the spectrum, about one in three (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%, vs. 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—stated they were unlikely to leave a positive comment. (The remaining 28.1% were neutral.) 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%).

**Educational Level**

The categories included high school education or less, professional or vocational certification, some college but no degree, associate 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, 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 non majority 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 high-school-or-less; this sector consisted of exactly twice as many conservatives as liberals—44 to 22.

***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 non majority 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 non majority 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.

**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.

***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 “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 lacking friends or family members who do; 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.

**Discussion**

**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.

**Characteristics of Inspiration Porn Consumers in this Study**

As predicted in the hypothesis, reactions to the media varied between conservative and liberal participants, 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, or why they felt a particular way. This part of the discussion will focus on the characteristics of religious tradition, education, and disability status most salient in conservative respondents.

The scarcity 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 Donald Trump, as an article of faith, consider themselves Christians, with 77% of white evangelicals (20% of the overall electorate) casting their ballots for him in 2016 (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 stories (true and false) and images (still and video).

The AARP cited research suggesting the growth of the social media site Facebook among Americans 55 and over (Schaffel, 2018); Trump, similarly, was more popular than Democrat Hillary Clinton in both the 50-to-64 and 65-and-over demographics (Pew Research Center, 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).

***Prominent Characteristics of the Most Likely Inspiration Porn Consumers***

The most salient characteristics of those participants with the greatest likelihood of positively interacting with the inspiration porn—that is, “liking,” sharing, leaving a positive comment, or a combination of these three—were conservative political affiliation; evangelical Christianity; an education limited to high school; and a close personal experience with disability. This section will explore these prominent characteristics and pose questions based on those identities, calling to account those participants’ inspiration porn consumption.

**Evangelical Christianity.** Evangelical Christianity appears to be a dominant identity among politically conservative Americans (as seen with 24.3% of conservative participants) when compared with political liberals (4.3% of liberal participants). Conservative religious communities are known for 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 their situation here on earth and the anticipation of a rewarding afterlife; trust in paternalistic government leadership; and resistance to change, particularly regarding social issues. Further, there is a belief in extra-scientific cures as a very present and plausible article of their faith, which is rooted in the evangelical belief in Christ’s power at work.

Even more prevalent among liberal Americans is a profession of agnosticism or atheism. Although these participants 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.

**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 the nation, but areas dominated by blue-collar industry in particular tend to run conservative. A poll from staffing company Express Employment Professionals (2018) found that both skilled and unskilled laborers, regardless of political affiliation, tend to regard the Republican Party as better for business and blue-collar Americans than the Democratic Party. Blue-collar occupations often involve on-the-job training that does not require postsecondary education. Thus, when industry trends change, many such workers are hesitant to change their profession because of a limited skill set.

Conversely, 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 visibly affect more insular communities, and exercise agility when those opportunities and concerns demand adaptation.

Despite the achievement of a college education among both conservatives in liberals in this study, 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 participants were 18 and older), the distribution of participants with a maximum educational level of high school is rather constant once the mid-20s are reached.

**Elevated Incidence of Disability*.*** Continuing the association between 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 those professions which require noncollege training—have a higher incidence of worker injury, but there also is an overlap between areas where such factors are prevalent and citizens’ health is failing. 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 Health Foundation, 2019). 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—and older and prone to age-related conditions—than the rest of the country (Ruffing, 2015).

Among disabled social media users, the interaction with inspiration porn might be regarded as more inspiring and less pornographic—a genuinely uplifting, nonpatronizing action. For them, perhaps “The only disability in life is a bad attitude” is a healthy mindset to have, but realistically there is more to it than outlook . . . and yet, perhaps, they feel buoyed by these media.

More than a third of the overall sample reported themselves or a close family member or friend as living with a disability. Conservatives were more likely to disclose the presence of disability of themselves only, a close family member or friend, or both. 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.

**Theoretical Frameworks and Contradictions in Inspiration Porn Consumption**

***Framing Theory***

In understanding the appeal of inspiration porn, it is helpful to revisit framing theory and its role in consumer perceptions. 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.

***Cognitive Dissonance***

The contradictions or competing situations that create a feeling of emotional disagreement or disequilibrium result in what Festinger (1957) described as “cognitive dissonance” that demands resolution. This is done by denying the appeal of at least one of the discomforting factors and then making every effort to avoid that discomfort in the future.

This is where the real contradiction of conservative Trump voters and inspiration porn comes in. The concept of rugged individualism always has been paramount in the American story, and the appeal of inspiration porn can be explained through that lens—that grit can propel one over most any obstacle, including physical disability—regardless of political affiliation. For many, Trump offends on a personal level with his denigrative remarks about Christian practices, such as when he referred to communion as “my little cracker” (CNN, 2015a, 2:30); with his predatory “Trump University” that swindled some 5,000 customers in search of a better life out of nearly $1,500 each (Tuttle, 2016); and with his mockery of those with disabilities, notoriously when he caricatured disabled reporter Serge Kovaleski (CNN, 2015b) at a 2015 rally. Paradoxically, instead of alienating his base—with many religious, undereducated, and disability payment-receiving Americans at its bedrock—Trump made them feel they belonged. Instead of holding up a mirror for them to see themselves as the target of his mockery, he held up a frame—their frame—through which they saw him in the same picture with them, together deserving of the power he had finally seized for them.

***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 participant recruitment; approximately seven out of eight reported having some college or other training, compared with two out of three at the national level.

**Disability.** Other demographic information differed between the survey participants and Americans nationally. Although 61.4 million American adults (25.7%) live with a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), this survey’s participants 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 participants. The variation may be at least partially explained by the fact that more than half of the participants were age 39 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 participants and the general public; as more undereducated people are likely to work in physically risky fields, the more likely they are to become physically disabled on the job.

**Age.** The favoring of younger participants (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 as of the 2010 census (Howden & Meyer, 2011).

**Other Limitations.** Study limitations stem mainly from the opt-in nature of the survey. Although the purposively sampled group of 800 participants is not random but instead composed of individuals who elected to join the study, Clifford et al. (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.

Three key demographic groups were underrepresented in the current study as compared to national demographic data. Specifically, only 3.1% of survey participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx as compared to 18.5% nationally; and only 6.8% of participants identified as Black or African American compared to the national average of 13.4%. Lastly, evangelical Christians were underrepresented in the survey compared with the general population (14.2% vs. 25.4%), according to the United States Census Bureau (n.d.). This underrepresentation must be taken into consideration when attempting to generalize results of this study to the larger population.

We identified two interesting overrepresentations regarding ethnic breakdowns along party lines: three times as many conservative Black or African-American participants (31.5%) as compared to the national average (10%), and twice as many conservative Asian-identified participants (38.3%) as compared to the national average (17%). Therefore, it may be difficult to make comparisons to national data without first considering the participants’ race/ethnic background.

**Conclusion**

These findings raise questions about the incongruity of those who consume inspiration porn the most with their personal convictions. 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 like 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 now-former 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 for some people to get swept up in the moment, perhaps smile, agree that he is saying what everyone is thinking . . . and give silent thanks for not being as bad off as his rival.

It is important to point out that this survey represents a snapshot in time marked by three major global events with American epicenters—widespread unrest regarding the violent treatment of Black Americans by law enforcement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic recession—that continue to polarize the nation along political lines. As the new administration seeks to mend these formidable divisions in the American social fabric (including COVID-induced chronic illness and disability issues) (Biden, 2021), future replication of this study should remain of interest—albeit with potential for differing outcomes.

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