Psychology of Popular Media

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Online First Publication, April 2, 2026. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000669

CITATION

Nabi, R. L., & van der Wal, A. (2026). Self-administered media prescriptions: Training algorithms to deliver inspirational content to reduce stress and increase goal motivation. *Psychology of Popular Media*. Advance online publication. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000669

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Psychology of Popular Media

© 2026 American Psychological Association
ISSN: 2689-6567

https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000669

Self-Administered Media Prescriptions: Training Algorithms to Deliver Inspirational Content to Reduce Stress and Increase Goal Motivation

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This study extends the growing body of media prescription research by determining whether instructing young adults to select their own inspirational media content has the same benefits on stress relief and goal motivation as previously found in studies assigning inspirational content. In a 4-week longitudinal intervention, the young adult sample (N = 132) was instructed to select 3–5 min of content that they found personally inspiring on their preferred short-form video platform every day for 5 days. The effects of this self-selected exposure were tracked for up to 10 days after the intervention. Findings demonstrated that inspirational content exposure was associated with higher hope, which in turn predicted both immediate and short-term stress relief and sustained goal motivation. Importantly, a measurable shift toward a less negative feed tone was detected. Furthermore, though amusement and awe were elevated and anxiety and boredom were reduced during the intervention, only reduced boredom evidenced a similar pattern of benefits as hope. This research provides the first evidence that young adults can self-administer brief, self-selected doses of inspirational content within their social media feeds with meaningful emotional and psychological effects. Practically, this evidence supports the notion that seeding one's social media feed with inspiring content can shift algorithmically provided content in ways that support these positive outcomes.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

Young adults who were instructed to watch 3–5 min of inspiring content on their favorite short-form social media platform over the course of 5 days felt more hopeful, which predicted lower stress levels and higher goal motivation up to 10 days later. They also reported their media feeds had notably less negative and distressing content. These findings demonstrate the multiple benefits of deliberately selecting inspiring content when engaging in social media spaces.

Keywords: hope, stress, goal motivation, social media, intervention

Young people today face persistently high levels of stress, with well-documented consequences for their mental health, academic and occupational functioning, and motivation (American College Health Association, 2023; American Psychological Association, 2024). Because traditional coping strategies are not always accessible, appealing, or effective, researchers have increasingly explored media-based interventions as scalable, low-barrier tools for stress reduction and goal-directed functioning (Reinecke & Eden, 2017). A growing body of evidence suggests that brief, daily exposure to positively valenced media—such as inspirational videos—can elicit hope and, in turn, improve psychological well-being by reducing stress and enhancing goal-directed motivation (Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025; see also Janicke et al., 2018; Stieger et al., 2023). These findings offer a promising foundation for media interventions aimed at enhancing mental resilience among young adults.

However, though the experimental delivery of "media prescriptions" has shown effectiveness in prior studies, its practical implementation presents several challenges. First, interventions often rely on external delivery methods, such as daily emails with curated video links, which are effortful to sustain at scale. Second, such approaches typically adopt a one-size-fits-all model, offering identical content to all participants, even though the experience of inspiration can be highly subjective (Chang, 2023; Hart, 1998). Third, they exist outside users' regular media routines and platforms, potentially limiting (long-term) effects. To improve ecological validity and practical relevance, positive media interventions must be embedded within the dynamic, personalized media environments

Karen E. Shackleford served as action editor.

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Robin L. Nabi and Amber van der Wal contributed equally to the execution of this research and the preparation of this article and thus share lead authorship.

Robin L. Nabi served as lead for data curation, project administration, resources, and writing–review and editing, contributed equally to conceptualization and methodology, and served in a supporting role for formal analysis and writing–original draft. Amber van der Wal served as lead for writing–original draft, contributed equally to conceptualization, formal analysis, and methodology, and served in a supporting role for data curation, project administration, resources, and writing–review and editing.

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young people already inhabit—namely, algorithmically curated social media feeds on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube.

This study tests a new approach to media prescriptions: Encouraging individuals to self-administer daily doses of inspirational content within their preferred social media environment. Rather than prescribing preselected videos, participants are guided to select content they personally find inspiring. This self-administration within their own social media environment not only has the potential to create similar effects to those found in previous media prescription studies but also has the capacity to positively influence algorithmic recommendation systems to deliver more of such content (Kang & Lou, 2022; Taylor & Choi, 2022), potentially establishing a positive feedback loop that sustains and amplifies the intervention's effects over time.

With all of this in mind, and guided by the media prescription paradigm (Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025; Prestin & Nabi, 2020), we crafted a 5-day intervention in which young adults in college were guided to self-select inspirational content on their preferred social media platform. By embedding the intervention into users' everyday media environments, we test whether this more ecologically valid, personalized approach to media prescription can foster hope, reduce stress, enhance goal motivation, and shift feed composition toward more positive content.

Inspirational Content, Selectivity, and Algorithmic Influence

Inspirational media content is typically defined as content that evokes feelings of transcendence, moves individuals beyond their ordinary capacities, and motivates them to pursue new possibilities (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Much of the prior work on inspiration—situated within the tradition of eudaimonic media research—has focused on long-form narratives, showing how movies can inspire audiences through depictions of moral virtue, human connection, or perseverance (Janicke & Oliver, 2017; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Yet inspiration is not confined to cinematic storytelling (Rieger & Klimmt, 2019b). Studies have demonstrated that social media can also provide brief "doses" of inspirational content (Dale et al., 2017; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019a, 2019b), which aligns with recent evidence that many young people describe "inspiration" as one of their primary motivations for social media use (van der Wal et al., 2024).

The themes that appear as inspirational in social media environments extend beyond those identified in film-based eudaimonic research (Rieger & Klimmt, 2019b). Although moral beauty, human connection, and perseverance remain salient, social media also foregrounds newer categories, such as career and work success and fitness-related inspiration (Dale et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2021; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019b). This expansion underscores that inspiration is not tied to a single genre or narrative form but can be found in a wide range of content (Oliver et al., 2021). At the same time, what resonates as inspiring is highly subjective. The same post that is perceived as inspirational by one user may leave another feeling indifferent (Chang, 2023; Hart, 1998). Taken together, these findings highlight both the diversity and person-specific nature of inspirational experiences on social media.

Guided by these insights, our study takes a self-selection approach, asking participants to locate and engage with content that they personally find inspiring on their preferred social media platforms for a few minutes per day, each day for 5 consecutive days, which aligns with the extant media prescription intervention protocol (Nabi et al., 2023, 2025). Assuming participants follow these instructions, we anticipate an overall increase in exposure to inspirational material during the intervention week. Moreover, given that today's social media platforms are heavily driven by recommendation systems that adapt to users' engagement patterns (Kang & Lou, 2022; Taylor & Choi, 2022), exposure to inspirational content may not only increase overall but may also rise progressively over the course of the intervention week as algorithms adjust to participants' repeated selections and perhaps endure after the intervention's conclusion. As such, we make the following predictions:

> *Hypothesis 1a (H1a):* Participants will report progressively greater exposure to inspirational content across the 5 intervention days.

> *Hypothesis 1b (H1b):* Participants will report increased exposure to inspirational content in the days following the intervention compared to their usual levels.

Although exposure to inspirational content is presumed to be a positive experience, continued algorithmic up-ranking of inspirational content may lead to perceived overexposure, monotony, and emotional habituation (Thompson & Spencer, 1966). Thus, we ask:

> *Research Question 1a (RQ1a):* Is the amount of inspirational content in participants' feeds in the days following the intervention perceived as appropriate or too much?

Importantly, algorithmic amplification suggests that if exposure to one form of content increases, exposure to other forms of content may decrease. Therefore, there is a possibility that a prescription for inspirational content could have broader impacts on reshaping the user's overall feed composition by reducing the prominence of other content types. Thus, we ask:

> *Research Question 1b (RQ1b):* Does increased exposure to inspirational content affect the prominence of other content types in participants' feeds in the days after the intervention?

Inspirational Content, Hope, and Prescribed Positive Outcomes

As demonstrated in past research (Janicke et al., 2018; Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025), inspirational content can have a range of well-being-related benefits because of the positive emotions it engenders. Although inspirational content can evoke multiple emotions (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2018), hope has been identified as particularly salient (Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025). Hope is the feeling of "yearning for relief from a negative situation, or for the realization of a positive outcome when the odds do not greatly favor it" (Lazarus, 1991, p. 282). Although hope may stem from unfavorable situations, it is associated with the expectation of a more positive future (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988), and as such, it is often seen as an emotional coping mechanism that is particularly useful in stressful or undesirable circumstances (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Roseman et al., 1990). Both trait-based and state-based hope have been linked to beneficial physical and psychological health outcomes, including increased mental wellness (Brackney & Westman,

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1992). Indeed, previous media prescription work has found that underdog-themed, inspiring stories generated hope, which in turn reduced stress (Nabi et al., 2023, 2025). Assuming self-selected inspirational content has similar effects, we predict:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Exposure to more self-selected inspirational content will be associated with greater feelings of hope.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Greater feelings of hope will predict lower levels of perceived stress (a) during the intervention week and (b) in the days following the intervention.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The relationship between exposure to inspirational content and perceived stress will be mediated by felt hope.

Hope is not only a likely salve to feelings of stress, but its benefits likely extend to productive action. As argued by Prestin and Nabi (2020) and Nabi et al. (2024), hope is unique relative to other positive emotions as it is known to motivate goal-oriented behavior, encouraging and sustaining action, commitment toward goals, and coping efforts (Averill et al., 1990; Lazarus, 1999; Snyder, 2000). As such, individuals experiencing hope are expected to be more motivated to pursue goals, which increases the likelihood that they would make progress toward achieving them. Indeed, Nabi et al. (2024) found that the hope generated from underdog-themed inspirational content was associated with greater motivation to pursue goals, which in turn predicted greater goal achievement over the next 10 days. Assuming that self-selected inspirational content generates hope, we expect a similar process of influence. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Greater feelings of hope will be associated with greater goal motivation during the intervention week.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): The effect of inspirational media on goal achievement progress will be mediated through felt hope and goal pursuit motivation such that participants with higher felt hope will report greater goal pursuit motivation, resulting in greater goal progress achievement in the days following the intervention.

As noted earlier, inspirational content often evokes multiple positive emotions beyond hope (Chang, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Janicke-Bowles et al., 2018). Two especially plausible candidates in the context of short-form videos are amusement and awe. Amusement may arise not only because people tend to self-select humorous content when given the choice (Nabi et al., 2024) but also because inspirational videos on social media often blend uplifting themes with entertaining or humorous elements (Dale et al., 2017). Similarly, inspirational content, when depicting extraordinary achievement, moral beauty, or vastness, can generate feelings of awe (Chang, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Janicke et al., 2018). Given the potential for inspirational content to evoke amusement and awe, it is incumbent upon us to explore whether these emotions could serve as alternative affective pathways to hope in facilitating stress relief and goal motivation. The limited research addressing related questions has yielded mixed or inconclusive findings. Prior media prescription studies have found little support for amusement as a mechanism underlying more sustained stress relief or goal-related outcomes (Prestin & Nabi, 2020; Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025), and the role of awe in this context remains largely untested. In light of these gaps, we ask:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): For amusement and awe, (a) are these emotions elicited by self-selected inspirational content, (b) are they related to perceived stress and goal motivation, and (c) do they mediate the association between inspirational content exposure and these outcomes?

Method

Sample

Participants were 154 undergraduate students enrolled in a communication course at a large public university in the United States. The data were derived from a course assignment for which students received a small amount of academic credit based on completion. Institutional Review Board approval, Protocol 47-24-0801, was obtained before data collection, and students provided informed consent for the use of their anonymized survey responses for research purposes. The consent process emphasized that students were free to choose not to have their data included in the research, that opting out would not affect their course grades, and that consent decisions would remain confidential until final grades were submitted. The full anonymized data set and analysis syntax are publicly available on Open Science Framework (van der Wal & Nabi, 2026; https://osf.io/hv7sx).

Of the 154 students who completed the assignment, 132 completed all study surveys and consented to have their data included in the analyses. The final sample ($N = 132$) had a mean age of 21.33 years ($SD = 1.57$; age range: 19–30 years) and was predominantly female (74.2%), with 25.0% identifying as male and 0.8% as nonbinary. Most participants were either juniors (42.4%) or seniors (56.8%). In terms of ethnicity, 57.6% of participants identified as White/Caucasian American, 18.9% as Hispanic/Latino American, 17.4% as Asian/Asian American, 0.8% as Black/African American, and 5.3% selected "Other."

Procedure

The study was designed to examine how intentional engagement with inspirational social media content might affect students' levels of hope, stress, and goal motivation during the month between midterm and final exams. The intervention spanned 4 weeks. After completing a baseline survey during Week 1, which assessed demographic characteristics, perceived stress, goal-related variables, feed composition, and some personality traits, participants took part in a week-long media intervention beginning on the Monday of Week 2. Each weekday during the intervention week (Monday–Friday), students received the following instruction:

> Today, we would like you to interact with social media short-form content that you find inspiring or uplifting on a platform of your choice (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts). By inspiring content, we mean material that encourages you to adopt a more optimistic and positive frame of mind and helps you imagine new possibilities. A wide range of content could fit this description—for example, uplifting stories, motivational talks, feats of achievement, acts of kindness, or scenes in nature. The important thing is that you find it inspiring. If you don't already follow creators who you find inspiring, you can find content through searches, including #inspiration, #motivation, and #hopecore, and see what content is recommended for you. Please watch

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several short videos through to completion (or one longer video if you prefer) for a total of 3–5 minutes. If you wish to like or comment on any of the videos, you are welcome to, though you are not expected to.

Participants were asked to use the same platform throughout the week. Immediately after each viewing session, they completed a brief survey reporting their emotional responses, stress, and goal motivation, and a description of their media interactions. Those who missed a day during the week were given the opportunity to complete the exercise on Saturday.

Finally, to assess any enduring effects of the intervention on feed composition, stress relief, goal motivation, and goal achievement, students completed two posttests —one during Week 3 (2–3 days after the final day of the intervention) and another in Week 4 (9–10 days after the intervention).

Measures

Two sets of measures were administered in this study: Those given at both the pretest and posttests and those completed during each day of the intervention week. For parsimony, only measures relevant to the hypotheses and research questions are reported here. The timeline is abbreviated as follows: Time 1 (T1; pretest baseline), Time 2 (T2; intervention week, Days 1–5), Time 3 (T3; first posttest, 2–3 days postintervention), and Time 4 (T4; second posttest; 9–10 days postintervention).

Social Media Use and Exposure to Inspirational Content

At pretest (T1), participants reported their typical daily social media use in hours per day using a continuous slider, followed by typical time spent on individual platforms (Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, Reddit, other). At both posttests (T3 and T4), participants reported their average daily time on each platform in the past week. At the start of the intervention (T2), participants also indicated which platform they would use for the assignment. These assessments were used to determine whether the intervention influenced time spent on the selected platform.

To assess perceived changes in inspirational content exposure during and after the intervention (H1–H2), participants completed several measures. During the intervention week (T2), they answered two daily items: (a) the amount of inspirational content encountered in the past 24 hr (0 = *none*, 10 = *a great deal*), and (b) whether they had seen more or less inspirational content than usual over the past 24 hr (0 = *much less than usual*, 5 = *about the same*, 10 = *much more than usual*). At both pretest (T1) and posttests (T3 and T4), participants indicated how much inspirational content they had seen in the past week, using the same 0–10 scale. Furthermore, to examine whether participants perceived the level of inspirational content as about right or too much (RQ1a), they rated their satisfaction with the amount of inspirational content in their feed on a 0–10 scale (0 = *too little*, 5 = *about right*, 10 = *too much*).

To assess potential shifts in feed composition due to the intervention (RQ1b), participants reported at T1, T3, and T4 how often in the past week they encountered six types of content on their feeds, using a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). These categories included three positive content types (i.e., inspirational, calming, and funny) and three negative content types (i.e., depressing, upsetting, and disturbing).

Finally, to gauge the depth of engagement with the selected inspirational content, participants were asked in each daily survey (T2) to indicate what engagement behaviors they engaged in during their viewing session, including liking a video, commenting on a video, and watching a video through to completion.

Felt Emotions

To test H2–H5, participants rated how much they felt each of ten discrete emotions after each daily viewing session during the intervention week (T2). Participants completed an adapted version of the modified Differential Emoions scale (mDES; Fredrickson et al., 2003), with ratings made on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Although the focus of the study was on hope, additional emotions (e.g., amusement, awe, boredom, anxiety, sadness) were included both to mask the study's primary intent and to provide the opportunity to determine if emotions other than hope (amusement and awe in particular) might influence the outcomes of interest (RQ2). Consistent with Prestin and Nabi (2020) and Nabi et al. (2023, 2025), daily hope, amusement, and awe ratings were each averaged across the 5 intervention days to create a composite measure reflecting participants' overall experience in response to the intervention ($M_{\text{hope}} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.23$; $M_{\text{amusement}} = 4.04$, $SD = 1.21$; $M_{\text{awe}} = 3.30$, $SD = 1.28$).

Perceived Stress

To test H3 and H4, perceived stress was assessed at T1, T3, and T4 using an adapted version of the 14-item Global Measure of Perceived Stress (Cohen et al., 1983), modified to refer to the past week. Participants rated how often they had experienced a range of stress-related thoughts and feelings (e.g., "I felt nervous and stressed," "I found it difficult to cope with everything I had to do") on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). Positively worded items were reverse-coded so that higher scores reflected greater perceived stress. A principal axis factor analysis conducted at T1 supported a unidimensional structure with good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). Composite scores were computed by averaging the 14 items for T1 ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.50$), T3 ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.52$), and T4 ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.53$).

To test H3a, momentary stress for each day during the intervention week (T2) was assessed with a single item, "How much stress are you feeling in this moment?" (0 = *no stress*, 10 = *extreme stress*). Daily responses were averaged across the 5 days ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.93$).

Goal-Related Measures

Goal Motivation. To test H5, and consistent with prior work (Nabi et al., 2024), participants first identified a personal goal at T1 that they aimed to achieve in the coming month. During the intervention week (T2), they reported their momentary motivation to pursue this goal each day using the item: "Right now, on a scale of 0–10, how motivated are you to tackle your important goals?" (0 = *not at all motivated*, 10 = *extremely motivated*). Daily ratings were averaged to yield a composite score of goal pursuit motivation across the intervention ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.75$). For exploratory purposes, we also assessed goal motivation with a single item, "How motivated have you been to work toward accomplishing that goal in the past week?" (0–10 scale) at T3 ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 2.29$) and T4 ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 2.20$).

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Goal Progress. To test H6, and consistent with Nabi et al. (2024), at both T3 and T4, participants reflected on the goal they had previously identified—or, if they could not recall it, on another meaningful goal they had been working toward. They then rated the extent of their progress toward and success in achieving that goal over the past week on two separate 11-point scales (0 = *none at all*, 10 = *a great deal*). The items were strongly correlated at each time point (T3: $r = .83$; T4: $r = .79$). These two items were averaged to generate a goal progress score at each time point (T3: $M = 5.82$, $SD = 2.40$; T4: $M = 6.18$, $SD = 2.19$), representing participants' perceived goal attainment.

Goal-Related Covariates. Consistent with prior work on inspirational media and goal pursuit (Nabi et al., 2024), participants indicated at T1 (a) how close they felt to achieving their target goal (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much;* $M = 5.36$, $SD = 2.20$) and (b) how confident they were in their ability to achieve it (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much;* $M = 6.87$, $SD = 2.07$). These two variables were entered as covariates in the model predicting goal achievement progress.

General Covariates

Social Media Mindset. To control for participants' baseline attitudes toward social media, we administered the 7-item valence subscale of the Social Media Mindset Scale (SMMS; Lee & Hancock, 2023), rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items include "Using social media is meaningful for me" and "Using social media is fun and enjoyable for me." Negatively worded items were reverse-coded. Higher scores indicate more positive beliefs about the value of social media (T1 $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.65$; $\alpha = .82$). Of note, we considered the SMMS as a potential moderator; however, it showed no significant moderating effect in any of the analyses reported.

Demographics. Given that age and gender both correlate with stress and gender in particular is implicated in emotional experiences, both were included as covariates in the reported analyses.

Results

Engagement With Social Media

Overall, participants reported that they usually spend 3.30 hr/day ($SD = 1.99$, range = 0.30–11.20) on social media. For the intervention, most participants selected TikTok (64.4%, $n = 85$) as their preferred platform, followed by Instagram (25.8%; $n = 34$) and YouTube (6.1%; $n = 8$). Five participants did not indicate which platform they used for the intervention. To assess whether the intervention influenced time spent on their preferred platform, repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted separately for each platform. For all three platforms, usage remained stable over time: TikTok, $F(2, 81) = 0.61$, $p = .55$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$; Instagram, $F(2, 32) = 1.53$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .087$; YouTube, $F(2, 6) = 0.60$, $p = .58$, $\eta_p^2 = .167$, suggesting that the intervention did not substantially affect participants' time spent on their selected platform.

Exposure to Inspirational Content

First, as a manipulation check, we examined whether participants reported increased exposure to inspirational content during the intervention week compared with their usual levels. Daily responses indicating whether they had seen more or less inspirational content than usual were averaged across the week, with scores >5 reflecting greater-than-usual exposure. A one-sample *t*-test comparing the weekly mean to the scale midpoint confirmed that participants reported exposure to significantly more inspirational content than usual during the intervention week ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(131) = 7.06$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI; 0.43, 0.77], indicating that participants engaged with inspirational content as instructed. In further support of a successful manipulation, 94% of participants reported watching at least one video through to completion, and 84% did so at least 3 of the 5 days of the intervention. Moreover, though not required as part of the study, participants frequently "liked" videos they had selected (87% at least once; 39% daily), whereas only 13% of participants commented on a video once or more during the intervention week.

Next, we tested H1a, which predicted that exposure to inspirational content would progressively increase across the 5 intervention days. A repeated measures ANOVA with day (1–5) as a within-subjects factor showed a significant main effect of day, $F(3.46, 332.07) = 4.55$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .045$ (Greenhouse–Geisser corrected). A planned polynomial contrast indicated a positive linear trend, $F(1, 96) = 5.92$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = .058$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni-adjusted) showed that compared with Day 1, exposure was higher on Day 2 ($p = .05$), Day 3 ($p = .002$), and Day 5 ($p = .017$). No other pairwise differences were significant. Together, the pattern reflects an overall upward trajectory of exposure to inspirational content across the week, supporting H1a.

H1b predicted that increased exposure would persist beyond the intervention. At T3 and T4, participants indicated whether they were exposed to more or less inspirational content than usual over the past week. One-sample *t*-tests against this midpoint showed that at T3, participants reported significantly greater-than-usual exposure ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(131) = 4.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.98]. By T4, however, this increase had dissipated ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(131) = 0.00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [−0.34, 0.34]. A paired-samples *t*-test confirmed a significant decline from T3 to T4, $t(131) = 3.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.34, 1.05]. Thus, though exposure remained elevated shortly after the intervention, the effect did not persist over time, providing only partial support for H1b.

RQ1a asked whether the amount of inspirational content in participants' feeds after the intervention was perceived as appropriate or too much. At T3, the mean satisfaction score was 4.92 ($SD = 1.43$) on the 0–10 scale, indicating that participants generally perceived the amount as appropriate. This evaluation remained stable at T4 ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.57$). A paired-sample t-test confirmed that there was no significant difference between the two time points, $t(131) = 1.32$, $p = .19$, 95% CI [−0.09, 0.45]. Thus, across both posttests, participants consistently perceived the level of inspirational content as balanced rather than excessive.

Changes in Feed Composition

RQ1b asked whether the intervention altered the broader composition of participants' social media feeds in the days after the intervention. To address this question, participants reported how often they encountered six types of content—three positive (inspirational, calming, and funny) and three negative (depressing,

disturbing, and upsetting)—at T1, T3, and T4 (see Table 1). Because changes in inspirational content have already been addressed through other measures, repeated measures ANOVAs with Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons were conducted for each of the remaining five content types. For calming content, a significant main effect of time emerged, $F(2, 130) = 4.28$, $p = .015$, $\eta_p^2 = .032$. Exposure increased from T1 ($M = 2.84$, $SE = 0.08$) to T3 ($M = 3.08$, $SE = 0.07$), $p = .012$, but did not change between T3 and T4 ($M = 3.02$, $SE = 0.08$). For funny content, the overall effect of time was also significant, $F(2, 130) = 3.03$, $p = .050$, $\eta_p^2 = .023$, with a slight decline from T1 ($M = 4.37$, $SE = 0.06$) to T4 ($M = 4.21$, $SE = 0.07$). However, pairwise comparisons were not statistically significant.

In contrast, exposure to negatively valenced content (i.e., depressing, upsetting, and disturbing content) declined sharply after the intervention (T3) and continued to decrease over time (at T4). As Table 1 shows, reports of *(very) often* encountering such content dropped substantially, whereas reports of never or rarely seeing these content types increased notably across measurement occasions. Repeated measures ANOVAs confirmed these patterns statistically. For depressing content, there was a significant main effect of time, $F(2, 130) = 21.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. Bonferroni-adjusted comparisons showed that participants reported significantly less exposure at both T3 ($M = 2.36$, $SE = 0.08$) and T4 ($M = 2.28$, $SE = 0.09$) compared with T1 ($M = 2.83$, $SE = 0.08$), both $p < .001$. The same pattern emerged for upsetting content, $F(2, 130) = 22.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$, and disturbing content, $F(2, 130) = 13.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$. Exposure to both types significantly dropped from T1 to T3 ($p < .001$) and again from T3 to T4 ($p < .001$ and $p = .001$, respectively).

Taken together, these findings suggest that though exposure to positive content only briefly increased or remained stable postintervention, the intervention was associated with a lasting and intensifying reduction in negative content exposure, pointing toward a broader shift in the composition and emotional tone of social media feeds perceived by participants.

Effects of Inspirational Content on Hope and Stress

To test H2–H4, we conducted mediation analyses using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) in SPSS Version 4.2, with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% CIs. Separate models were estimated for perceived stress at T3 and T4. In both models, preintervention levels of exposure to inspirational content and baseline stress, gender, age, and the SMMS were included as covariates.

Consistent with H2, inspirational content exposure during the intervention significantly predicted higher levels of hope ($b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$). H3a and H3b posited that greater hope would predict lower levels of perceived stress at T2 ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.15$, $\beta = -0.21$, $p = .028$) and T3 ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $\beta = -0.13$, $p = .050$), both of which were supported (see Figure 1 for the model at T3). Of note, the direct effect of inspirational content on stress was approaching significance at T2 ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.18$, $p = .07$) but was not significant at T3 ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.02$, $\beta = 0.01$, $p = .83$). Finally, H4 predicted that the relationship between inspirational content and stress would be mediated by hope. This was confirmed by a significant indirect effect at both T2 ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI [−0.21, −0.01]; $\beta = -0.10$, 95% CI [−0.20, −0.01]) and T3 ($b = -0.02$, 95% CI [−0.04, −0.001]; $\beta = -0.06$, 95% CI [−0.13, −0.003]). Together, these findings support H2–H4 at T2 and T3, indicating that exposure to self-selected inspirational content reduced stress indirectly through its effect on hope both during and a few days after the intervention.

At T4, however, the hypothesized effects were no longer evident. Neither the effect of hope on stress ($\beta = -0.10$, $p = .18$) nor the indirect pathway through hope ($\beta = -0.05$, 95% CI [−0.13, −0.03]) was significant. Thus, H3b and H4 were not supported at this later time point.

Effects of Hope on Goal Motivation and Progress

H5 posited that greater feelings of hope during the intervention would be associated with greater goal pursuit motivation. H6 further predicted that the effect of inspirational media on goal progress would be mediated sequentially through hope and goal motivation. To test these hypotheses, we estimated a sequential mediation model in PROCESS (Model 6; Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% CIs. Separate models were estimated for goal progress at T3 and T4. Hope (T2) and goal pursuit motivation (T2) were entered as serial mediators, with goal progress as the outcome. Covariates were preintervention exposure to inspirational content, gender, age, the SMMS, and baseline goal confidence and goal closeness.

Results supported H5. Hope positively predicted goal motivation, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$. Although not predicted, we also found that inspirational content exposure predicted goal motivation, $b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.40$, $p < .001$. However, goal motivation did not significantly predict goal progress at T3 ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = .16$), and the serial indirect effect via hope and

Table 1
Self-Reported Exposure to Different Content Types on Social Media at Pretest (T1), Posttest 1 (T3), and Posttest 2 (T4)

Content type	T1 *Never/rarely*	T3 *Never/rarely*	T4 *Never/rarely*	T1 *Sometimes*	T3 *Sometimes*	T4 *Sometimes*	T1 *(Very) often*	T3 *(Very) often*	T4 *(Very) often*
Inspiring	9.8%	7.6%	18.9%	36.4%	40.9%	37.9%	53.8%	51.5%	43.2%
Calming	33.3%	22.0%	30.3%	45.5%	49.2%	37.9%	21.2%	28.8%	31.8%
Funny	0.8%	1.5%	1.5%	7.6%	12.9%	14.4%	91.7%	85.6%	83.3%
Depressing	37.9%	59.1%	59.1%	37.9%	29.5%	25.8%	24.2%	11.4%	15.2%
Upsetting	34.8%	59.8%	59.1%	37.1%	26.5%	28.0%	28.0%	13.6%	12.9%
Disturbing	49.2%	61.4%	65.9%	31.8%	27.3%	22.7%	18.9%	11.4%	11.4%

Note. Values represent the percentage of participants who reported encountering each content type during the past week. Response options on the 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*) were collapsed such that *never* and *rarely* were combined, as were *often* and *very often*.

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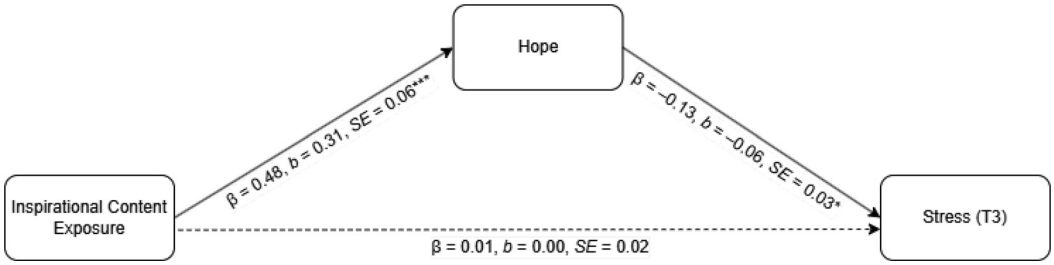
Figure 1

Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients (and Standard Errors) for the Direct Effects of Inspirational Content on Hope and Perceived Stress at Time 3



Note. Paths shown are from PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% CIs; covariates entered on all paths were baseline inspirational exposure, baseline stress, gender, age, and social media mindset ($N = 132$). The dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. At T4, the path from hope to stress was no longer significant ($p = .18$).
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

motivation was also not significant (β = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.08]). At T4, we observed a similar pattern. Goal motivation did not significantly predict goal progress at T4 (β = 0.16, $p = .24$), and the serial indirect effect via hope and motivation was also not significant (β = 0.02, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.07]). Thus, H6 was not supported at T3 or T4.

Lasting Goal Motivation Instead of Goal Progress

For most students, the goal toward which they were working was primarily academic in nature (e.g., passing or getting an A in a course). Because the posttests took place after midterms but before many final papers and exams were due, it is possible that it might have been too early for many to report substantial academic goal progress. This timing might explain why the increase in hope, and the accompanying higher goal motivation observed during the intervention, though trending in the expected direction, did not translate into greater reported goal progress. To examine whether inspirational content nonetheless had sustained effects on goal motivation, we conducted exploratory serial mediation PROCESS analyses with goal motivation at T3 and T4 as the outcomes instead of goal progress.

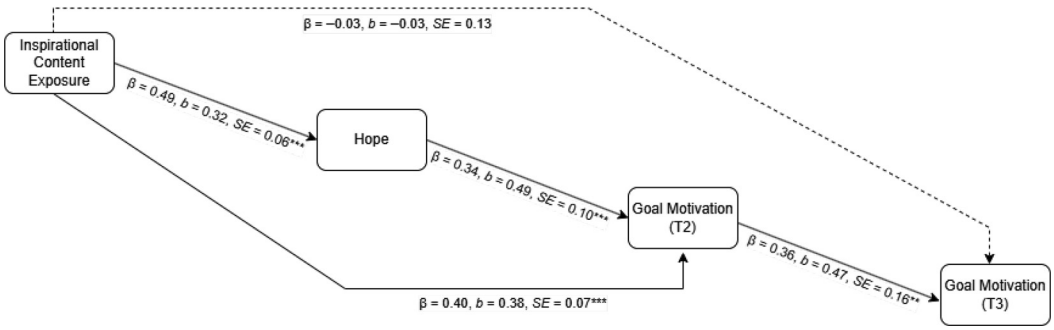
As can be seen in Figure 2, goal motivation during the intervention predicted goal motivation in the days after the intervention $b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.16$, β = 0.36, $p < .01$). The serial pathway from inspirational content through hope to goal motivation during the intervention, and subsequently to T3 goal motivation, was significant ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.017, 0.133]; β = 0.06, 95% CI [0.01, 0.11]). Similarly, at T4, goal motivation during the intervention significantly predicted T4 goal motivation ($b = 0.33$, $SE = 0.15$, β = 0.26, $p = .035$), and the indirect effect of inspirational content on T4 goal motivation via both hope and motivation during the intervention was also significant ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.004, 0.109]; β = 0.04, 95% CI [0.003, 0.094]). As such, there is some support for enduring influence of inspirational content and the hope it evokes on goal pursuit motivation.

The Effects of Amusement and Awe

To answer RQ2, we repeated the primary analyses for stress and goal progress, replacing hope with amusement and awe felt in response to inspirational content as potential mediators.

Figure 2

Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients (and Standard Errors) for the Direct Effects of Inspirational Content on Hope, Goal Motivation, and Goal Progress at Time 3



Note. Paths shown are from PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% CIs; covariates entered on all paths were baseline inspirational exposure, baseline goal confidence and goal closeness, gender, age, and social media mindset ($N = 132$). The dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. At T4, a similar pattern was observed.
** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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Perceived Stress

For T3 stress, inspirational content exposure significantly predicted amusement ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), but amusement did not predict perceived stress ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = .29$). The direct effect of inspirational exposure on stress was nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.02$, $p = .79$), as was the indirect effect via amusement ($\beta = -0.03$, 95% CI [−0.09, 0.025]). Similar patterns were observed at T4.

Replacing hope with awe also yielded no evidence of mediation. Inspirational exposure was only marginally related to awe ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.16$, $p = .075$), and awe did not predict perceived T3 stress ($\beta = -0.06$, $p = .37$). The direct effect of inspirational exposure on stress was nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = .56$), as was the indirect effect via awe ($\beta = -0.009$, 95% CI [−0.043, 0.015]). Similar patterns were observed at T4. Thus, the effects of hope on stress were unique relative to amusement and awe.

Goal Motivation and Progress

Examining goal motivation at T3, replacing hope with either amusement or awe as the mediator (PROCESS Model 6) yielded interesting findings. Specifically, amusement predicted higher goal motivation ($b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.17$, $p = .015$) as did awe ($b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.10$, $\beta = 0.19$, $p = .008$). Yet only amusement evidenced a sequential indirect effect of inspirational content on T3 goal motivation through emotional arousal and T2 goal motivation ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.068]). Thus, there is some evidence that positive emotions other than hope may boost goal motivation with an enduring effect. As with hope, goal progress was not influenced by either amusement or awe.

Exploratory Analyses With Negative Emotions

As a robustness check, we also examined the effect of inspirational content exposure on negative emotional experiences. As might be expected, exposure to inspirational content resulted in decreased anxiety ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = -0.18$, $p = .042$) and boredom ($b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = -0.23$, $p = .015$), as well as marginally lower irritation ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = -0.17$, $p = .070$) and sadness ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $\beta = -0.15$, $p = .068$), controlling for covariates. Interestingly, significant mediation emerged for boredom on T3 stress ($b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.012, −0.001]; $\beta = -0.03$, 95% CI [−0.077, −0.002]), indicating that inspirational content was indirectly associated with reduced stress through its effect on lowering boredom. Similar patterns were found for T3 goal motivation, serially with T2 goal motivation ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.049]; $\beta = -0.03$, 95% CI [−0.077, −0.002]). That is, greater exposure to inspirational content was associated with lower boredom, which in turn predicted higher goal motivation during the intervention, resulting in higher goal motivation at T3. No other negative emotion evidenced a significant mediation effect for either stress or goal motivation.

Discussion

Extending the growing body of media prescription research (Nabi et al., 2023, 2024, 2025; Stieger et al., 2023), this study examined whether a self-administered media prescription for self-selected inspirational content—enacted by participants within their own social media feeds—can serve as a practical, ecologically valid way to support well-being and goal pursuit. This work addressed two issues central to real-world intervention deployment: (a) how actively selecting inspirational content affects one's algorithmically curated feeds, and (b) whether such selective exposure is associated with enhanced hope, reduced stress, and greater goal motivation and progress. We further extend the extant literature by examining whether other positive emotions—amusement and awe—might be generated by self-selected inspirational content and to what effect.

Inspirational Content Exposure and Feed Composition

A critical first step in assessing the merit of a self-administered media prescription is to confirm that it can, in fact, lead to an increase in exposure to the prescribed, inspirational content. This study provides clear support for this approach in that participants reported more inspirational content in their feeds during the intervention period compared with their usual levels, with exposure increasing across days and without an accompanying rise in overall platform use. This increase in inspirational content was modest and experienced as "about right," consistent with our deliberately conservative dosing (3–5 min of viewing per day, with actions such as liking/commenting being optional). After the intervention, the elevation in inspirational exposure persisted for a few days but was no longer evident at the second posttest. This more short-lived elevation in inspirational content is perhaps not surprising given the conservative nature of the intervention and the absence of follow-up suggestions to continue to interact with inspirational content. These results suggest room for strengthening the intervention. Given that we found liking behavior positively correlated with felt hope during the intervention ($r = .26$, $p = .003$), encouraging deeper engagement with inspiring content could enhance benefits, as might scheduling brief booster sessions or simply encouraging participants to continue to enact this new practice of actively seeding or curating their feed on their own moving forward.

Importantly, though there was not an enduring increase in content with a positive emotional tone, the affective tone of participants' social media feeds seemed to improve in that the perception of negatively valenced (i.e., upsetting, disturbing, depressing) content declined sharply after the intervention and continued to drop from T3 to T4, even as inspirational exposure seemed to return to baseline levels. This suggests that a short period of intentional engagement with inspirational material can nudge recommendation dynamics away from negativity and may help reorient the affective tone of algorithmic feeds, at least in the short term. This is a promising finding given ongoing concerns about the negative affective climate of social media feeds.

Taken together, these findings raise important questions about how much exposure is needed to sustain gains and how such exposure impacts other aspects of one's feed. Heavier or longer dosing—and booster sessions—might yield more durable changes. However, we must also be mindful of possible "overdose" outcomes in the form of content fatigue, boredom, or even irritation that could result from too much inspirational content. Moreover, too much content of one type might shift the relative visibility of other content categories, reducing the overall diversity in one's feed or crowding out personally useful material. Future research should experimentally vary dose (minutes per day, number of days, booster sessions) and level of active engagement (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing) and track

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both the targeted increases and any collateral changes in other content types over time. Pairing self-report with digital trace data would be especially informative for tracking dose–response relationships, identifying thresholds at which benefits plateau or reverse, and examining feed diversity and balance as key outcomes.

Hope, Stress, and Goal Motivation

During the intervention week, greater exposure to self-selected inspirational content was associated with greater hope, which in turn corresponded with lower perceived stress both during the intervention week and a few days later at T3. These findings not only align with evidence that brief, positively valenced media can provide immediate stress relief (Prestin & Nabi, 2020; Stieger et al., 2023) and with experiments showing that inspiring media specifically reduces stress via hope (Nabi et al., 2023, 2025) but also extend them to a self-administered, in-feed context. Furthermore, analyses based on amusement and awe indicated that only hope served as a mediator of stress relief, suggesting that even though inspirational content may evoke multiple positive emotions, hope may be unique in its stress-relieving benefits.

By T4 (9–10 days postintervention), the reduction in stress was no longer significant. This finding might be a function of the degree of hope, though appropriately elevated, being lower than what was documented in previous media prescription studies, or a result of self-selected inspirational content reflecting a much broader set of themes compared to the underdog narratives that were emphasized previously. Regardless, given that this attenuation coincided with inspirational exposure returning to baseline by T4, it might be that for self-administered media prescriptions, maintaining stress-buffering gains may require periodic reinforcement (e.g., spaced boosters) or longer dosing windows. Future work should test such maintenance strategies and examine when and for whom short inspirational doses translate into more enduring reductions in stress.

In addition to reduced stress, increased hope was linked to greater goal motivation during the intervention, aligning with previous media prescription research (Nabi et al., 2024; Prestin & Nabi, 2020). Notably, goal motivation remained elevated at both T3 and T4—suggesting that inspirational content can sustain motivation beyond the exposure window. Contrary to expectation, however, we did not observe corresponding gains in goal progress at either posttests. This might be a function of assessment timing (between the major academic milestones of midterms and finals). Or perhaps the broader range of inspirational content to which participants were exposed did not have the same impact on goal pursuit as the more specific underdog-themed content that has been the focus of previous work. Assessing the impact of various content themes of inspirational content, as well as milestone-aligned assessments, is needed to more specifically assess when motivational gains crystallize into progress.

Interestingly, analyses revealed that inspirational content evoked not only hope as expected but also, to a lesser degree, amusement as well as awe, both of which related to goal motivation. Although no evidence of serial mediation with downstream goal progress emerged with either emotion, amusement seemed to have a more enduring effect on goal motivation. These findings suggest that future research on self-administered and selected media prescriptions should consider a wider range of positive emotions and the conditions under which they may enhance goal pursuit.

Furthermore, and unique to previous media prescription work, we examined the influence of inspirational content on negative emotional experiences. As one might expect, inspirational content exposure was associated with reduced boredom, anxiety, and to a lesser extent, sadness and irritation. However, of particular interest, reduced boredom was also significantly linked to reduced stress and increased goal motivation in ways similar to hope. This finding opens up a new avenue of exploration. Although we found this effect for inspiring content, it is possible that other forms of media that reduce boredom, in short doses, may evidence similar effects. This is a particularly intriguing direction for future research.

Finally, though our self-administered, in-feed prescription proved beneficial for lowering stress and increasing motivation, it operated without regard to participants' momentary stress or motivation. A promising future avenue to consider, then, is just-in-time adaptive interventions—dynamic, smartphone-based interventions that use real-time data to deliver support at the right moment (Henry et al., 2025). Recent just-in-time adaptive intervention trials show that microinterventions delivered at moments of heightened need can improve daily well-being (Johnson et al., 2025). Applying this logic, brief, smartphone-based ecological momentary assessments could flag periods of elevated stress or known times of day that are associated with dips in goal motivation, which could trigger a prompt to engage with inspirational content. Such timing may strengthen effects—sustaining stress reductions and helping translate motivational increases into measurable progress—without the need to increase overall exposure.

Limitations

Several limitations of this research warrant consideration. First, exposure and feed composition were assessed via self-report, leaving open questions about the objective shifts occurring on participants' platforms versus perceptual shifts. With evidence that media users are reporting benefits, future work should pair surveys with digital trace data (e.g., data donations, screenshots/logs) to directly quantify changes in feed content and recommendation dynamics. Second, the study used a within-subjects, single-group intervention design without a randomized control condition. Randomized designs (e.g., waitlist or alternative-content controls) would strengthen inference. Third, the study included a predominantly female, U.S. college-student sample, who, though known to be a heavily stressed group who are also heavy users of social media platforms, does limit generalizability. Replication with larger and more diverse samples—including different age groups and individuals experiencing different sources of stress—will clarify boundary conditions. Fourth, some mediation paths—particularly those into goal progress—were small and likely underpowered in this sample. Although we used bootstrap estimation, tests of distal outcomes may require larger sample sizes and longer observation windows.

Conclusion

This research provides the first evidence that young adults can be encouraged to self-administer brief, self-selected doses of

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inspirational content within their everyday social media feeds with meaningful effects. Inspirational exposure was associated with higher hope and immediate as well as delayed stress relief, sustained gains in goal motivation, and a measurable shift toward a less negative feed tone. These patterns suggest a promising, low-effort strategy that can be recommended to leverage existing platforms to enhance well-being without increasing overall use or relying on externally delivered media prescriptions. Sustaining benefits may require modest reinforcement (e.g., periodic boosters) and attention to preserving feed diversity and utility. Nonetheless, by empowering media users to take control of their media feeds in this way, we offer a highly actionable strategy to harness digital technologies to address the epidemic of stress that continues to threaten the well-being of young people in society today.

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Received November 4, 2025
Revision received February 5, 2026
Accepted February 17, 2026 ■

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