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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

When Good Characters Do Bad Things: Examining the Effect of Moral Ambiguity on Enjoyment

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Some of the most compelling characters are morally ambiguous, but little research has examined these characters. This study (N = 313) empirically tests the effects of good, bad, and morally ambiguous characters (MACs) on audience responses. Findings of an experiment reveal that different character types are appealing for different reasons. Specifically, good characters are enjoyed because they are well liked; bad characters are liked the least, but they are equally as transporting, suspenseful, and thus cognitively engaging as other characters. MACs, on the other hand, are liked less than good characters, but they are nevertheless equally as transporting, suspenseful, cognitively engaging, and thereby enjoyable as good characters. The implications of these findings on various media effects theories are discussed.

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Characters are an integral part of entertainment content and are often mentioned as the main reason that entertainment is enjoyed (Cohen, 1999; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2002). Although various factors affect people's impressions of characters (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1991, for review), characters' behaviors, in particular, reveal much about their moralities and personalities (Livingstone, 1992). Some protagonists or heroes, such as Superman, are depicted as behaving almost entirely in consistently "good" ways, and some villains, such as Freddy Krueger, are portrayed as being consistently "bad" or "evil." However, many characters are morally ambiguous in that they do both good and bad things. Protagonists often behave in immoral ways yet some audience members seem to excuse or even embrace these actions when performed by a beloved character.

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Based on affective disposition theory, it can be predicted that purely good characters will be liked more than morally ambiguous characters (MACs). However, the popularity of MACs in mass media content suggests that these types of characters may be enjoyed more than purely good or bad characters and for different reasons. This study thus examines individuals' perceptions of MACs, and how these perceptions affect enjoyment. Specifically, this study tests the effect of different character types on affective dispositions, perceived realism, transportation, and suspense.

Disposition theory and moral judgment

According to Zillmann (2000), viewers continually monitor and judge the morality of characters' actions and motivations. If the actions and motivations are perceived to be moral and good, individuals will form favorable attitudes toward the character. If, on the other hand, the actions and motivations are perceived to be immoral, the character will be disliked. Once people form affective dispositions toward characters, they begin to anticipate certain outcomes for the characters. They hope for success and fear failure for liked characters. Conversely, they hope for failure and fear success for hated characters. When the hoped-for outcomes are achieved, relief and enjoyment are the result, and when feared-for outcomes are presented, enjoyment suffers.

Character ambiguity can cause uncertainty and feelings of ambivalence, and according to Comisky and Bryant (1982), ambivalence and neutrality are the least favorable nonnegative attitudes that individuals generally have for protagonists. Based on the assumption that the perceived morality of characters' actions directly affects character liking, it can be predicted that characters who are always good or moral will be liked more than MACs.

H1: Character actions will affect the strength and valence of affective dispositions formed toward characters, such that good characters will be liked the most, bad characters will be disliked the most, and MACs will fall between the two extremes.

Aside from the issue of character perceptions per se, it is important to point out that disposition theory's conceptualization of audience enjoyment is premised on the notion of the interaction between character liking and character outcome. In other words, according to this theory, simply liking or disliking a character should not necessarily lead to enjoyment unless accompanied by hoped-for outcomes. In the context of the present investigation, our focus is on character morality (rather than on positive/negative outcomes), and consequently, the outcomes in the narratives differed somewhat. As a result, it is unclear in this study if there would be any direct effect of character actions on ultimate enjoyment, and therefore the following research question was examined:

R1: Will affective dispositions toward characters be associated with enjoyment of narratives?

Despite dispositional accounts for viewer reactions, examples of enjoyment of ambiguous or unresolved outcomes abound in entertainment offerings. For example,

the popularity of *The Sopranos* persisted for years despite no clear resolution. Consequently, in addition to conceptualizing enjoyment as an outcome that is experienced at the conclusion of a narrative, it may also be fruitful to conceptualize enjoyment as an experiential state that occurs during the narrative experience itself—as the plot unfolds and the reader/viewer makes sense of the narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). From this perspective, then, it is useful to consider additional perceptions that readers/viewers experience during the course of narrative consumption that may also ultimately lead to gratification. In the following sections, we consider three different perceptions, and how depictions of character morality may be related to each one.

Perceived realism

Although, according to disposition theory, MACs may be judged more negatively than purely good characters, literary researchers often refer to these types of characters as being more realistic than other characters (e.g., Ealy, 2005; Strimel, 2004). Most people are not consistently good or evil; that is, even good people make mistakes, and most people who do bad things have redeeming qualities. Therefore, character ambiguity may affect perceptions of character realness or authenticity.

Individuals make judgments about the realism of stories while they read or view them (Shapiro & Chock, 2003). Individuals most frequently assess the plausibility (Hall, 2003) and typicality (Shapiro & Chock, 2003) of depicted characters and events when determining the realism of mediated content. In assessing the realness of characters, individuals may evaluate their actions and overall behavior and determine how frequently individuals in the real world behave in a similar manner. Because most people in the real world are usually not purely good or bad, MACs may be more likely than good or bad characters to be perceived as realistic.

Moreover, the popularity of these types of characters in literature, television, video games, and films suggests that some individuals may actually prefer these kinds of characters to purely good or evil ones. For example, while running a manipulation check, Zillmann and Cantor (1977) unexpectedly found no difference in affective dispositions toward MACs and benevolent characters, but both types of characters were liked significantly more than a malevolent character. Raney (2004) proposed that because individuals are motivated to enjoy entertainment content, they excuse the bad behaviors of protagonists through a process of moral disengagement. This hypothesis has garnered some recent support in the literature (see Hartmann & Vorderer, 2009; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Furthermore, purely good characters may not be liked more than MACs because as, Aronson (1969) pointed out a person "who appears to have no 'human' weaknesses may lose in attractiveness by making others feel inadequate" (p. 157). Hoorn and Konijn (2003) employed similar reasoning when they suggested that a purely good character such as Superman may irritate some people because he has too many good features and that this may make him seem less realistic. Likewise, Byrne (1971) proposed that

audiences may perceive purely good characters to be less like themselves and that this could result in decreased liking of the characters.

Characters who are perceived to be more realistic have been found to be more involving, meaning that they encourage more positive affective responses, empathy, and identification (Konijn & Hoorn, 2004). Therefore, although disposition theory would suggest that good characters should be most liked (H1), research on perceived realism would suggest that viewers may perceive MACs as more plausible.

H2: MACs will be perceived to be more realistic than good or bad characters.

Further, although H1 predicted the greatest liking for good characters, character ambiguity may also indirectly lead to increased liking via perceived realism.

H3: Perceived character realism will be positively related to character liking.

Although in this section our discussion of perceived realism has focused on character perceptions, additional research suggests that perceived realism may play a consequent role in terms of viewer engagement or transportation into the narrative.

Transportation

Transportation is defined as "a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). It is the process by which people become temporarily immersed into a narrative world to the extent that the rest of the world disappears. This immersion may continue even after individuals finish reading a story as they contemplate the narrative world.

Greater transportation has been found to increase both the perceived realism of narratives (Green, 2004) and character liking (Green & Brock, 2000). However, it is possible that these factors influence each other; that is, even though transportation has been found to increase character liking (Green & Brock, 2000), it is possible that character liking affects transportation. If characters are more multidimensional or realistic, readers may become more interested and absorbed in their stories. Supporting this notion, Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) found that perceiving a film as being more understandable, or more similar to the real-world and viewers' experiences, leads to greater transportation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived realism will be positively associated with transportation.

According to Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004), transportation "illuminates the experience of enjoyment" (p. 324). A positive relationship between transportation and enjoyment has been found in the context of short stories (Green, Brock, et al., 2004; Green, Rozin, Aldao, Pollack, & Small, 2004). Those who experienced high levels of transportation, as well as enjoyment, were more likely to report that they would make favorable recommendations of the stories to others. Therefore, if narratives with MACs are more transporting, these narratives should also be more enjoyable.

H5: Transportation will be positively associated with enjoyment.

Suspense

Because actions of MACs are less predictable than those of good and bad characters, they may produce more uncertainty and suspense than characters who are consistent in their actions. Individuals may be unsure about the true nature of MACs and of what they will do next in a story. In addition, the deserved outcome for MACs is less clear and thereby potentially less predictable.

Individuals form expectations about how a story will end based on their experiences with previous narratives. In their explanation of the cognitive processes underlying the experience of suspense, Ohler and Nieding (1996, p. 139) suggest that suspense can be generated "by transcending the viewers' expectations horizons." This occurs when the cues in a narrative cannot be integrated into an individual's preexisting mental model. Individuals assume that media narratives will follow a familiar structure. Because most narratives end with good characters succeeding and bad characters failing, individuals may expect such endings. In other words, individuals expect morally correct endings for these characters. Readers expect a criminal to get caught, and a person who does something honorable to be rewarded in some way. However, when a character is a criminal who does some honorable things, the morally correct outcome becomes ambivalent. Consequently, we predicted:

H6: Audiences will experience more suspense when reading narratives featuring MACs than when reading narratives featuring either good or bad characters.

Importantly in terms of viewer enjoyment, the experience of suspense may be pleasurable for some individuals. Suspense has been found to increase enjoyment of a variety of content, including short stories (Jose & Brewer, 1984), television programs (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006), and news stories (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis was examined:

H7: Suspense will be positively associated with enjoyment.

Summary

In summary, disposition theory generally predicts greater liking for "good" than for "bad" characters. However, MACs may indirectly lead to greater enjoyment for a host of reasons, including perceived realism, transportation, and heightened suspense. Figure 1 illustrates the hypotheses and research question examined in this study.

Method

Participants and procedure

Three hundred and thirteen students from a large university in the northeastern United States participated in this study for extra credit. The mean age of the

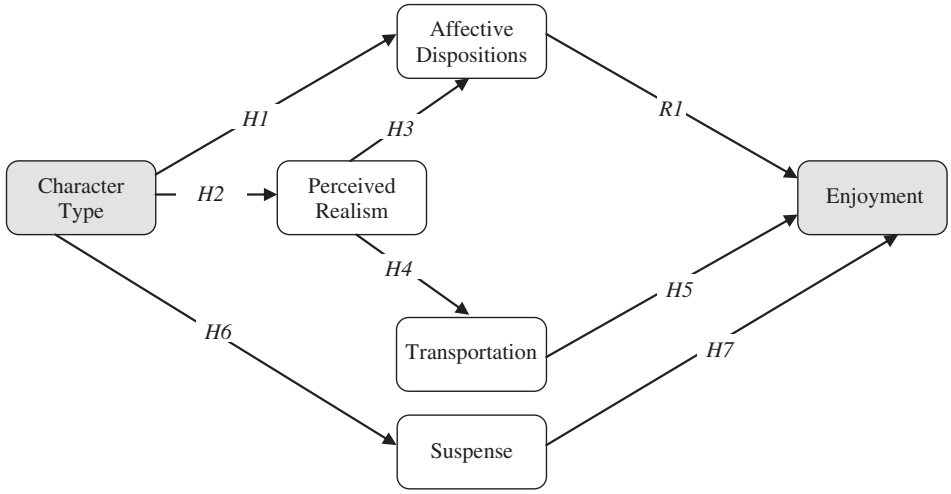

Figure 1 Schematic drawing illustrating the effects of character type on enjoyment.

participants was 20.04 years ($SD = 1.79$), and 65.8% were female and 34.2% were male. Eighty-four percent reported being White, with the remainder of the participants indicating that they belonged to an ethnic minority group.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (good, bad, and MAC). Each participant read one of six short stories and filled out a questionnaire measuring the dependent variables.

Stimulus materials

Two short stories were written for this study, and each story was edited to create the three conditions. One of the stories, *The Suspect*, is written in the first person and details a day in the life of a detective. It begins as the detective is returning from a gruesome autopsy of a young girl. After he returns to his office, he prepares to interrogate the prime suspect in her murder, but he fears that the police do not have enough evidence to convict him. After the interrogation, the suspect falls ill, and the detective must decide whether to save him or to let him die. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the suspect did not murder the young girl. The descriptions of the detective and the actions he performs were manipulated to create three character conditions. In the good character condition, the detective is described as doing only good things: He wants to get justice for the young girl, follows the rules, and saves the life of the suspect. In the bad character condition, the detective is described as doing only bad things: He steals drugs from the crime scene, roughs up the suspect during the interrogation, and lets the suspect die. In the MAC condition, the detective is described as doing both good and bad things: He steals drugs from the crime scene and roughs up the suspect during the interrogation, but he saves the suspect's life.

The second story, *Summit Fever*, is written in the third person and focuses on a mountain climber's attempted ascent of Mt. Everest. Craig, the main character, is climbing with two of his friends. The story begins with the friends eating lunch and preparing for the last stretch of the climb. After some time, one of Craig's friends falls behind, and Craig and the remaining friend must decide whether to wait for him or to proceed without him. Later, Craig and one of his friends encounter a disoriented climber whom they thought had died the previous day. Craig must decide whether to save this climber's life or to continue to the summit, which is only half a mile away. As in the first story, the descriptions and actions of the main character were manipulated to produce the three conditions. In the good character condition, Craig is described as doing only good things: He shares his food with his friends, waits for his friend when he falls behind, and saves the disoriented climber's life. In the bad character condition, Craig does not share his food, leaves his friend behind, and kills the disoriented climber by pushing him off the ridge. In the MAC condition, Craig does not share his food and leaves his friend behind, but he saves the disoriented climber. All the narratives were edited to be of near equal length. The full text of each story is available from the first author on request.

To ensure that the stimulus manipulations were successful, a pretest was conducted in which 62 participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (good, bad, and MAC). After reading each narrative in their packet, participants rated the main character's actions on ten 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*); the items were adapted from person perception and impression formation literature (Hoffner, 1996; Pfau & Mullen, 1995). Five of the items focused on the character's negative attributes (e.g., *The main character does some immoral things*; $\alpha = .99$), and five focused on the character's positive characteristics (e.g., *The main character has some positive attributes*; $\alpha = .98$).

To assess the effects of the particular stories and conditions on character attribute perceptions, a 2 (Story: *The Suspect*, *Summit Fever*) × 2 (Attribute Type: positive, negative) × 3 (Condition: good, MAC, and bad) mixed model repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with story and attribute type as within-subjects factors was conducted. This analysis employed a multivariate approach using Wilk's criterion and revealed a main effect for condition, $F(2, 58) = 32.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$. Furthermore, there was a significant Condition × Attribute Type interaction, $F(2, 58) = 197.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .87$, which indicated that participants perceived good characters to have significantly more positive than negative attributes, bad characters to have significantly more negative than positive attributes, and MACs to have an equal number of positive and negative attributes. Therefore, it was concluded that the stimulus manipulations were successful at creating three distinct character types.

Dependent measures

All items were measured using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Affective dispositions

Six items were used to measure affective dispositions (e.g., *I like the main character in the narrative*). An affective dispositions scale was created by averaging the ratings of the six items with higher values indicating more favorable attitudes ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.83$).

Perceived realism

A perceived realism scale was created by averaging the ratings of four items adapted from those used by Shapiro and Chock (2003) and Potter (1986). Each of the items measured the perceived realism of the main character rather than the story in general (e.g., *the main character is like someone I know in real life*; $\alpha = .77$, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.25$).

Transportation

The degree to which individuals are transported into the narrative was measured with 12 items adapted from Green and Brock (2000) (e.g., *while I was reading the story, I could easily picture the events in it taking place*). Three items showed low levels of item-to-total correlations and were subsequently dropped from the scale. A transportation scale was created by averaging the ratings of the nine remaining items ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.94$, $SD = 0.94$).

Suspense

A suspense scale was created using six items adapted from Nabi et al. (2006), Vorderer, Knobloch, and Schramm (2001), and Knobloch, Patzig, Mende, and Hastall (2004) (e.g., *while reading the story, I tried to guess what would happen next*; $\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.13$).

Enjoyment

Media researchers have debated the conceptualization and operationalization of enjoyment (see Nabi & Krcmar, 2004; Oliver & Nabi, 2004; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Nabi and Krcmar argued that enjoyment should be conceptualized as an attitude, and as such, that its measurement should include affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Therefore, in this study, the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of enjoyment were measured with 20 items adapted from items used in previously reported studies (e.g., *this story made me think*) (Krcmar & Renfro, 2005; Raney & Bryant, 2002). Because enjoyment is a multidimensional concept, an exploratory factor analysis (principal components, Varimax) was employed. The analysis revealed cross-loadings for four items that were consequently dropped. The final subsequent analysis revealed a two-factor solution, explaining 59% of the variance. The first factor included items measuring affective components of enjoyment, such as happiness and good feeling; the second factor included items measuring the cognitive aspects of enjoyment, such as wanting to analyze or talk to others about the story (affective, $\alpha = .91$, $M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.20$; cognitive, $\alpha = .87$, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.15$).

Results

To test the proposed effects of character type on affective dispositions and perceived realism, a series of factorial ANOVAs were employed. To test the relationships among affective dispositions, perceived realism, transportation, suspense, and enjoyment, a series of simple and multiple linear regressions were performed. In addition, path analyses were employed to test the full proposed model.

In accordance with disposition theory, H1 predicted that good characters would be liked the most, bad characters would be liked the least, and that liking of MACs would fall somewhere between good and bad characters. A 2 (Story) × 3 (Condition) ANOVA was conducted to examine affective dispositions toward characters. This analysis revealed a main effect for condition, $F(2, 306) = 224.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .59$. Holm's sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons showed that affective dispositions of all three characters differed significantly from each other. Specifically, good characters were liked the most ($M = 5.66$, $SE = 0.11$), followed by MACs ($M = 4.22$, $SE = 0.12$); bad characters were liked the least ($M = 2.25$, $SE = 0.12$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

The first research question asked whether favorable affective dispositions would be related to enjoyment. Because the exploratory factor analysis revealed that enjoyment had two main components (i.e., cognitive and affective), two simple linear regressions were performed to test this research question. The analyses showed that favorable affective dispositions significantly predicted both the cognitive ($\beta = .13, t = 2.37, p < .05$) and affective components of enjoyment ($\beta = .39, t = 7.54, p < .001$). Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformations were conducted to determine whether the correlations between favorable affective dispositions and the two types of enjoyment differed significantly (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The analysis revealed that the two correlations differed significantly, $t(310) = 5.37, p < .001$, indicating that favorable affective dispositions more strongly predicted affective rather than cognitive enjoyment.

To determine if condition moderated this relationship, two hierarchical multiple regressions were employed. In the first analysis, affective enjoyment was regressed on affective dispositions, and two dummy-coded condition variables, "good character" and "bad character"; ambiguous characters were thus the reference category for this analysis. In the second analysis, cognitive enjoyment was regressed on affective dispositions and the two dummy-coded condition variables. The affective dispositions and enjoyment scales were mean centered for these analyses. The first analysis revealed no significant Condition × Affective Dispositions interactions on affective enjoyment, F change $(2, 306) = 2.01$, $p = .14$, R^2 change $= .01$. Likewise, the second analysis revealed no significant Condition × Affective Dispositions interactions on cognitive enjoyment, F change $(2, 306) = 2.32, p = .10, R^2$ change $= .01$. Therefore, the analysis revealed that favorable affective dispositions were positively related to enjoyment in all three conditions.

H2 predicted that MACs would be perceived to be more realistic than either good or bad characters. A 2 (Story) × 3 (Condition) ANOVA was conducted to examine perceived realism of characters. This analysis revealed a main effect

for condition, $F(2, 307) = 30.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$. Holm's sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons showed that this main effect occurred because good characters ($M = 5.07$, $SE = 0.11$) and MACs ($M = 4.82$, $SE = 0.11$) were perceived to be significantly more realistic than bad characters ($M = 3.94$, $SE = 0.11$). Therefore, H2 was partially supported in that MACs were perceived to be more realistic than bad characters but equally as realistic as good characters. However, the differences in perceived realism were likely due to factors other than the complexity of MACs as initially predicted.

H3 predicted that perceived realism would be positively related to favorable affective dispositions. To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was performed by regressing affective dispositions on perceived realism. The analysis showed that characters' perceived realism significantly predicted favorable affective dispositions ($\beta = .45$, $t = 8.85$, $p < .001$). To determine if condition moderated this relationship, hierarchical multiple regression was employed by regressing affective dispositions on perceived realism and two dummy-coded condition variables, "good character" and "bad character." MACs were thus the reference category for this analysis. The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect, F change $(2, 306) = 7.59$, $p < .001$, R^2 change $= .02$. Specifically, there was a significant Bad Condition $\times$ Perceived Realism interaction ($\beta = -.13$, $t = -2.24$, $p < .05$) but no significant Good Condition $\times$ Perceived Realism interaction ($\beta = .08$, $t = 1.54$, $p = .12$). Three additional simple linear regressions were performed to examine the significant interaction. The results indicated that perceived realism was positively associated with favorable affective dispositions in the good ($\beta = .49$, $t = 5.75$, $p < .001$) and MAC conditions ($\beta = .27$, $t = 2.81$, $p < .01$) but not in the bad conditions ($\beta = .04$, $t = .38$, $p = .71$). Therefore, the third hypothesis was partially supported in that perceived realism was positively associated with favorable affective dispositions in good and MAC conditions but not in bad conditions.

H4 predicted that perceived realism would be positively associated with transportation. To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression analysis was performed by regressing transportation on perceived realism. The analysis showed that characters' perceived realism significantly predicted transportation ($\beta = .25$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$). To determine if condition moderated this relationship, hierarchical multiple regression was employed by regressing transportation on perceived realism and two dummy-coded condition variables, "good character" and "bad character." The analysis revealed no significant interaction effect, F change $(2, 307) = 1.39$, $p = .25$, R^2 change $= .01$. Therefore, H4 was supported in that perceiving a character to be more realistic resulted in more transportation.

H5 predicted that transportation would be positively associated with enjoyment. To test this hypothesis, two simple linear regressions were performed. In the first analysis, affective enjoyment was regressed on transportation, and in the second analysis, cognitive enjoyment was regressed on transportation. The results indicated that transportation was positively associated with both affective ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$) and cognitive enjoyment ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$). Fisher's r-to-z transformations revealed

that the two transportation-enjoyment correlations differed significantly, $t(310) = 2.34$, $p < .05$, indicating that transportation more strongly predicted cognitive rather than affective enjoyment. Therefore, H5 was supported.

H6 predicted that narratives featuring MACs would be more suspenseful than narratives featuring either good or bad characters. A 2 (Story) × 3 (Condition) ANOVA was conducted to examine levels of suspense. This analysis revealed no main effect for condition, $F(2, 307) = .71$, $p = .49$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Therefore, H6 was not supported.

H7 predicted that suspense would be positively associated with enjoyment. To test this hypothesis, two simple linear regressions were performed. In the first analysis, affective enjoyment was regressed on suspense, and in the second analysis, cognitive enjoyment was regressed on suspense. The results indicated that suspense was positively associated with both affective ($\beta = .64$, $p < .001$) and cognitive enjoyment ($\beta = .71$, $p < .001$). Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformations revealed that the two suspense-enjoyment correlations differed significantly, $t(310) = 2.19$, $p < .05$, indicating that suspense more strongly predicted cognitive rather than affective enjoyment. Therefore, H7 was supported.

Although no predictions were made about the direct effects of character type on enjoyment, a 2 (Enjoyment: affective, cognitive) × 2 (Story) × 3 (Condition) mixed model repeated-measures ANOVA with enjoyment as a within-subjects factor was conducted to examine this relationship. This analysis employed a multivariate approach using Wilk's criterion. The analysis revealed a significant Condition × Enjoyment interaction, $F(2, 307) = 14.46$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Narratives featuring good characters ($M = 4.53$, $SE = 0.12$) and MACs ($M = 4.45$, $SE = 0.12$) were more affectively enjoyed than were narratives featuring bad characters ($M = 4.05$, $SE = 0.12$), and narratives featuring bad characters were more cognitively ($M = 4.32$, $SE = 0.11$) rather than affectively enjoyed ($M = 4.05$, $SE = 0.12$).

To further explore the effects of character type on the dependent variables, a path analysis was run with two dummy-coded variables, "good character" and "bad character," treated as exogenous variables. Affective and cognitive enjoyment were the final variables in the path. The initial model included paths of all hypothesized relationships. To improve the parsimony and fit of the final model, only those paths that were significant at $p < .05$ were kept (cf. Oliver, Kalyanaraman, Mahood, & Ramasubramanian, 2007; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and paths between transportation and suspense, affective dispositions and suspense, and perceived realism and suspense were added. Although no hypotheses predicted the relationships of these variables, prior research suggests these relationships may exist (e.g., Green, 2002; Green & Brock, 2000).

Figure 2 contains the final model in this analysis, with all paths reporting standardized coefficients. The chi-square for the model was significant, $\chi^2 = 21.96$, $df = 11$, $p < .05$. However, this test is known to be sensitive to large sample sizes. As a result, the χ^2/df ratio, CFI, and RMSEA were used to make judgments about model fit. The overall pattern of these indices suggests an acceptable fit, χ^2/df ratio = 2.00, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI = .02–.09 (Arbuckle, 1996;

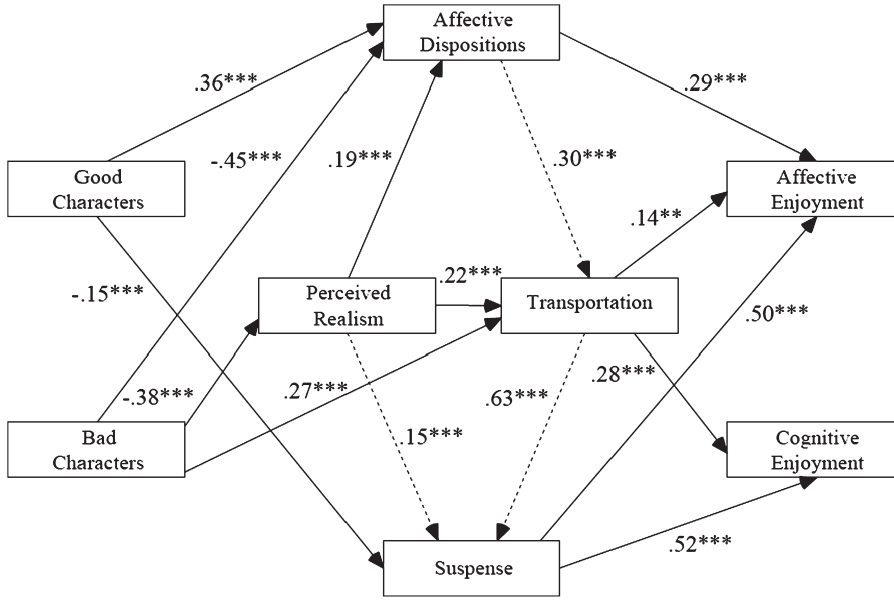

Figure 2 Path model of effects of character type on dependent variables.

Note: Solid lines represent hypothesized relationships. Dashed lines represent significant unpredicted relationships. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Browne & Cudeck, 1993). This model illustrates that good characters evoked more favorable affective dispositions ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), but less suspense ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$) than MACs. Favorable affective dispositions were, in turn, positively associated with affective enjoyment ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and transportation ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$). Moreover, transportation was positively associated with suspense ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and enjoyment (affective, $\beta = .14$, $p < .01$; cognitive, $\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), and suspense was positively associated with enjoyment (affective, $\beta = .50$, $p < .001$; cognitive, $\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapping of the indirect effects of condition on the dependent variables revealed significant positive indirect effects of good characters on transportation ($\beta = .04$, $p < .01$), suspense ($\beta = .03$, $p < .01$), and affective enjoyment ($\beta = .01$, $p < .05$) compared with MACs. Therefore, good characters were more liked than MACs, and this led to greater transportation, suspense, and affective enjoyment. They were not, however, significantly different from MACs in terms of perceived realism or cognitive enjoyment. Furthermore, good characters were less directly suspenseful than MACs.

In contrast, bad characters evoked less favorable affective dispositions ($\beta = -.45$, $p < .001$) and were perceived to be less realistic ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) than MACs, but they were more transporting ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) than MACs. Bootstrapping of the indirect effects of condition on the dependent variables revealed significant negative indirect effects of bad characters on favorable affective dispositions ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .001$), transportation ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$), and affective enjoyment

($\beta = -.17$, $p < .001$) compared with MACs. The indirect effect of bad characters on cognitive enjoyment was not significant ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .77$). Therefore, bad characters were perceived to be less realistic and were less liked than MACs, and this led to less transportation and affective enjoyment. However, bad characters were more directly transporting than MACs, and they were equally as cognitively enjoyed as MACs.

Discussion

The findings of this study enhance our understanding of individuals' responses to MACs by demonstrating the strengths and limitations of various media effects concepts. In particular, this study examined how different character types influence affective dispositions, perceived realism, transportation, and suspense. The results indicate that good characters, bad characters, and MACs may be appealing for different reasons. Furthermore, although affective dispositions accurately predict affective enjoyment for good and bad characters, other audience responses, such as transportation and suspense, may more adequately explain cognitive enjoyment and the enjoyment of MACs.

In support of Zillmann's (2000) hypothesis that individuals form attitudes about characters based on their actions, good characters were liked the most followed by MACs, whereas bad characters were liked the least. These findings suggest that individuals may base their judgments about characters on the ratio of good to bad things that they do, particularly when lacking other information about the characters. There was no indication that purely good characters were perceived to be "too good" or irritating. This result may be explained by the fact that in this study, individuals read a relatively short, three- or four-page narrative, in which the main characters were described doing things in specific situations. It is possible that individuals form more negative affective dispositions toward purely good characters when reading longer narratives or when viewing serialized television shows, books, and movies, in which they are exposed to characters for longer periods of time and in more diverse situations.

Character liking, in turn, predicted affective enjoyment and, to a lesser extent, cognitive enjoyment. Therefore, narratives featuring good characters were affectively enjoyed more than narratives featuring bad characters. However, even though MACs were liked less than good characters, they were nevertheless equally enjoyed. One possible explanation for these results is that the story outcomes affected enjoyment. Affective disposition theory is predicated on the idea that enjoyment is a function of character liking and outcomes, but due to the manipulations of the main characters' actions, the outcomes in the stories were not consistent. Specifically, in the bad character conditions, the main characters kill another character, whereas in the good and ambiguous conditions, the main characters save the other characters' lives. Therefore, in terms of overall outcomes, the good and MAC stories were much more similar to each other than to the bad character conditions. Individuals may

have affectively enjoyed both the good character and MAC narratives because the outcomes for all the characters in these conditions were good; conversely, they may have derived less affective enjoyment from reading the bad character narratives because these narratives ended badly for some of the other characters. Nonetheless, because MACs were liked less than good characters, these findings may also suggest that MACs are appealing for reasons beyond their perceived morality and that other factors, such as suspense, may need to be taken into account when predicting enjoyment of MACs.

In addition, the results suggest that character liking may not be as effective at predicting cognitive types of enjoyment. This is evidenced by the fact that bad characters were equally as cognitively enjoyed as were good characters and MACs. Moreover, the impact of affective dispositions on cognitive enjoyment disappeared with the addition of other factors. Namely, affective dispositions influenced transportation, and, in turn, transportation affected cognitive enjoyment. These findings not only suggest that various audience responses affect enjoyment but also confirm the notion that enjoyment is a multidimensional concept.

Researchers have debated the conceptualizations of enjoyment and have argued that the gratifications that individuals get from entertainment should not be simply equated with fun or joy (see Nabi & Krcmar, 2004; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Nabi, 2004; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Vorderer et al., 2004). This study reaffirms the need to study various aspects of enjoyment, particularly those related to cognition. Specifically, this study reveals that affective and cognitive enjoyment are not always experienced together. That is, some content may evoke pleasant feelings but not induce mental involvement and vice versa. The findings also suggest that certain factors more strongly predict one type of enjoyment than another. In particular, affective dispositions more strongly predict affective rather than cognitive enjoyment; conversely, transportation and suspense more strongly predict cognitive rather than affective enjoyment. Transportation may thus increase individuals' desire to think deeply about a story, which may help explain why transportation leads to persuasion (Green, 2002, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). Moreover, the results suggest that transportation may enhance other audience responses, such as feelings of suspense. To examine these relationships in more depth and to minimize the effects of overlap between transportation and other audience responses, it may be beneficial for future studies to use a more defined scale to measure absorption into a narrative, such as the one proposed by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009).

This study also has implications for theories of suspense, particularly because suspense was found to strongly affect cognitive enjoyment. One possible explanation for this is that individuals may try to lessen their uncertainty about what will happen next in a narrative by contemplating the possible outcomes; as a result, the more suspense they feel, the more cognitively engaged they may become. Nonetheless, this finding is surprising because theories of suspense focus predominantly on affective states, namely empathy (Zillmann, 1991, 1996). Suspense is hypothesized to occur when individuals fear a negative outcome for a liked character, with whom

they empathize; conversely, individuals may fear a positive outcome for a disliked character. Enjoyment is derived from the relief that is felt once the threat of the undesirable outcome subsides. However, the results from this study reveal that this is not always a necessary condition for enjoyment, because suspense was not affected by character type. One possible explanation for this is that readers felt that the outcomes in the narratives were equally predictable or unpredictable. If readers equally feared positive outcomes for bad characters and negative outcomes for good characters, they may have experienced equal levels of suspense in both conditions. However, it is unknown whether MACs elicited equal levels of suspense because individuals feared positive or negative outcomes for these characters. Another possible explanation for these findings is that suspense may be enjoyable regardless of character outcomes and that other factors, such as perceived realism and transportation, counteracted the direct effects of character type on suspense.

The results also indicate that some character types are perceived to be more realistic than others. Specifically, MACs and good characters were perceived to be more realistic than bad characters. Bad main characters are relatively rare in entertainment content, which may make them and the stories they appear in seem unrealistic. On the other hand, individuals may perceive fictional characters who are particularly moral as being authentic either because (a) this matches their schema for how fictional characters should behave or (b) they hope that other individuals are morally good people and consequently perceive morally clean fictional characters to be realistic. Interestingly, good characters and MACs were not perceived to be completely realistic, which may indicate that individuals are more likely to notice when characters behave unrealistically than when they behave realistically.

Perceptions of characters' realism were, in turn, found to be positively associated with favorable affective dispositions in the good and MAC conditions but not in the bad character conditions. One possible explanation for this is that realistic bad characters are perhaps perceived to be more frightening, which could make them less likeable. Perceived realism was also found to predict transportation such that narratives featuring more realistic characters were more transporting. Therefore, because good characters and MACs were more realistic, narratives featuring these characters were more transporting. These results are in line with previous findings that show a link between realism and transportation (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Directions for future research

Individuals form impressions of characters based on a number of different factors, including their intentions (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), which may be particularly influential in affecting responses. Individuals attempt to determine why others behave the way they do (Heider, 1958) so when a character does something bad, individuals may attribute this behavior to a number of factors, which may ultimately either make the character seem more or less moral, likeable, realistic, enjoyable, and so forth. If characters' intentions are perceived to be moral, the outcomes of their actions may not matter. Future research could begin to illuminate these

complexities by first developing a typology of MACs in mainstream entertainment content that identifies their major differences, and second, examining how specific differences among MACs (e.g., their intentions, the types and number of actions they perform, and the effects their behaviors have on themselves and others) affect audience responses.

In addition, characters and story components both influence audience responses, such as transportation and perceived realism, and it is difficult to disentangle the effects of characters from story components. However, in an attempt to study the effects of different character types on enjoyment, and to limit the number of factors that were examined, this study focused on differences in character actions. Therefore, story components were kept as consistent as possible in the three conditions. This is not a perfect solution to the problem of story components interacting with character types, but it is a starting point for examining responses to MACs. We are hopeful that future studies dealing with character types can examine these potentially complex interactions.

Finally, it may also be worthwhile to explore the effects of moral ambiguity in nonfictional content. For example, it is possible that people would be more willing to accept moral ambiguity from fictional characters rather than from real individuals. On the other hand, some individuals may enjoy viewing content depicting morally ambiguous individuals because it makes them feel better about their own morality. This could help explain the popularity of reality television shows, which often depict real people behaving in immoral ways. In some instances, individuals may be motivated to enhance their own self-esteem by comparing themselves to others who are less successful or less fortunate (Mares & Cantor, 1992; Wills, 1981). Therefore, it is possible that individuals, who are unsure about their own moral standing, could be more motivated to view content featuring morally ambiguous individuals.

Conclusion

This study attempted to identify responses to MACs as compared with purely good and bad characters. The findings support the proposition that MACs are enjoyable. Although affective dispositions were associated with enjoyment, other audience responses, including perceived realism, transportation, and suspense were also important. Moreover, while affective dispositions predicted affective enjoyment, suspense and transportation were more strongly associated with cognitive enjoyment. The results also indicate that different character types may be appealing for different reasons. Good characters are perceived to be realistic and are well liked; this leads to greater affective enjoyment and transportation; therefore, affective dispositions are the primary explanatory mechanism for the appeal of these characters. Bad characters, on the other hand, are equally as transporting, suspenseful, and thereby cognitively enjoyable as other characters despite being liked the least. Likewise, even though MACs are liked less than good characters, they are nevertheless equally as transporting, suspenseful, and enjoyable as good characters.

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선한 사람들이 나쁜일들을 할때: 오락에서의 도덕적 모호성의 효과 연구

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요약

가장 매력적인 성격들 중 일부는 도덕적으로 모호한 것이나, 이에 대한 연구는 별로 단행되지 않았다. 본 연구는 313 명을 대상으로 한 오디언스 반응에서 도덕적으로 모호한 성격, 좋은 성격, 그리고 나쁜 성격들의 효과를 실증적으로 조사한 것이다. 결과들은 다른 성격 타입들은 다른 이유때문에 호소력이 있는 것으로 나타났다. 특히, 좋은 성격들은 사람들이 그들을 좋아할때 즐거운 것으로 나타 났으며, 나쁜 성격들은 가장 선호되지 않으나, 그들은 다른 성격들과 인지적으로 교류하는 것으로 나타났다. 한편, 도덕적으로 모호한 성격들은 좋은 성격들 보다는 선호도가 약했으나, 그럼에도 불구하고 인지적으로 교류적이어서 좋은 성격만큼이나 즐거운 것으로 나타났다. 여러가지 미디어 호과 이론들에 대한 이러한 발견들의 함의들이 논의 되었다.

Quand les bons font des méfaits : un examen de l'effet de l'ambiguïté morale sur le plaisir

K. Maja Krakowiak & Mary Beth Oliver

Certains des personnages les plus fascinants sont ambigus sur le plan de la morale, mais peu d'études ont examiné ces personnages. Cette étude (N = 313) vérifie empiriquement les effets des personnages à la morale ambiguë, des bons personnages et des mauvais personnages sur les réactions de l'auditoire. Les résultats révèlent que différents types de personnages sont attirants pour différentes raisons. Spécifiquement, les bons personnages sont appréciés parce qu'ils sont aimés. Les mauvais personnages sont les moins aimés, mais ils sont tout aussi envoûtants, pleins de suspense et, par conséquent, intéressants que les autres personnages. Les personnages à la morale ambiguë, par contre, sont moins aimés que les bons personnages, mais ils sont néanmoins tout aussi envoûtants, pleins de suspense, intéressants et donc divertissants que les bons personnages. Les conséquences de ces résultats pour diverses théories des effets médiatiques sont commentées.

Mots clés : divertissement, personnages moralement ambigus, théorie des dispositions affectives, plaisir, envoûtement, suspense, perception de réalisme

Wenn gute Figuren schlechte Dinge tun: Eine Untersuchung der Wirkung von moralischer Ambiguität auf Enjoyment

Einige der ansprechendsten Charaktere sind moralisch mehrdeutig, dennoch gibt es bislang wenig Forschung zu diesen Charakteren. In dieser Studie (N=313) testeten wir empirisch die Wirkung von moralisch mehrdeutigen, guten und schlechten Charakteren auf die Reaktionen des Publikums. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass verschiedene Charaktertypen aus verschiedenen Gründen ansprechend sind. Insbesondere sind gute Charaktere unterhaltend, weil sie gemocht werden, schlechte Charaktere werden weniger gemocht, sind aber genauso transportierend, spannungsvoll und deshalb kognitiv involvierend wie andere Charaktere. Mehrdeutige Charaktere auf der anderen Seite, werden weniger gemocht als die guten Charaktere, sind aber trotzdem genauso transportierend, spannungsvoll, kognitiv involvierend und deshalb unterhaltend wie gute Charaktere. Die Implikationen dieser Ergebnisse auf verschiedene Medienwirkungstheorien werden diskutiert.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Unterhaltung, moralisch mehrdeutige Charaktere, Theorie der affektiven Disposition, Enjoyment, Transportation, Spannung, wahrgenommener Realismus