International Communication Association

OXFORD

Evidence of balance theory as a predictive framework for character interdependence

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Abstract

Across three studies, we examined how balance theory can be used to predict interdependent character evaluations. Leveraging the propositions of balance theory as suggested by Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020), our findings demonstrate that moral information about a single character biases perceptions and judgments of other characters within the same narrative. Beyond replicating binary comparative judgments between characters, similar to past work on character interdependence, we show that the relational information conveyed by a character network can reveal how interdependent effects between several characters will manifest. Specifically, our results demonstrate that characters are either contrasted or assimilated to one another based on the relationship valences communicated by the narrative's character network. Extrapolating from these findings, we discuss several aspects of character networks that should be considered to further develop the concept of character interdependence.

Keywords: character interdependence, balance theory, affective disposition theory, character networks, narrative

Recent advancements in entertainment media scholarship suggest that accounting for audiences' relative assessments of characters enhances the predictive power of media theories (Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2024, Tamborini et al., 2024). Defined as *character interdependence* (see Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020), this phenomenon demonstrates that the perceived relationships between characters can be used to specify the theoretical accuracy and scope of character appraisal frameworks. Largely couched within affective disposition theory (ADT; Zillmann, 2000), interdependence has been shown to substantially bias audience perceptions of characters and their actions while accounting for large amounts of variance in audience judgments. Additionally, interdependence offers plausible explanations for limitations of current theorizing in this area (e.g., why viewers like when characters do bad things; see Raney & Janicke, 2013), providing greater explanatory power to the overarching ADT model (see Chaffee & Berger, 1987; DeAndrea & Holbert, 2017).

However, due to its novelty in the literature, the validation of a framework that formalizes the predictions of character interdependence has yet to be determined. Put simply, identifying how and when interdependence will explicitly influence character evaluations is currently unclear. With this shortcoming in mind, work in this area (Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020; Hopp et al., 2020) has suggested that network-based theories could serve as foundations for hypothesizing interdependent character evaluations. An initial theory that has been proposed is balance theory (Heider, 1958). Applying balance theory to a character network leads to falsifiable predictions of how interdependence will bias audiences' judgments via perceived relationships between characters. Despite an in-depth discussion of this potential (see Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020), these propositions have yet to be empirically examined.

This manuscript aims to further develop the concept of character interdependence through predictions derived from balance theory. Across three experiments, we employ a custom narrative to establish a character network. By manipulating information about a single character, we demonstrate how this information spreads throughout the network in a manner consistent with balance theory, ultimately influencing evaluations of all narrative characters. We show that these evaluations are either contrasted or assimilated based on the relationships between the characters. After presenting our results, we discuss considerations for character networks in interdependent disposition formation, highlighting how features of character networks and the viewer may determine when interdependence is more or less likely to shape audience judgments.

Affective disposition theory

ADT predicts that enjoyment is maximized when liked characters experience positive outcomes and disliked characters experience negative outcomes. Conversely, enjoyment is minimized when disliked characters experience positive outcomes and liked characters experience negative outcomes. These predictions are comprised of three distinct subprocesses: disposition formation, anticipatory responses, and outcome evaluation (Grizzard et al., 2023). The subprocesses explain how viewers come to like or dislike characters (disposition formation), what experiences viewers hope and fear for (anticipatory responses), and how viewers perceive and respond to outcomes (outcome evaluation). To date, ADT, its subprocesses, and extensions of its logic have received extensive empirical support (Eden et al., 2015, 2017; Grizzard et al., 2023; Grizzard et al., 2025; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Matthews, 2019; Shafer & Raney, 2012).

Of particular importance for character interdependence is ADT's disposition formation subprocess. Zillmann (2000) posited that disposition formation is largely determined by the moral approbation of a character's behavior. When a character acts morally, viewers will approve of their behavior, form a positive disposition, and like the character. On the other hand, when a character acts immorally, viewers will disapprove of their behavior, form a negative disposition, and dislike the character. Research on the disposition formation subprocess has consistently and overwhelmingly demonstrated that, while several factors may moderate the moral judgment process, moral approbation remains the predominant predictor of character dispositions (see Eden & Tamborini, 2017; Francemone et al., 2022; Frazer et al., 2023; Grizzard et al., 2018). Thus, we propose our first hypothesis:

> H1: Directly attributing moral behaviors to a character will produce positive dispositions, while directly attributing immoral behaviors will produce negative dispositions.

A second disposition formation process that has been extensively discussed in the literature is the schema-activation route of disposition formation. In a theoretical extension to ADT, Raney suggested that repeated exposure to narratives causes viewers to develop story schemas which "provide viewers with the cognitive pegs upon which to hang their initial interpretations and expectations of characters" (2004, p. 354). In other words, viewers develop expectations about how characters will function in a narrative based on heuristic cues, such as appearance (e.g., white vs. black hat cowboys) or archetype (e.g., police officer vs. criminal). Such cues can activate schematic processing, leading viewers to categorize characters in specific ways and form relevant dispositions (see Sanders, 2010; see also Raney & Janicke, 2013). For instance, seeing a character wearing all black and scowling likely causes viewers to categorize the character as a villain, perceive them to be immoral, and develop negative dispositions toward them. Using this logic, past research has demonstrated that a character's behavior not only influences how audiences form dispositions toward that character but also influences how viewers perceive that character's role in the story via schematic expectations (see Grizzard et al., 2021). This work demonstrates that describing a character's behaviors as moral results in viewers categorizing the character as the protagonist, whereas describing them as immoral results in viewers categorizing the character as the antagonist. This logic leads to our second hypothesis:

> H2: Directly attributing moral behaviors to a character will lead viewers to perceive the character as the protagonist, while directly attributing immoral behaviors will lead viewers to perceive the character as the antagonist.

Character interdependence

While ADT has garnered substantial support, the theory—as originally formulated—holds a strong implicit assumption that disposition formation occurs as an independent process for each character. In other words, audiences form their dispositions toward each character based on the behaviors and schema of the character being evaluated. Recently, however, Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020) challenged this assumption and posited the character interdependence hypothesis,

which suggests that the perceptions and dispositions a viewer has toward one character influence the perceptions and dispositions they have toward other characters. They formally define the character interdependence as, "mutual covariation between two or more characters wherein the perceived attributes of one character influence and interact with the perceived attributes of (an)other character(s)" (Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020, p. 275).

Grizzard and colleagues have presented evidence of character interdependence across multiple papers in the past several years. Initial theorizing was based on the observation that character evaluations were polarized when presented in sequential orders; heroes were perceived to be more heroic when evaluated after a villain and villains were perceived to be more villainous when evaluated after a hero (Grizzard et al., 2018). In their paper presenting the character interdependence hypothesis, Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020) showed that disapproval of an antagonist's behavior predicted both moral judgments of the antagonist and the moral judgments of the protagonist. Even more notable, they also demonstrated that a single neutral-schema character was judged to be either heroic or villainous depending entirely on a comparison character (i.e., when the comparison character was villainous, the neutral character appeared heroic, and vice versa). Finally, Grizzard et al. (2021) presented evidence that character interdependence can influence sequential judgments of characters and their behaviors. When two characters were present in summaries of serial narrative episodes, approbation and categorization of each character were polarized as compared to when each character was presented individually.

Despite its robust evidence, research on character interdependence thus far has focused on comparisons between two characters and how corresponding evaluations are contrasted against one another. However, narratives often feature more complex character networks with alliances and conflicts occurring between alliances (see Hopp et al., 2020; see also Lee & Jung, 2019). Consequently, the multiple associative relationships within these character networks likely have ramifications for the valence and degree to which character interdependence operates. Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020) described this phenomenon when presenting character interdependence and theorized that perceptual, network-based models could further develop the predictive precision of the character interdependence hypothesis. Specifically, they suggested balance theory (Heider, 1958) as a foundation for understanding how a narrative's character network can bias disposition formation.

Balance theory as an organizing framework

Balance theory (Heider, 1958) is an attitudinal network theory that explains how affective relationships between multiple entities must be balanced to produce cognitive consonance. A general rule of thumb used to determine whether a network is balanced or unbalanced is whether the product of the network's relationship valences is positive (e.g., −, −, +) or negative (e.g., −, +, +). The theory contends that these attitudinal relationships are formed, maintained, or adjusted under the presumption of balancing the network, suggesting they are inherently dependent upon one another and not necessarily free to vary. In other words, the attitude

an individual has toward one entity is influenced by the attitudes that entity has with other separate entities.

Balanced networks are stable and evoke cognitive consonance (Heider, 1958). When three friends all like each other (see Figure 1-1), or two friends like each other and both dislike a common rival (see Figure 1-2), the network is balanced, stable, and does not require any adjustments. Unbalanced networks, on the other hand, are inherently unstable and evoke cognitive dissonance. Imagine three colleagues who all start out liking each other, but then over time, the relationship between two of them sours (see Figure 1-3). This type of network is unbalanced, unstable, and leads the individuals to experience what Heider (1958, p. 207) calls "stress toward change." The pressure elicited by the network is a result of humans' desire for harmonious interpersonal relations (Festinger, 1957). The negative B–C relationship puts stress on A and necessitates some adjustment to return to balance. A return to balance can occur by (1) B and C resolving their disagreements and returning to being friends, (2) A and B altering their relationship to be negative, resulting in an alliance between A and C against B, or (3) A and C altering their relationship to be negative, resulting in an alliance between A and B against C.

Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020) proposed that a narrative's character network—combined with the predictions of balance theory—could be leveraged to understand how interdependent disposition formation will occur. When a viewer enters a narrative, the associative relationships between characters will determine how that viewer forms their dispositions across the network. For example, if two characters in a narrative dislike each other, a viewer likely cannot form positive dispositions toward each of them without entering a state of cognitive dissonance. As such, the disposition the viewer forms toward one of the two rival characters will be biased to be negative because of (a) the positive disposition the viewer

develops toward one of the characters and (b) the dislike the two characters feel toward one another. This logic leads to our third and fourth hypotheses:

> H3: Directly attributing moral behaviors to a character will negatively bias dispositions toward that character's rival (and vice versa).
> H4: Directly attributing moral behaviors to a character will lead viewers to perceive that character's rival as the antagonist (and vice versa).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 represent a contrast effect (see Sherif et al., 1958), in which differences between two entities are perceptually exaggerated. This effect has thus far served as the empirical basis for research and theorizing on character interdependence. However, contrast effects represent only one type of social comparison. When two entities are positively associated, an assimilation effect can occur, whereby their differences are perceptually minimized. Assimilation can lead to the characteristics of one entity being attributed to an ally, regardless of whether the ally explicitly exhibits those characteristics. Thus, in a narrative, a viewer's positive (or negative) perceptions of one character likely extend to their allies. This type of extension is especially common with secondary characters, who are often tied to main characters through various narrative tropes (e.g., heroes and sidekicks, villains and underlings).

There are two methods to test assimilation when applying balance theory's triadic structure to a character network. One approach is to directly associate a sidekick with the main character and examine whether the main character's traits influence perceptions of their sidekick. While this test provides evidence of assimilation through character interdependence, it functionally mirrors the contrast effect described earlier, but with an inversely valenced relationship. As a result, both effects rely on a direct association with the main character, reflecting the types of binary relationships studied in past character interdependence research.

A more compelling test of assimilation would examine how these effects operate through indirect associations. Therefore, we aim to determine whether moral information about the main character spreads *through* a character network, influencing perceptions of characters with no direct connection to them. This approach more effectively leverages balance theory's predictions to understand how information ripples across a network and shapes interdependent disposition formation based on relationship valence. To test this, we associate a sidekick with the main character's *rival*. Structuring the character network this way allows us to assess whether moral information about the main character indirectly influences the rival's sidekick by first contrasting the rival against the main character and then assimilating the rival's sidekick with the rival. In other words, this indirect pathway replicates and extends past findings by testing comparison effects based on direct associations between characters while also introducing a novel examination of character interdependence through indirect associations.

> H5: When the main character's rival has a sidekick, dispositions toward the sidekick will be mediated by dispositions toward the rival, such that attributing moral behaviors to the main character will negatively and indirectly bias dispositions toward the rival's sidekick.
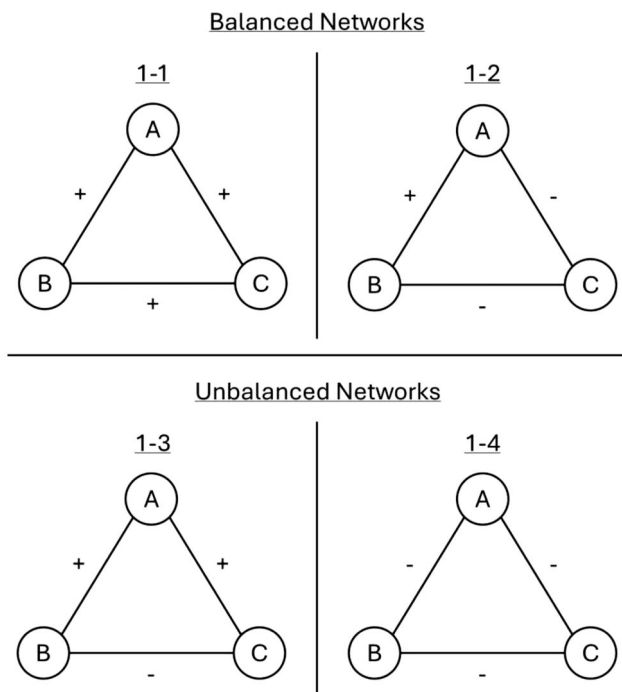
Figure 1. Depictions of Heider's original triad in balanced and unbalanced states.

Importantly, we do not predict that the sidekick will be perceived as the protagonist or antagonist of the story, as secondary characters are less likely to occupy primary narrative roles.

The current studies

The current studies were designed to examine how information about a single character can influence both independent and interdependent disposition formation by spreading throughout a character network in a manner consistent with balance theory. The character network established in the current studies contained three characters: Character A (the main character), Character B (the rival character), and Character C (the rival's sidekick). Information about Character A's past behaviors was manipulated to establish him as either moral or immoral (depending on random assignment). Importantly, moral information about Character B and Character C was omitted entirely to examine whether perceptions of these characters were influenced by the information provided about Character A. By structuring our narrative stimuli in this manner, we aimed to assess whether the manipulation of Character A's morality (a) directly impacted evaluations of Character A (as proposed by ADT, H1 and H2), (b) directly impacted evaluations of Character B (as proposed by balance theory, H3 and H4), and (c) indirectly impacted evaluations of Character C through evaluations of Character B (as proposed by balance theory, H5). Thus, we test our predictions using a path analysis, where direct and indirect paths provide evidence for our hypotheses, and model fit serves as evidence for the overall approach.

Study 1

Data, syntax, surveys, measurement models, reliabilities, descriptives, correlation matrices, supplementary analyses, and stimuli are available on OSF (https://bit.ly/44SHm5j).

Method
Stimuli and design
To present multiple characters and maintain a high degree of control over the stimuli, we wrote a short story (approximately 700 words) framed as a synopsis of a hypothetical movie, *Super Caldera*, loosely based on the plot of the film *Twister*. The story opens with a brief paragraph describing the imminent threat of the Yellowstone super caldera, a massive, 43-mile-wide supervolcano under Yellowstone National Park that is on the brink of eruption.

The next paragraph introduces the two main characters, referred to as Character A and Character B for clarity (in the text, they were named Harry Dalton and Mike Roark, respectively). Characters A and B are described as "two rival scientists" who are both developing devices to prevent the super caldera eruption. This section of the narrative includes our first manipulation, consisting of two sentences that describe the morality of Character A (immoral vs. moral). To depict Character A as immoral, he is described as a deadbeat father who takes mind-enhancing drugs, steals research ideas, and has falsified data to gain a competitive edge. To depict Character A as moral, he is described as a philanthropist who has donated millions of dollars, resources, and ideas to up-and-coming volcanologists. In both versions, Character B is

simply described as Character A's rival, with no information given about his morality.

The following paragraph sets up a meeting and conversation between Characters A and B, who are attending an international volcanology conference. At the conference, they learn of an upcoming seismic event that would be the perfect opportunity to test their devices. Both realize that the first to analyze this event will have the upper hand in solving the crisis. Characters A and B notice each other at the conference and share some adversarial dialogue, challenging each other to reach the event first. After the conversation, Character B meets Character C—Jonas Miller, a graduate student and emerging volcanologist who wants to assist Character B in testing his device and solving the dilemma. Character B then recruits Character C to help with his research. Like Character B, no information is given about Character C's morality. The story ends with the characters racing toward the seismic event with their devices in tow.

During Study 1's planning, we noted that the inclusion of Character C could potentially moderate the Character A morality manipulation. For instance, Character C prefers to work with Character B instead of Character A, and this could implicitly suggest that Character B is a better person. To examine whether Character C's inclusion inversely influenced dispositions toward Characters A or B, we manipulated Character C's presence (absent vs. present) in Study 1. This influence would be reflected either as a main effect of the Character C presence manipulation or as an interaction between the Character A morality manipulation and the Character C presence manipulation. Accordingly, we asked the following exploratory research question:

> RQ1: Does the presence of a sidekick moderate dispositions toward the main character or their rival?

Study 1 was thus a 2 (Character A Morality: Immoral vs. Moral) X 2 (Character C Presence: Character C Present vs. Character C Absent) between-subjects factorial experiment.

Procedure and participants
Procedures were evaluated and determined exempt by the authors' institutional review board, and surveys were administered online using Qualtrics. A total of 262 participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at a large, public university in a mid-western state where the students received course credit for their participation. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, read the narrative stimulus associated with their condition, and responded to study and demographic measures. After completing the survey, participants were thanked for their time and dismissed.

We applied two inclusion criteria to determine our final sample. First, we removed participants with missing data across our dependent variables. Second, we implemented two factual attention check measures based on our stimuli ("What two cities were featured in the story?" and "What kind of disaster were the scientists trying to avoid?"). Our final sample consisted of 162 participants (n_{Female} = 83, 51.2%; n_{Male} = 79, 48.8%; n_{White} = 126, 77.8%; n_{Black} = 11, 6.8%; n_{Asian} = 18, 11.1%; $n_{\text{Other Race}}$ = 7, 4.3%; M_{Age} = 20.99, SD_{Age} = 2.97). A chi-square analysis indicated that random assignment was not compromised by our criteria,

$\chi^2(1) = 0.51$, $p = .475$ ($n_{\text{Immoral-Absent}} = 45$, $n_{\text{Immoral-Present}} = 42$, $n_{\text{Moral-Absent}} = 43$, $n_{\text{Moral-Present}} = 32$).

Measures

Character dispositions

Character dispositions were measured using the 5-item Character Moral Foundations Questionnaire Short Form (CMFQ-S; Grizzard, Fitzgerald et al., 2020) and the 6-item Character Liking Scale (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). The CMFQ-S measures moral perceptions based on the five foundations proposed by moral foundations theory. An example item is "[Character] seems like he would deny others their rights." The Character Liking Scale measures one's liking or disliking of a character. An example item is "I admire [Character]." Both scales were measured using a 7-point Likert-type response scale. Based on our confirmatory factor analyses, we averaged the five items from the CMFQ-S and select items (1, 2, and 5) from the Character Liking Scale to create disposition composites for each character.

Character role

We also measured perceptions of each character's role in the narrative to assess whether interdependence influenced whom participants believed to be the main protagonist or antagonist of the story. These single-item measures asked participants, "How likely do you think [Character] is to be the [protagonist/antagonist] of the story." All six items were measured using a 7-point scale ranging from *Extremely unlikely* to *Extremely likely*.

Results

As stated earlier, the main test of our hypotheses is conducted through path analysis. However, we began our analysis using MANOVAs as a manipulation check for our primary manipulation and to assess whether the presence of Character C moderated its strength.

MANOVA—Characters A and B

Our MANOVA examined the main and interactive effects of our manipulations on dispositions toward Characters A and B and perceptions of each character's role within the narrative. The Character A morality manipulation, the Character C presence manipulation, and their interaction were included as predictors. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was significant ($p < .001$), so we interpreted Pillai's Trace. The multivariate results indicated a significant effect of the Character A morality manipulation, Pillai's Trace = 0.67, $F(6, 153) = 50.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{\text{p}} = 0.67$. Neither the Character C presence manipulation nor the Character A morality X Character C presence interaction was significant, suggesting that the inclusion of Character C did not influence the dispositions toward Characters A or B, answering RQ1.

The univariate results demonstrate that the Character A morality manipulation had a significant effect on all dependent variables for Character A (see Table 1). The corresponding patterns of means indicate that participants formed more positive dispositions toward Character A, were more likely to believe Character A was the protagonist, and were less likely to believe Character A was the antagonist when Character A was described as moral compared to immoral. These findings support H1 and H2, which predicted that Character A's morality would positively influence perceptions and evaluations of Character A.

Table 1. Study 1 Univariate Effects and Marginal Means of the Character A Morality Manipulation.

Character	Variable	$F(1, 158)$	p	η_{p}^2	A Immoral M	A Immoral SE	A Moral M	A Moral SE
A	Disposition	301.66	<.001	.66	2.60	0.10	5.09	0.11
	Protagonist	12.29	<.001	.07	4.58	0.20	5.58	0.21
	Antagonist	24.29	<.001	.13	5.36	0.20	3.94	0.21
B	Disposition	12.38	<.001	.07	4.89	0.09	4.40	0.10
	Protagonist	9.57	.002	.06	5.24	0.18	4.43	0.19
	Antagonist	13.05	<.001	.08	4.36	0.19	5.44	0.22
C[a]	Disposition	0.00	.98	.00	4.92	0.14	4.92	0.16
	Protagonist	0.02	.90	.00	3.79	0.31	3.84	0.35
	Antagonist	0.19	.66	.00	3.57	0.29	3.38	0.34

[a] The *df* for the Character C *F*-tests were (1, 72).

The Character A morality manipulation also had a significant effect on all variables for Character B. Reversing the patterns for Character A, participants formed less positive dispositions toward Character B, were less likely to believe Character B was the protagonist, and were more likely to believe Character B was the antagonist when Character A was described as moral compared to immoral. These findings support H3 and H4, which predicted that Character A's morality would negatively bias perceptions and evaluations of Character B.

MANOVA—Character C

The previous MANOVA was conducted on dispositions toward and perceptions of Characters A and B and excluded Character C. This exclusion was necessary because observations of Character C could only be taken when Character C was present. To further examine whether the Character A morality manipulation influenced Character C, we conducted a separate MANOVA. Here, we included Characters A and B to examine replicability of the effects from the first MANOVA. However, the primary effects of interest are whether the Character A morality manipulation has direct effects on dispositions and perceptions of Character C.

Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was significant ($p < .001$), so we interpreted Pillai's Trace. Although the multivariate effect of the Character A morality manipulation was significant, Pillai's Trace = 0.69, $F(9, 64) = 15.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{\text{p}} = 0.69$, the univariate effects indicate that the Character A morality manipulation did not impact any of our dependent variables related to Character C (see Table 1). Thus, the significance of the multivariate effect was fully attributable to the manipulation's impact on the dependent variables related to Characters A and B, and the information about Character A's morality had no direct effect on the perceptions or evaluations of Character C.

Path model

Finally, we conducted a path analysis to evaluate whether the pattern of disposition formation toward all characters was consistent with balance theory's predictions. Our path model was established to reflect the pattern of relationships within the character network. We incorporated paths from the Character A morality manipulation to Character A and B dispositions to account for the direct effects of the manipulation on these character dispositions, testing H1 and H3. We also included a direct path from Character B dispositions to
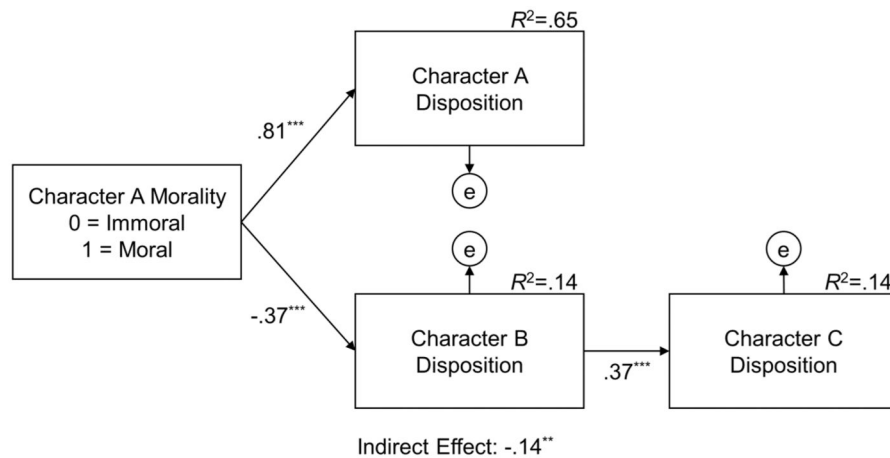
Figure 2. Path model results from Study 1.
$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$. All effects are standardized.

Character C dispositions to evaluate the indirect effect of the Character A morality manipulation on Character C dispositions through Character B dispositions, testing H5. Results are presented in Figure 2.

Our model fit the data well, $\chi^2(3) = 2.98$, RMSEA = .00, PCLOSE = .48, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .07, and we observed all modeled paths were significant. The Character A morality manipulation positively predicted Character A dispositions, negatively predicted Character B dispositions, mirroring the effects identified in our MANOVA, and again provide support for H1 and H3. We also found Character B dispositions positively predicted Character C dispositions and led to a significant negative indirect effect of the Character A morality manipulation on Character C dispositions. Thus, although we did not observe any direct effects of the Character A morality manipulation on Character C dispositions in our MANOVA, our model results suggest its influence is fully mediated by Character B dispositions, supporting H5. Notably, we also observed that by simply accounting for the morality of Character A and the relationships included in our character network, we explained a large amount of variance in Character A dispositions, and moderate amounts of variance in Character B and C dispositions.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate strong support for both ADT and character interdependence via the predictions of balance theory. Regarding ADT, we observed that the moral information provided about Character A directly and positively impacted how participants formed dispositions toward him and perceived his role in the story. These results are consistent with Zillmann's assertion that viewers act as "untiring moral monitors" (2000, p. 54) when evaluating characters, suggesting that a character's moral behaviors strongly influence how audiences perceive and evaluate that character. When a character is perceived as moral, audiences are more likely to positively judge that character, highlighting behavioral approbation as the predominant pathway of disposition formation, consistent with past research.

Regarding character interdependence, we found the moral information provided about Character A directly impacted how viewers formed dispositions toward Character B and

perceived his role in the story. Because Characters A and B had a negative relationship, these effects were negative rather than positive, indicating that the perceptions and evaluations of Character B were contrasted against those of Character A. Thus, the information about Character A's morality spread through the character network in a manner consistent with balance theory and negatively biased participants' perceptions and evaluations of Character B, even though no moral information was included about him.

Similarly, we found a strong relationship between Character B dispositions and Character C dispositions. Because Characters B and C had a positive relationship, with Character C serving as a sidekick to Character B, evaluations of Character C were assimilated with those of Character B. This relationship led to a negative indirect effect of the Character A morality manipulation on evaluations of Character C, indicating that evaluations of Character C were also contrasted against those of Character A. Again, these results suggest that the information about Character A's morality spread throughout the character network in a manner consistent with balance theory and negatively influenced how participants perceived Character C. Importantly, the presence or absence of Character C did not moderate these effects. Taken together, our findings support Grizzard, Francemone, et al.'s model (2020) and are consistent with the character interdependence hypothesis (see also Grizzard et al., 2021), suggesting that viewers perceive and evaluate characters based not only on their features but also their relation to other characters.

Study 2
Method

Given the findings of Study 1, we sought to replicate our results with a more focused design. Since the Character C presence manipulation had no effect on our dependent variables, we simplified our design to a single factor (Character A Morality: Immoral vs. Moral) between-subjects experiment. As a result, Character C was present in both versions of our stimuli, with the morality of Character A being the only information that was manipulated between our conditions. We also aimed to recruit a more heterogeneous and adequately

powered sample compared to the student sample collected in Study 1. Thus, we recruited our sample from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for Study 2. Aside from these two changes, Study 2 followed an identical procedure, used the same stimuli, and employed the same measures as Study 1.

Participants

432 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and received $2.00 for their participation. We applied the same inclusion criteria as Study 1 to determine our final sample. Our final sample consisted of 351 participants (n_{Female} = 157, 44.7%; n_{Male} = 193, 55.0%; $n_{Transgender\ Male}$ = 1, 0.3%; n_{White} = 269, 76.6%; n_{Black} = 47, 13.4%; n_{Asian} = 20, 5.7%; $n_{Other\ Race}$ = 15, 4.3%; M_{Age} = 35.87, SD_{Age} = 10.40). A chi-square analysis indicated that random assignment was not compromised by our criteria, $\chi^2(1) = 0.38$, $p = .538$ ($n_{Immoral}$ = 178, n_{Moral} = 173).

Results
MANOVA

Given our simplified design, we conducted a single MANOVA examining the effect of the Character A morality manipulation on dependent variables related to all three characters. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was significant ($p < .001$), so we interpreted Pillai's Trace. We observed a significant multivariate effect of the Character A morality manipulation, Pillai's Trace = 0.69, $F(9, 341)$ = 84.37, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.69$. The univariate effects are presented in Table 2. For Characters A and B, we found that the results of Study 2 fully replicated those of Study 1. The means indicated that participants formed more positive dispositions toward Character A, were more likely to believe Character A was the protagonist, and were less likely to believe Character A was the antagonist when Character A was described as moral compared to immoral. Similarly, participants formed less positive dispositions toward Character B, were less likely to believe Character B was the protagonist, and were more likely to believe Character B was the antagonist when Character A was described as moral compared to immoral. These results again support H1-H4. Notably, we observed two significant direct univariate effects of the Character A morality manipulation on Character C variables. Participants formed less positive dispositions toward Character C and were more likely to perceive Character C as the antagonist when Character A was described as moral compared to immoral.

Table 2. Study 2 Univariate Effects and Means of the Character A Morality Manipulation.

Character	Variable	$F(1, 349)$	p	η^2	A Immoral		A Moral	
					M	SE	M	SE
A	Disposition	713.08	<.001	.67	2.55	0.08	5.66	0.08
	Protagonist	92.44	<.001	.21	4.14	0.14	6.01	0.14
	Antagonist	80.77	<.001	.19	5.65	0.14	3.87	0.14
B	Disposition	82.80	<.001	.19	5.32	0.08	4.26	0.08
	Protagonist	68.41	<.001	.16	5.85	0.11	4.50	0.12
	Antagonist	67.82	<.001	.16	4.14	0.14	5.72	0.14
C	Disposition	17.46	<.001	.05	5.37	0.07	4.95	0.07
	Protagonist	1.47	.23	.00	3.66	0.14	3.42	0.14
	Disposition	8.62	.004	.02	3.05	0.14	3.61	0.14

Path model

Our proposed path model fit the data well in Study 2, $\chi^2(3)$ = 12.19, RMSEA = .09, PCLOSE = .07, CFI = .99, SRMR = .03, and the observed paths fully replicated those of Study 1 (see Figure 3). The Character A morality manipulation positively predicted Character A dispositions, negatively predicted Character B dispositions, and had a negative indirect effect on dispositions toward Character C through Character B dispositions. Thus, H1, H3, and H5 were fully supported again. Moreover, when comparing the amount of variance explained between our studies, we observed that similar amounts of variance were explained for Character A and B dispositions. However, nearly twice as much variance was explained for Character C dispositions, likely due to the more adequately powered sample used in Study 2.

Discussion

The findings in Study 2 demonstrate that the effects observed in Study 1 were robust. We again observed direct effects of Character A's morality on evaluations of Character A, consistent with ADT, and also observed direct and indirect effects of Character A's morality on evaluations of Characters B and C, consistent with character interdependence and balance theory.

Notably, we observed two novel effects related to Character C in Study 2. First, we observed a direct negative effect of the Character A morality manipulation on Character C dispositions. While this finding departs from the Character C effects observed in Study 1, the pattern of results mirrors those of Character B, indicating that evaluations of Character C were contrasted against those of Character A, and are still consistent with the predictions of balance theory. Additionally, the amount of variance explained by this direct effect ($\eta^2 = 0.05$) is dwarfed by the amount of variance explained by the indirect effect included in our path model ($R^2 = 0.37$). Thus, we believe this finding is largely complementary and highlights that interdependent effects related to side characters should primarily be analyzed through the lens of their corresponding main character, as these types of pathways will account for more variance in character evaluations.

Second, we observed a direct negative effect of the Character A morality manipulation on perceptions of Character C as the antagonist of the story. While this finding is interesting, we note that the means of these responses were below the midpoint of the scale (e.g., *Completely unsure* response option) and also below those of Characters A and B in both conditions, indicating this effect is largely inconsequential compared to those observed for the main characters. In other words, participants seem to be intuitively aware that the rivals (Characters A and B) are more likely to be the protagonist and antagonist as compared to Character C. Overall, the results of Study 2 successfully replicated those of Study 1 and again demonstrate support for character interdependence and Grizzard, Francemone et al.'s (2020) model.

Study 3
Method

Following Study 2, we sought to address an outstanding methodological concern regarding order effects. In Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to rate Character A before
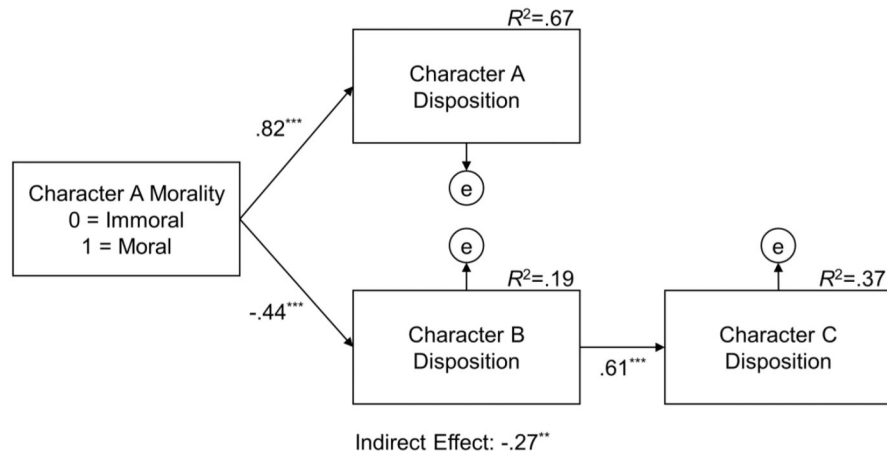
Figure 3. Path model results from Study 2.
$*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.$ All effects are standardized.

Character B and Character B before Character C. As a result, we were concerned that our findings were carryover effects elicited by our measurement design rather than interdependent effects elicited by the character network. Therefore, we conducted one final replication which randomized the order participants responded to our measures to eliminate this alternative explanation. Aside from the randomization, Study 3 followed the same protocol as Study 2.

Participants

281 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and received $2.00 for their participation. The same inclusion criteria used in Studies 1 and 2 were applied to determine our final sample. Our final sample consisted of 212 participants ($n_{\text{Female}} = 92$, 43.4%; $n_{\text{Male}} = 120$, 56.6%; $n_{\text{White}} = 189$, 89.2%; $n_{\text{Black}} = 11$, 5.2%; $n_{\text{Other Race}} = 12$, 5.7%; $M_{\text{Age}} = 39.07$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 11.45$). A chi-square analysis indicated that random assignment was not compromised by our criteria, $\chi^2(1) = 0.43$, $p = .510$ ($n_{\text{Immoral}} = 104$, $n_{\text{Moral}} = 108$).

Results
MANOVA

The same MANOVA from Study 2 was conducted for Study 3. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was significant ($p < .001$), so we interpreted Pillai's Trace. We observed a significant multivariate effect of the Character A morality manipulation, Pillai's Trace $= 0.55$, $F(9, 202) = 27.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{\text{p}} = .55$. All univariate effects from Study 2 replicated in Study 3, aside from perceptions of Character C as the antagonist of the story, supporting H1–H4 (see Table 3).

Path model

Our proposed path model fit the data well in Study 3, $\chi^2(3) = 1.08$, RMSEA $= .00$, PCLOSE $= .88$, CFI $= 1.00$, SRMR $= .01$. All observed paths fully replicated those of Studies 1 and 2, and similar amounts of variance were explained in character dispositions (see Figure 4). Thus, H1, H3, and H5 were fully supported once more, and we were able to

**Table 3.** Study 3 Univariate Effects and Means of the Character A Morality Manipulation.

Character	Variable	$F(1, 210)$	p	η^2	A Immoral		A Moral	
					M	SE	M	SE
A	Disposition	214.65	<.001	.51	2.84	0.12	5.29	0.12
	Protagonist	29.39	<.001	.12	4.20	0.18	5.57	0.18
	Antagonist	53.66	<.001	.20	5.72	0.17	3.95	0.17
B	Disposition	26.72	<.001	.11	5.23	0.11	4.41	0.11
	Protagonist	30.39	<.001	.13	5.93	0.14	4.88	0.13
	Antagonist	23.11	<.001	.10	4.04	0.18	5.28	0.18
C	Disposition	8.48	.004	.04	5.37	0.10	4.96	0.10
	Protagonist	0.81	.37	.00	3.39	0.19	3.62	0.18
	Disposition	0.41	.52	.00	3.16	0.18	3.32	0.18

eliminate methodological artifacts of measurement order as an explanation for our findings.

General discussion

The current article extends both the empirical evidence and conceptual precision of character interdependence. Across three studies, we demonstrate that manipulating a single character's morality influences participants' perceptions and evaluations of other characters within the same narrative. Beyond merely exhibiting interdependent disposition formation, our studies align with Grizzard, Francemone et al.'s (2020) hypothesizing and highlight that, through the lens of balance theory, the relationships within a character network can be leveraged to predict how interdependent evaluations will manifest. Rather than freely developing positive or negative dispositions toward characters, viewers' dispositions seem to develop in a manner consistent with the types of relationships among characters. By considering the valences of these relationships, one can predict how perceptions of one character ripple throughout the network, biasing perceptions of other characters. Thus, our findings suggest a new possibility for conceptualizing disposition formation. Instead of assessing disposition formation based solely on a character's behaviors and schema, researchers could incorporate the
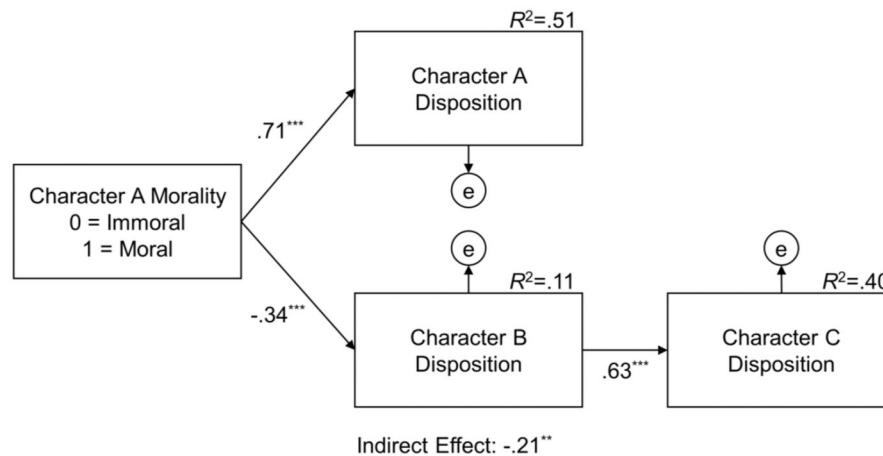
Figure 4. Path model results from Study 3.
$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$. All effects are standardized.

relational information gleaned from a character network to more accurately model how audiences evaluate characters.

Considering character networks in the disposition formation process
Social cognition and interdependent disposition formation

A central aspect of our approach is highlighting how affective relationships provide valuable information for viewers when evaluating characters. This distinguishes our findings from past interdependence research, as they demonstrate that viewers consider how characters feel about one another when forming dispositions, rather than simply showing how perceptions of characters are influenced by comparative framing. For instance, a key finding from the predecessor of this work—Grizzard, Francemone et al. (2020)—is that a neutral-schema character was perceived as highly villainous or highly heroic when presented after a heroic-schema or villainous-schema character, respectively. While this finding is crucial for understanding how character interdependence influences disposition formation, it is primarily based on the presentation of perceptual differences between these characters rather than their explicit relationship, which has been the basis for character interdependence research and similar studies to date (Grizzard, Francemone et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2021; Tamborini et al., 2024).

Rather than relying solely on binary perceptual comparisons, our findings emphasize that the relationships within a character network provide additional context that viewers use to judge characters. We observed that perceptions of characters are either contrasted (Character A with Characters B and C) or assimilated (Character B with Character C) based on how they feel about and interact with one another. This highlights the inherently social nature of character interdependence, suggesting that perceptions of social relationships and interactions may shape disposition formation processes. As such, insights from social cognition and interpersonal communication research may offer valuable perspectives for studying interdependent disposition formation.

For example, social skills such as social intelligence, social awareness, and conflict resolution (see Spitzberg & Dillard, 2001) may moderate interdependent disposition formation. Individuals with stronger social skills may more easily identify nuanced relationships conveyed by the author and may more accurately perceive relationships within a character network as compared to those with weaker social skills. This notion is particularly important when using balance theory as a predictive framework for character interdependence, as its predictions rely on viewers accurately perceiving relationships within a character network. If viewers misinterpret the valence of a relationship, the resulting pattern of disposition formation may contradict theoretical predictions. Understanding how social skills influence the interpretation of character relationships may help identify important moderators that shape how character interdependence emerges from the between-character relationships present within character networks.

Complexity within character networks

An important caveat of our studies is that we utilized a simplistic character network. This was an intentional decision to robustly test balance theory's predictions for interdependent disposition formation. However, entertainment media often feature more elaborate character networks beyond a simple triad (e.g., *Game of Thrones*). As a result, hypotheses from balance theory's original triadic model may or may not cleanly apply to larger networks, as they become increasingly complex with the introduction of additional characters. This complexity may have significant implications for understanding how viewers perceive character networks, as greater interconnectedness suggests that viewers will likely need to consider more relational information when forming interdependent dispositions.

That said, narratives have distinct affordances that may simplify the complexity of vast character networks. One such affordance is the concept of a narrative "metastory" (Raney & Janicke, 2013), which broadly suggests that most stories distill into a central conflict between two opposing sides—namely, good and evil—with enjoyment often tied to good triumphing over evil. From this perspective, viewers may

categorize characters within these broader opposing forces, allowing them to perceptually simplify a complex network into a general binary conflict with characters falling on each side of the conflict. This idea is supported by findings from Hopp et al. (2020), who used graph learning and natural language processing to analyze character networks by applying the electronic Moral Foundations Dictionary to movie scripts (e.g., *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*). They found that characters in these stories typically fell into two (or sometimes three) opposing sides engaged in moral conflict.

A prime example of this phenomenon is *Captain America: Civil War*, where two groups of longstanding heroic allies are pitted against each other (i.e., Team Iron Man and Team Cap). Although the film features a dozen heroic characters, much of the public discourse surrounding it suggested that viewers judged these characters primarily based on their allegiance to one of these two sides (see Reddit, 2021). This film not only serves as a strong instance of media that elicits interdependent disposition formation—compelling viewers to choose between two morally upstanding factions—but also demonstrates how narratives can structure relationships in ways that help viewers simplify complex character networks.

Thus, it remains an open question how network complexity impacts interdependent disposition formation. A more complex character network may require viewers to consider additional relational information when forming interdependent dispositions, or it may be perceptually simplified by structures of narrative storytelling. Future research should examine different types of character networks to determine how complexity can influence character interdependence. Additionally, if balance theory proves insufficient as a predictive framework for larger character networks, future research should explore alternative perceptual network theories (e.g., cognitive social structures; see Brands, 2013) to further formalize how various network qualities might moderate interdependent disposition formation.

Conceptualizing nodes and ties within character networks

When examining the influence of character interdependence on mediated processes and judgments, another consideration is whether real-world individuals—or the viewer—can be conceptualized as nodes within a character network, with their connections to characters serving as network ties. Our findings suggest that the perceived relationships between characters within a narrative shape viewers' feelings toward those characters in predictable ways. It is also possible that these effects extend beyond the narrative itself, influencing judgments of real-world individuals who have perceived connections to fictional characters.

For example, could a viewer's feelings toward a character bias their attitudes toward similar real-world individuals? Some prior research supports this possibility. Holbert et al. (2003) found that the television drama *The West Wing* increased positive feelings toward the fictional President of the United States (POTUS), which, in turn, led to more favorable attitudes toward the real-world office of the presidency and former officeholders. They described this as a priming effect. However, through the lens of balance theory, this effect could also be interpreted as assimilation based on a perceived positive connection established by the similarity between the real and fictional POTUS. The perceived positive relationship

may have led audiences to extend their perceptions of the fictional POTUS to the real-world office. Thus, in certain contexts, it may be appropriate to conceptualize real-world individuals as nodes within a character network, as doing so could enhance the predictive precision of media effects that extend beyond the story world.

Similarly, the viewer could be considered as a central node within a character network, with relevant mediated processes or judgments (e.g., dispositions) serving as unidirectional ties the viewer has with characters. This perspective may be particularly impactful, as several media psychology and mass communication theories highlight the importance of such one-sided relationships. Specifically, concepts like parasocial relationships or parasocial interactions suggest that these one-sided relationships foster various persuasive outcomes and processes, such as attitude change, behavioral intentions, and narrative transportation (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Therefore, to examine how character networks can enhance the explanatory power of media theories, it may be useful to conceptualize the viewer as the most central node within the network and leverage their unidirectional ties to characters to specify the resulting effects.

On the other hand, it may be more effective to consider character networks as closed systems conveyed by a narrative and observed from the outside by the audience. From this perspective, the ties that constitute a character network are explicitly defined by relationships and interactions between characters within the narrative. These relationships are thus uniformly communicated to all audience members. Consequently, the ties between the viewer and a character—or the perceived ties between a real-world individual and a character—are best understood as effects elicited by the character network rather than as integral pathways within it. Regardless of whether viewers or real-world individuals should be conceptualized as nodes, continued efforts to define character network boundaries are necessary to determine which perspective is most beneficial for the theoretical development of character interdependence.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of our work is the use of print-based stimuli. While this approach maximized internal consistency and allowed us to make accurate causal claims, the narrative we created pushes the boundaries of ecological validity. Therefore, we suggest future work should incorporate more representative audiovisual stimuli to examine how character interdependence functions across narrative media, as the affordances of audiovisual formats (e.g., nonverbal communication, visual schema) likely amplify interdependent disposition formation. We encourage narrative scholars to conceptually replicate this work across a variety of formats to determine how different media may diminish or enhance the effects identified in our studies.

Another limitation is that we did not examine other versions of a balanced network (e.g., a wholly positive network). For example, although allied characters were present in the narrative through Character C's positive relationship with Character B, it remains an empirical question how interdependence will function with two primary characters who are allies. As discussed, narratives are typically built on conflict, so a fully positive character network may be difficult for viewers to understand, and the effects of character

interdependence may be minimized. However, wholly positive networks can exist within clusters of a character network (e.g., all characters on one side of a conflict) and highlight instances where strong assimilation effects may occur. Thus, future work should examine more varied types of networks, in both balanced and unbalanced states, to determine how their structures moderate interdependent character evaluations. This work can help define boundary conditions for character interdependence and highlight when the balance of a network is more or less likely to hold sway over a viewer's evaluations.

Conclusion

The current article develops the character interdependence hypothesis and specifies its implications for character appraisal theories. We demonstrate that by considering the relationships that constitute a narrative's character network, one can more effectively predict how interdependent character perceptions manifest and subsequently bias audience judgments. Our findings support Grizzard, Francemone et al.'s (2020) theorizing and highlight that relational information can influence disposition formation outside of behavioral approbation and schema activation. By further identifying how features of character networks impact viewer perception, future work can continue to develop character interdependence and use its insights to enhance the precision of character evaluative theories.

Data availability

The data, materials, and analyses underlying this article are available on the Open Science Framework at https://bit.ly/44SHm5j.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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