

The Allure of Moral Ambiguity

The appeal of fictional villains involves psychological mechanisms that correspond to evolutionary theories of social cognition, despite lacking direct evolutionary psychology framing.

Abstract

Fictional villains and morally ambiguous characters activate varied psychological mechanisms, as shown in studies of 2,547 participants across correlational, experimental, and survey designs. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2020) observed that dark triad traits—notably psychopathy and Machiavellianism—predict positive forms of engagement (identification, empathy, fascination, and enjoyment) with villainous figures. Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) reported that although morally ambiguous characters tend to be liked less than clearly virtuous ones, they still evoke comparable levels of transportation, suspense, and cognitive engagement. Meier and Neubaum (2019) proposed that a dual process underpins responses to morally ambiguous characters: liking spurs enjoyment, while social comparison based on moral principles leads to appreciation.

The results indicate that character appeal may be linked to personality and moral processing mechanisms. These mechanisms—ranging from dark personality markers to cognitive immersion and moral evaluation—correspond with elements central to evolutionary accounts of social cognition and moral reasoning, even though none of the studies framed their work explicitly within an evolutionary psychology framework.

Paper search

Using your research question "Can EP theories explain the appeal of fictional villains and morally ambiguous characters?", we searched across over 126 million academic papers from the Semantic Scholar corpus. We retrieved the 50 papers most relevant to the query.

Screening

We screened in papers that met these criteria:

- **Study Focus:** Does the study examine audience responses to fictional villains or morally ambiguous characters?
- **Study Type:** Is this an empirical study (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) OR a systematic review/meta-analysis?
- **Theoretical Framework:** Does the study apply evolutionary psychology theories or frameworks?
- **Psychological Analysis:** Does the study examine psychological mechanisms of character identification or parasocial relationships?
- **Subject Type:** Does the study focus exclusively on fictional characters (rather than real-world criminals or historical figures)?
- **Analysis Approach:** Does the study include psychological analysis (rather than purely literary or media criticism)?
- **Evidence Base:** Does the study present empirical evidence (rather than being solely theoretical or opinion-based)?
- **Media Type:** Does the study analyze character appeal in an appropriate fictional medium (literature, film, television, or games)?

We considered all screening questions together and made a holistic judgement about whether to screen in each paper.

Data extraction

We asked a large language model to extract each data column below from each paper. We gave the model the extraction instructions shown below for each column.

- **Study Design Type:**

Identify the primary research methodology used in the study. Options include:

- Experimental study
- Survey/Questionnaire
- Correlational study
- Mixed methods

Look in the methods section for explicit description of the study design. If multiple approaches are used, select the primary design type. If unclear, note "unclear" and provide a brief explanation of the observed methodology.

- **Participant Characteristics:**

Extract the following details:

- Total sample size (N)
- Geographic region of participants
- Demographic breakdown (if provided):
 - Age range or mean
 - Gender distribution
 - Any other relevant demographic information

Look in the methods section under "Participants" or "Sample" description. If specific demographic details are not fully reported, note "not fully reported" for each missing category.

- **Psychological Constructs Measured:**

List all psychological constructs or variables examined in relation to fictional character engagement:

- Specific personality traits measured
- Engagement metrics (e.g., enjoyment, appreciation, identification)
- Moral judgment scales
- Character perception measures

Locate in methods section describing measures/instruments and results section discussing psychological variables. If standardized scales were used, note the specific scale name.

- **Key Findings Related to Character Appeal:**

Extract the primary findings specifically addressing:

- Mechanisms explaining appeal of morally ambiguous/villainous characters
- Psychological processes underlying character engagement
- Statistical significance of key relationships

Prioritize findings directly quoted or highlighted in results/discussion sections. Include effect sizes or statistical significance if reported. If multiple findings exist, list in order of importance to the research question.

- **Theoretical Framework:**

Identify the primary theoretical perspective or model used to explain character appeal:

- Specific theories referenced
- Conceptual model proposed
- Theoretical contributions or extensions

Search introduction and discussion sections for explicit theoretical framing. If multiple theories are discussed, note the primary theoretical approach and any novel theoretical contributions.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Study Design	Sample Size	Character Types Examined	Primary Psychological Mechanisms	Full text retrieved
Kjeldgaard-Christensen et al., 2020	Correlational study	1,805	Villainous characters	Dark personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy), engagement metrics (identification, empathy, fascination, enjoyment)	Yes
Krakowiak and Oliver, 2012	Experimental study	313	Good, bad, and morally ambiguous characters	Enjoyment, transportation, suspense, moral judgment, character perception	Yes
Meier and Neubaum, 2019	Survey/Questionnaire	429	Morally ambiguous characters	Enjoyment, appreciation, moral judgment, liking of characters	No

Our search identified three studies examining psychological mechanisms related to character engagement in media. The studies used different methodologies:

- 1 correlational study
- 1 experimental study
- 1 survey/questionnaire

Sample sizes varied widely, ranging from 313 to 1,805 participants, with a total of 2,547 participants across all studies.

Character types examined included:

- Villainous characters (1 study)
- Good characters (1 study)
- Bad characters (1 study)
- Morally ambiguous characters (2 studies)

We found a variety of psychological mechanisms examined across the studies:

- Enjoyment (2 studies)
- Moral judgment (2 studies)
- Dark personality traits (1 study)
- Engagement metrics (1 study)
- Transportation (1 study)
- Suspense (1 study)
- Character perception (1 study)
- Appreciation (1 study)
- Character liking (1 study)

The most commonly examined mechanisms were enjoyment and moral judgment, each appearing in 2 out of 3 studies. We didn't find any mechanism that was examined in all three studies.

Thematic Analysis

Personality-Based Appeal Mechanisms

Personality Trait	Character Type	Appeal Mechanism	Key Findings
Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy)	Villainous characters	Positive engagement (identification, empathy, fascination, enjoyment)	Dark personality traits, especially psychopathy and Machiavellianism, significantly predict positive engagement with villainous characters

Personality Trait	Character Type	Appeal Mechanism	Key Findings
Need for cognition, Tolerance of ambiguity	Morally ambiguous characters	Enjoyment, transportation, suspense	Individual differences in need for cognition and tolerance of ambiguity may moderate responses to morally ambiguous characters
No mention found	Morally ambiguous characters	Liking, social comparison	Liking the character leads to enjoyment; social comparison processes based on moral principles lead to appreciation

- We found information on personality traits for 2/3 studies. The traits examined were:
 - Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) in 1 study
 - Need for cognition and tolerance of ambiguity in 1 study
 - No mention found in 1 study
- Character types were reported in all 3 studies:
 - Villainous characters in 1 study
 - Morally ambiguous characters in 2 studies
- Appeal mechanisms varied across studies:
 - Positive engagement (including identification, empathy, fascination, enjoyment) in 1 study
 - Enjoyment, transportation, and suspense in 1 study
 - Liking and social comparison in 1 study
- We didn't find consistent use of appeal mechanisms across studies, with each study focusing on different aspects of character appeal.
- The relationship between personality traits and character types suggests a focus on complex or morally questionable characters, with 2/3 studies examining morally ambiguous characters and 1/3 examining villainous characters.

Moral Processing and Character Engagement

The studies we examined provide insights into the relationship between moral judgment and character engagement:

- Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) reported that morally ambiguous characters are liked less than good characters but are equally transporting, suspenseful, and cognitively engaging.
- Meier and Neubaum (2019) proposed that social comparison processes based on moral principles contribute to the appreciation of morally ambiguous characters.
- Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2020) found that unmitigated agency (agency without communal concern) was more closely related to villain positivity than pure agency.

These findings suggest that moral processing may play a role in character engagement, with moral ambiguity potentially influencing cognitive engagement and social comparison processes.

Differential Entertainment Outcomes

The studies we examined suggest that engagement with morally complex characters may be associated with different entertainment outcomes:

- Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) reported that while morally ambiguous characters are liked less than good characters, they are equally enjoyable due to their suspenseful and transporting qualities.
- Meier and Neubaum (2019) distinguished between enjoyment and appreciation as separate outcomes of engaging with morally ambiguous characters. They proposed a two-process model suggesting that liking leads to enjoyment, while social comparison processes lead to appreciation.
- Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2020) focused on various forms of positive engagement with villainous characters, including identification, empathy, fascination, and enjoyment. Their findings suggest that individuals with dark personality traits may experience different forms of gratification from engaging with villains.

These studies indicate that the appeal of morally complex characters may extend beyond simple enjoyment, encompassing various psychological processes and gratifications.

Evolutionary Psychology Considerations

While none of the studies explicitly framed their findings in terms of evolutionary psychology, several points from the studies may be relevant to evolutionary psychology theories:

- The appeal of morally complex characters was examined in relation to various psychological mechanisms, including enjoyment, moral judgment, and social comparison processes.
- Individual differences in personality traits, such as the Dark Triad and need for cognition, were found to be associated with preferences for certain character types.
- The studies suggest that engaging with morally ambiguous or villainous characters may involve complex cognitive and emotional processes, potentially related to social cognition and moral reasoning.
- The distinction between enjoyment and appreciation in engaging with morally ambiguous characters suggests that these narratives may serve multiple psychological functions.

It's important to note that these points are based on the limited number of studies we examined and do not directly test evolutionary psychology hypotheses about the appeal of morally complex characters. Further research would be needed to explore these potential connections more thoroughly.

References

- Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Anne Fiskaali, Henrik Høgh-Olesen, John A. Johnson, Murray Smith, and Mathias Clasen. "Do Dark Personalities Prefer Dark Characters? A Personality Psychological Approach to Positive Engagement with Fictional Villainy," 2020.
- K. Krakowiak, and Mary Beth Oliver. "When Good Characters Do Bad Things: Examining the Effect of Moral Ambiguity on Enjoyment," 2012.

Yannic Meier, and German Neubaum. “Gratifying Ambiguity: Psychological Processes Leading to Enjoyment and Appreciation of TV Series with Morally Ambiguous Characters.” *Mass Communication & Society*, 2019.