

RUNNING HEAD: Testing ADT with antiheroes

**Testing Affective Disposition Theory: A Comparison of the Enjoyment of Hero and
Antihero Narratives**

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Abstract

From *Bonnie & Clyde* to *Mr & Mrs. Smith*, audiences are attracted to morally questionable protagonists. Why is that the case? One leading theory of media enjoyment, affective disposition theory (ADT), would seemingly offer some answers. An online experiment examined two general questions: How do viewers enjoy dramatic narratives that violate the traditional protagonist-is-morally-superior-to-the-antagonist formula (e.g., antihero films)? And how, if any, does the enjoyment process for these narratives differ from their traditional counterparts? A total of 205 German citizens viewed a film clip that was introduced and described as either following a traditional hero plot or a morally problematic, antihero one. Results suggested that antihero film enjoyment does not follow the ADT formula. Identification with the antihero protagonist, rather than moral judgment of character behavior, predicted enjoyment. The findings are discussed in light of recent scholarship on moral disengagement, story schema development, and entertainment theory.

Keywords

antihero, hero, affective disposition theory, ADT, enjoyment, identification, moral judgment, entertainment theory, moral disengagement

Introduction

We primarily watch movies to be entertained. Blockbusters like the *Spiderman* trilogy, the Indiana Jones series, and *The Terminator* demonstrate a consistent formula for such entertainment: Brave and virtuous heroes saving our world by outsmarting and at times wiping out their evil and detested enemies. But would we still enjoy similar movies if the heroes were selfish? If they betrayed their friends and behaved in an aggressive way without any justification? Obviously we do. Many examples exist of successful movies (e.g. *Bonnie & Clyde*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*) in which the protagonists violate nearly all commonly held moral standards but which are nevertheless enjoyed by a large audience. The protagonists in this type of movies—whose actions most would agree are blameworthy and lack moral justification—will be referred to as antiheroes in this paper.

According to previous entertainment research, especially that informed by affective disposition theory (ADT; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann, 2000), we know that the key factor behind enjoyment of fictional drama is character liking based on (moral) evaluations of the character's behaviors and motivations. However, little is known about the enjoyment process of the mentioned antihero narratives, in particular the role that moral judgments play in the enjoyment of these films (Raney & Bryant, 2002). Why might the process differ with antihero films? Because the morally questionable (and at times even reprehensible) conduct of the protagonists cannot be justified, but nevertheless viewers still seem to like the characters.

The purpose of this study is therefore the investigation of enjoyment processes during antihero movies in comparison to traditional hero narratives. The project will be guided by two general research questions: How do viewers enjoy dramatic narratives that violate the traditional protagonist-is-morally-superior-to-the-

antagonist formula (e.g., antihero films)? And how, if any, does the enjoyment process for these narratives differ from their traditional counterparts?

Enjoying “traditional” hero narratives: Affective disposition theory

Despite the fact that from a social-scientific perspective the concept and the underlying processes of media enjoyment are not yet fully explicated, everyone knows the pleasurable experience of watching a good movie. In fact, the concept can basically be defined as a “sense of pleasure that one derives from consuming media products” (Raney, 2004, p. 349). Disposition-based theories provide a helpful explanation why and how people enjoy media content and which processes can influence the entertainment experience. The affective disposition theory applied to drama (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann, 2000) states that enjoyment is a function of the affective dispositions viewers form toward characters in interaction with the storyline. These dispositions are formed along an affective continuum of extreme liking moving through indifference to extreme disliking.

For the sake of cognitive consistency, we viewers want our emotional side-taking with protagonists and against antagonists to be justified. One way to ensure this is to morally approve of the liked character’s actions. In fact, according to ADT, this is just what we do as viewers: The formation of affective dispositions is a result of our morally judging the motivations and actions of the characters. According to Zillmann (2000) viewers act as “untiring moral monitors” and continually judge what they see on the screen. The subjectively held senses of moral propriety that each of us hold influence the valence and intensity of resulting perceptions of and dispositions toward media characters. This explains why some viewers hold more intense positive (or negative) affiliations with some characters as opposed to other characters, and as opposed to other viewers (Raney, 2004; Weber, Tamborini, Lee, & Stipp, in press). These dispositions (and the moral judgments that lead to their

variable formation) again have direct consequences on enjoyment. For example, Raney (2002) demonstrated how the individually held attitudes about vigilantism, punitiveness and empathy serve under certain conditions as predictors for enjoyment of crime dramas. Likewise, Oliver (1996) demonstrated how authoritarianism influenced responses to reality-based crime shows. Also, Weber and his colleagues (in press) showed that for soap opera fans the moral propriety of the character's behavior serves as a positive predictor of character liking.

Thus, the moral standards held by an individual can moderate their moral judgment of media characters and their behaviors. The result of that moral judgment leads to varying levels of character liking or disliking. More specifically, the liking of media characters varies to the extent a viewer judges the character's behaviors as morally appropriate (Raney, 2006), with this judgment being dependent upon the viewer's moral values.

Once we like characters, we are able to empathize and identify with them. We can understand their motivations and rationales, feeling *with* them like we do with good friends in reality (Zillmann, 1994). As noted above, ADT effectively explains how these feelings that we develop toward characters—guided at least in part by trait empathy in the viewer—are important for enjoyment. In fact, several studies have shown that empathy serves as a key mechanism in the enjoyment of drama (Hoffmann, 1987; Zillmann 1991, 1994).

This emotional connection with characters leads the viewer to hope for and fear certain outcomes in the narrative. In interaction with anticipated outcomes of the story, viewers hope for a satisfactory resolution: success and happiness for the loved character and a deserved punishment for the hated one (Zillmann, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). Thus positive or negative affiliations with the main characters in combination with the anticipation of possible outcomes lead to specific hopes and fears (i.e.,

anticipatory emotions). Relief and enjoyment occur when the expected ending takes place, but the pleasurable experience suffers when fears come true.

To summarize, ADT contends that dispositional affiliations are developed as the actions and motivations of characters are observed, with viewers evaluating the moral correctness of those actions and motivations through their own moral lens. As a result, characters are liked and disliked to varying degrees. The valence and intensity of those dispositions lead viewers to generate anticipations about the characters' futures. For liked characters, success is hoped and failure is feared. For hated characters, failure is hoped and success is feared. Enjoyment results from seeing the extent to which the actual outcomes portrayed reflect those anticipations, such that highly liked characters engender intensely hoped-for outcomes that when met lead to relief and enjoyment. However, enjoyment suffers when a feared outcome is observed. This is the basic affective disposition theory formula. The reader can readily see how this formula well explains the enjoyment of the classic Hollywood drama, with brave heroes fighting for the good against evil antagonists.

The assumptions of the ADT have been widely tested, with strong empirical support with a variety of media narratives (e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Oliver, 1993, Raney & Bryant, 2002). Despite this wealth of support in general, few have analyzed the specific role that moral judgment plays in the enjoyment process (e.g., Raney & Bryant, 2002), with virtually no attention paid to morally complex antiheroes.

Enjoyment of antihero narratives

As previously mentioned, little is known about how and why viewers find antihero films enjoyable. To start perhaps a conceptual distinction between heroes and antiheroes is warranted. Within the context of movie perceptions, *social deviance*—especially characterized as the violation of commonly shared beliefs

(Opatow, 1990)—would seem to be a crucial criterion. But, as detailed above, character liking and moral judgment are the vitally important factors for viewer enjoyment of drama. If we apply the ADT formula to the reception of antihero movies, then we must conclude that it is impossible to enjoy these films. That is, in films like *Bonnie & Clyde*, the moral judgment of the protagonists' motives and behaviors would be exceedingly negative, because of the characters' morally inappropriate and unjustified actions. As a consequence, viewers should not like the characters and should, therefore, hope that nothing good will happen to them during the course of the narrative. Additionally, because a traditional hero character usually does not appear in antihero movies, no morally good counterpart exists with whom to emotionally side. Antihero movies only feature antiheroes; and, based on our moral judgment we should not, and actually cannot, like them. Further, in most antihero movies the protagonists are not punished in a way that their behaviors would typically deserve. So, viewers cannot even feel malicious joy at an inevitable justice-restoring outcome. As a result, given that we know that viewers do in fact enjoy watching antihero movies, the processes described by ADT do not seem to be appropriate. Or at least we would assume that some of the presumptions have to be modified to explain enjoyment of antihero films.

So, where do we begin? First, we can assume that many viewers actually do enjoy watching antihero movies. The genre is well established and is becoming more prevalent on the media landscape. Second, the ADT focus on the importance to enjoyment of characters and their outcomes, in relation to viewer expectations and anticipations, likewise seems applicable in this situation. Although the evidence is purely anecdotal (and perhaps self-incriminating), some viewers do actually like antiheroes. However, the moral corruption of the antihero protagonist would

seemingly fit poorly with the ADT explanation of the enjoyment process. Thus, when comparing a traditional hero film to an antihero film, we would expect:

H1: The behaviors of an antihero will be judged more negatively than those of a morally justified hero.

H2: An antihero will be liked less than a morally justified hero.

H3: A clip from a film featuring an antihero will be enjoyed less than one featuring a morally justified hero.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we started with these three simple predictions. What was ultimately revealed was anything but simple; this complexity is discussed below.

Method

Stimuli and procedure

To test the three proposed hypotheses, a two-factor online experiment was conducted. Scenes from the movie *Perdita Durango* (1997) were selected and edited to yield a three-minute clip that basically operated as an extended trailer for the movie, though it revealed more detail about the narrative than a typical trailer. This film was selected because it is relatively unknown (though it received various awards in Spain and Italy) and because the story is a typical antihero story. In the clip, the protagonist Perdita Durango (played by Rosie Perez) kidnaps a young couple and acts aggressive against them in several ways. The clip closes with a scene in which Perdita shoots one of her various pursuers and gets away (i.e., protagonist wins in the end). All participants viewed the same clip.

Two experimental conditions were created through the textual introduction to the clip. In the antihero condition, respondents were shown a short text framing the female protagonist as an antihero without any justification for the violent and

aggressive behavior shown in the clip. This text was adapted from the information provided on DVD case. In the hero condition, the introduction explained that Perdita and her sister did not have a happy childhood, that she has lost her sister to a cocaine overdose, and therefore hunts the dealers responsible for pushing the drugs on her sister as a way to hold the drug cartel and its leader accountable. Thus, in the hero condition a justification for Perdita's immoral behavior was given.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions by the online survey software. Before the presentation of the introductory text and the film clip, respondents answered questions concerning their own moral positions and provided sociodemographic information. After exposure to the clip, participants evaluated the protagonist and her actions and rated their enjoyment. Data were collected between June and October 2008.

Participants

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique via e-mail, starting with current students in media management at a university in Germany. Accordingly, all materials (including the film clip) were in German. Participants who were familiar with the movie were excluded from the sample. In sum, 205 individuals (62.9% female, mean age 24.8, 72.7% reported being a student) participated in the study: 97 were randomly assigned to the antihero condition and 108 to the hero condition.

Measures and scale construction

For the primary analysis, as reflected in the three hypotheses, three primary dependent variables were observed.

Moral judgment of protagonist's behavior. The judgment of the character's behavior was measured with six items (e.g. "Perdita's behavior was appropriate given her situation) using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly

agree). We averaged responses to indicate the viewer's moral judgment of the protagonist's behavior ($\alpha=.86$).

Liking of protagonist. To measure the affective disposition held toward the protagonist, we used a single-item measure on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) similar to what has been used in previous research: How much do you like Perdita Durango?

Enjoyment of the clip. To measure enjoyment we adapted parts of the scale used in previous research (e.g., Raney, 2005; Raney & Bryant, 2002). In sum, four items measured the intensity of enjoyment (e.g., "The clip is enjoyable"). Respondents indicated the extent to which they enjoyed the clip using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale was constructed by averaging the ratings for the individual items, with higher scores indicating a greater enjoyment ($\alpha=.85$).

Data from several additional measures were collected based on previous research, with the plan of using the data in follow-up analyses (described below). These scales were included in the pre-exposure questionnaire and are intended to investigate various components of the viewer's moral makeup.

Trait empathy. As noted above, empathy is often cited as a key mechanism behind the formation of affective dispositions with media characters. Empathy was measured as an individual-difference trait variable using eight items drawn from a previously reported scale (Ordman, 1996; Raney, 2002; Raney & Bryant, 2002). The scale—which used a 5-point Likert approach (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)—yielded a single empathy factor. Sample items included "When I see somebody being victimized, I think I need to protect him" and "I try to understand both sides of a conflict before I take sides." The empathy scales was constructed by

averaging the ratings for the eight individual items, with higher scores indicating greater empathy ($\alpha=.58$).¹

Attitudes toward vigilantism. This scale measures the extent to which a person advocates or tolerates taking law enforcement into one's own hands. To measure vigilantism, we adapted parts of the scales originally developed by Raney and Bryant (2002). Four items measured the extent to which the respondents support vigilantism (e.g., "The law is made in a way that criminals get away easily. That's why I think that citizens should be become active themselves"). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale was constructed by averaging the ratings for the individual items, with higher scores indicating a greater support for vigilantism ($\alpha =.73$).

Attitudes toward the acceptability of violence. Acceptance of violence was measured with four items (e.g. "Physical violence against others is a normal human behavior to assert oneself"), adapted from a scale used in previous research (Heitmeyer et al., 1995). Responses to the items were made on a 5-point Likert scale and were averaged to form a single scale ($\alpha=.72$). Higher scores indicate greater acceptance of violence.

Importance of moral principles. One item measured the general importance morality has for oneself ("you should only act, when you are sure that it's morally correct") on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Finally, one additional dependent measure was used in the post-exposure questionnaire. Many studies have investigated the way that viewers identify with media characters (Chory-Assad & Cichirillo, 2005; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005;

¹ The observed Cronbach's alpha level for the scale is lower than reported in previous studies. We imagine that this is because of translation issues. Regardless, some caution is encouraged when empathy-related findings are discussed later.

Cohen, 2001; Hoffner, 1996). Unfortunately, little work has been published regarding the relationship between affective dispositions and character identification. At any rate, a four-item identification-with-the-protagonist scale, based on previous research (Cohen, 2001), was used (e.g., “I can place myself in Perdita’s position very well”). Responses to the items were averaged to form a single scale ($\alpha=.70$), with higher scores associated with greater identification with the protagonist.

Results

Hypothesis testing

As the reader will recall, three hypotheses were proposed based on the extant ADT literature. First, we expected that behaviors displayed by the antihero would be judged more negatively than those of the morally justified hero. As a reminder, the only difference between these two conditions was the introduction to the clip, which described an antihero plot versus a typical hero plot; the clips themselves were identical in content. A one-way ANOVA procedure revealed no significant difference ($F_{1,203} = 2.56, p > .1$) on the moral judgment of the protagonist’s behavior scale between the antihero ($M = 1.82, SD = .81$) and hero ($M = 2.00, SD = .81$) conditions. In other words, viewers judged the antihero’s behaviors as similarly moral and appropriate as those of the hero. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

Second, we expected that the antihero would be less liked than the hero by their respective viewers. A second one-way ANOVA procedure again revealed no significant difference ($F_{1,203} = .268, p > .1$) between the liking of the antihero ($M = 1.86, SD = .99$) and hero ($M = 1.93, SD = .95$) conditions. In other words, viewers similarly liked the antihero and hero. Therefore, H2 was not supported.

Finally, we expected that the antihero clip would be enjoyed less than the one containing the morally superior hero. A third one-way ANOVA procedure again revealed no significant difference ($F_{1,203} = .305, p > .1$) between the enjoyment of the

antihero ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.06$) and hero ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.01$) conditions. In other words, viewers similarly enjoyed the antihero and hero clips. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

Follow-up analyses

As one might imagine, we found these findings curious (though not altogether unexpected). The well-supported ADT formula supports the proposed differences. Why were none found? One potential explanation is that our manipulation simply did not work; that the introductory paragraph was insufficient to frame the protagonist as morally justified (i.e., the hero) and morally unjustified (i.e., the antihero). However, a follow-up ANOVA revealed that the viewers did in fact rate the protagonists as significantly different in terms of *moral justification*. Based on the scores on the single item “I think Perdita behaved morally correct,” the viewers in the hero condition rated the protagonist ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .91$) as significantly more correct in moral terms ($F_{1,203} = 6.54$, $p < .05$) compared to the antihero viewers ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .84$). True, the overall behaviors were judged similarly appropriate (see H1 findings). However, we argue that the inconsistency between this justification finding and the H1 moral behaviors findings may point to the activation of a specific story schema (cf. Raney, 2004) that encourages moral disengagement for the sake of enjoying antihero narratives. More on this topic will be discussed below.

Another possible explanation for the unsupported hypotheses may be that enjoyment of the hero film clip did not follow the traditional ADT formula in the first place. That is, our stimulus selection for the hero condition might be improper, and therefore did not elicit the typical reactions to and enjoyment of a hero narrative. As noted above, ADT suggests that moral judgment of behaviors leads to character liking, which influences enjoyment. To test this possibility, a series of linear regression models were used to test for mediation between the key ADT variables.

According to the analyses, the study's hero narrative did in fact follow the ADT formula. The viewers' moral judgments of the hero's actions significantly predicted liking of the hero protagonist: $F_{1,106} = 23.44, p < .001, \beta = .426, \text{adj. } R^2 = .17$. Furthermore, hero liking predicted enjoyment: $F_{1,106} = 28.13, p < .001, \beta = .497, \text{adj. } R^2 = .34$. The regression models confirmed that character liking mediated the effects of behavioral judgments on enjoyment. Therefore, it appears that the clip was an appropriate selection.

Thus, with two leading rival hypotheses discounted, we turn to the possibility that the enjoyment process for antihero films differs from that of traditional narratives. To initially test this proposal, the same series of linear regression models testing for mediation effects in the hero condition were examined for the antihero condition. According to the analyses, the study's antihero condition did not follow the typical ADT formula. Both moral judgment of the protagonist's behaviors ($\beta = .198, p < .05$) and protagonist liking ($\beta = .390, p < .001$) directly predicted enjoyment ($F_{2,94} = 15.50, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .23$), but no mediation effects were observed. Thus, we concluded that enjoyment of antihero films, while similar to that of hero narratives, appears to differ somewhat.

In an attempt to examine these potential differences more, we turned to the literature on identification with media characters (Chory-Assad & Cichirillo, 2005; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Cohen, 2001; Hoffner, 1996). The design included a four-item scale measuring identification with the protagonist. We introduced this factor to the regression model predicting enjoyment of the antihero film. The model again proved to be significant ($F_{2,94} = 12.43, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .26$); however, the inclusion of identification led to the exclusion of moral judgment ($\beta = .134, p > .1$) as a significant predictor of enjoyment. Protagonist liking ($\beta = .327, p < .01$) and

identification with the protagonist ($\beta = .222, p < .05$) significantly predicted enjoyment of the antihero film.

To validate that the influence of identification to enjoyment was unique to the antihero condition, we ran the same regression analysis with the hero condition data. As expected, the model was significant, but identification ($\beta = -.063, p > .1$) was not a significant predictor of enjoyment in the hero condition. The implications of this finding are discussed in detail below.

Finally, a path analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between potentially influential independent variables—gender, attitudes toward vigilantism, attitudes toward the acceptability of violence, trait empathy, and importance of moral principles—and the reactions to and evaluations of the antihero clip (i.e, identification with the antihero protagonist, judgment of behaviors, protagonist liking, and enjoyment). An initial model based on ADT (see Figure 1) was tested. Suggested modifications were then tested, with a final model (see Figure 2) emerging. The final model was a reasonably good fit for the data: $\chi^2 = 15.103, df = 10, p > .1$; CFI = .941; RMSEA = .073.

—Insert Figures 1 and 2 here—

The final model confirmed the strong relationship between identification and enjoyment of an antihero clip. Further, it revealed the role of moral judgment in the process of enjoyment that the previous regression analyses did not. Specifically, as in the standard ADT formula, the moral judgment of the protagonist's behaviors predicted liking. But additionally, moral judgment predicted identification. Finally, three variables predicted the initial moral judgment of the antihero's behaviors: empathy (as consistently seen in the ADT literature), importance of moral principles (negatively), and strongest of all, one's attitudes about the acceptability of violence. Possible implications and explanations of these observations follow.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the way that viewers enjoy antihero movies in comparison to traditional hero narratives. Well-supported claims from affective disposition theory (ADT) pointed to differences that should exist, especially in relation to the ways that viewers form affiliations with characters. In general, we interrogated two primary questions: How do viewers enjoy dramatic narratives that violate the traditional protagonist-is-morally-superior-to-the-antagonist formula (e.g., antihero films)? And how, if any, does the enjoyment process for these narratives differ from their traditional counterparts?

Studies relying on ADT have consistently identified the role that moral judgment plays in the liking of characters, and then the role of character liking in predicting enjoyment. Given the differences in morality that in many ways define the hero-antihero distinction, we predicted that viewers of a hero film clip, as compared to an antihero one, would (1) judge the behaviors of the hero protagonist as morally superior, (2) like the protagonist more, and (3) enjoy the film clip more. These predictions, of course, are perfectly in line with the ADT literatures. However, such was not the case in our study; none of our initial hypotheses were supported by the data.

We then began a series of follow-up analyses in search of an explanation. Those procedures led us to the conclusion that the enjoyment process for an antihero film differs from that for the traditional hero film. More specifically, it appears that the general assumptions underlying the ADT need to be differentiated for the two types of narratives. As noted above, the traditional ADT formula is that a viewer's moral judgment of the protagonist's behavior predicts protagonist liking, which ultimately predicts enjoyment. This pattern of relationships was observed in the hero condition, as expected. However, with the antihero film clip, the moral judgment of

behaviors was not a significant predictor in the model; rather, identification with the character replaced moral judgment as a predictor of enjoyment in the antihero condition.

How do we make sense of these findings? We propose that the process of moral disengagement for the sake of enjoyment is a possible explanation. Raney (2004) argued that we as viewers extend moral propriety to dramatic characters—that is, we stretch our sense of what is morally acceptable to cover the immoral-but-well-intended actions of a beloved hero—because we like them a great deal, and we desperately want to see them succeed. In other words, because we like characters and we know from past media experiences that enjoyment comes from seeing them prosper, we tend to interpret their morally questionable actions in a way that helps us view them as virtuous: We interpret their actions as morally appropriate and rightly motivated, even if they must break the rules we usually demand be followed.

This tendency to give moral amnesty to others (whether mediated or real) in certain circumstances has been examined in many literatures. Bandura identified the process by which otherwise unacceptable behaviors are permitted, accepted, and defended as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1986; 1991). As moral agents we control how we enforce our moral codes; we can apply them more strenuously or leniently depending on the situation. By selectively activating and disengaging the sanctions that typically regulate and evaluate conduct, individuals can permit and accept behaviors that would otherwise be judged as inappropriate. To alleviate cognitive distress during these instances in which typical self-censure or others-condemnation is disengaged, we rely on a variety of cognitive strategies. As Bandura explained,

The disengagement may center on redefining harmful conduct as honorable by moral justification, exonerating social comparison, and sanitizing language.

It may focus on agency of action so that perpetrators can minimize their role in causing harm by diffusion and displacement of responsibility. It may involve minimizing or distorting the harm that flows from detrimental actions; and the disengagement may include dehumanizing and blaming victims of the maltreatment (Bandura, 2002, p. 102).

Not only can reprehensible acts be carried out because the individual performing them has morally disengaged from the situations, but—more importantly to the current discussion—third-party observers who give moral assent to those actions can also be said to have morally disengaged.

In truth, we all presumably engage in these attitude-defensive strategies from time to time out of loyalty to those whom we love. Showing partiality comes naturally with liking; by definition, we show favoritism to those whom we favor. We like whom we like, and for the most part we want to keep on liking them. So, when they say and do things we dislike, we pardon them; or, as we say in the States we “cut them slack,” we blame something or someone else, we defend them. Therefore, by occasionally accepting the morally improper acts of our real-life friends and family members—regardless of how insignificant or severe—we all morally disengage from time to time.

Raney (2004) suggested that these principles and cognitive processes may be activated when we view mediated fiction as well. It is reasonable to expect that encountering media characters could activate the processes whereby we not only create affiliations with media characters as we do with others in reality, but also where we seek to maintain those affective affiliations once formed. At times, liked media characters disappoint us: They cheat on their spouses; they break the law; they make poor decisions. Or in the case of an antihero, they are simply immoral. Does that necessarily mean that we like them less? Perhaps. But the research

record suggests that, given strong positive affiliations with characters, we also readily defend them. We extend the boundaries of what is in moral terms typically allowable or tolerable because we like certain characters so much and we want to continue liking them. And moreover, we go through this process of moral disengage because we want to enjoy media.

It would seemingly follow that the stronger our affective dispositions toward a character, the more likely and willing we would be to utilize the attitude-maintenance strategies noted above for the sake of enjoyment. In fact, studies suggest that viewers consistently offer great (though surely not unlimited) moral latitude and license to highly favored characters (Raney, 2002; 2005). We contend that this process of moral disengagement likely takes place with antihero characters for the sake of enjoyment. That is, through previous experiences with antiheroes (and morally challenged heroes), media consumers develop story schemas (cf. Mandler, 1984) that help them interpret and enjoy narratives containing those uncommon protagonists. A part of that schema formation is the process of moral disengagement. Viewers know that the application of the traditional moral lens to the narrative will only result in frustration and low enjoyment. Therefore, a different lens is applied to antihero narratives for the sake of enjoyment, a lens greatly shaped by the process of moral disengagement.

What evidence from our study points in this direction? The predictive relationship between identification and enjoyment that is present in the antihero, but not the hero, condition led us in this direction. If viewers are not relying on moral judgment to form an affiliation with the antihero protagonist like they typically do with heroes, but yet they are still reporting similar levels of enjoyment as those who viewed a hero version of the same film, then their enjoyment is being derived in another way. Identifying with the protagonist seems to be the route that is taken.

That is, viewers appear to be aligning themselves more closely with the antihero character *in ways other* than morally. What all those *other ways* may be is still a bit of a mystery. But the fact remains that enjoyment is being experienced, and that identification with the antihero protagonist is partly responsible. Perhaps identification—which is reasonably related to the real-world partiality that we afford friends—may well be the mechanism through which moral disengagement occurs.

Interestingly, though, moral judgment still seems to play a role in the enjoyment of the antihero film. As the path analysis suggested, identification was actually predicted by moral judgments of the antihero protagonist's behavior. In isolation, this makes little sense. However, when one considers the factors that influenced those moral judgments—that is, the interpretive lens that was apparently engaged when those judgments were made—the findings begin to make more sense. As the final path model suggested, a viewer's attitudes about the acceptability of violence was the strongest predictor of the (acceptable) judgment of the antihero's actions. That is, the more one thinks that violence is acceptable in reality, the more acceptable they evaluated Perdita's behaviors, which then led to greater identification with her, greater liking of her, and more enjoyment of the clip. The second strongest predictor of moral judgment, in a negative direction, was the importance that viewer's placed on their own morality as behavior-guiding principles. Thus, the less important someone viewed their own morality as a guide for their own behavior, the more acceptable they judged Perdita's behaviors, with subsequent impact on identification, character liking, and enjoyment. Trait empathy also predicted moral judgment (as seen in previous ADT studies).

Do these findings support our moral disengagement argument? We think that they do. We argue that the predictive factors of violence acceptability and moral-principle unimportance point to a deviation from (or disengagement of) the typical

social standards of morality applied to violence and antisocial behavior. That is, we argue that they point to (at least a cognitive form of) social deviance, to attitudes supportive of (at least a theoretic) violation of commonly shared beliefs about social justice and morality. Such deviance is needed (at least to some extent) for viewers to embrace and thoroughly enjoy the *Bonnie & Clyde*-type antiheroes that are seemingly becoming more commonplace in mediated narratives. Now, we are not attempting to argue that these attitudes lead to actual antisocial behavior in viewers, only that their relative presence in the minds of viewers can predict liking of certain narratives. We contend that such a finding, though tentative, may prove quite important for future research.

One might still wonder why understanding these relationships matter in the first place. After all, "it's only entertainment," right? The media effects, and more recently entertainment theory, literature tends to disagree with such a dismissive stance. Specifically, if people in fact develop schemas that promote such ways of receiving antihero films, can similar schemas be developed for other situations, schemas that encourage moral disengagement? Furthermore, questions about how morally disengaging for the sake of enjoyment might impact one's tendency to morally disengage in reality must certainly be probed. We think (or at least hope) that our study can help direct attention to this topic. We contend that better understanding the allure of morally questionable characters, and more importantly, their potential impacts on the attitudes of viewers, is a socially relevant and significant pursuit. The findings in this study are helpful, especially when it comes to seeing new avenues of investigation. However, we quickly acknowledge the tentative nature of these results. At a minimum, we hope our work serves as a catalyst to encourage similar work.

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Figure 1. Initial path model investigating predictors of antihero film enjoyment (n = 97).

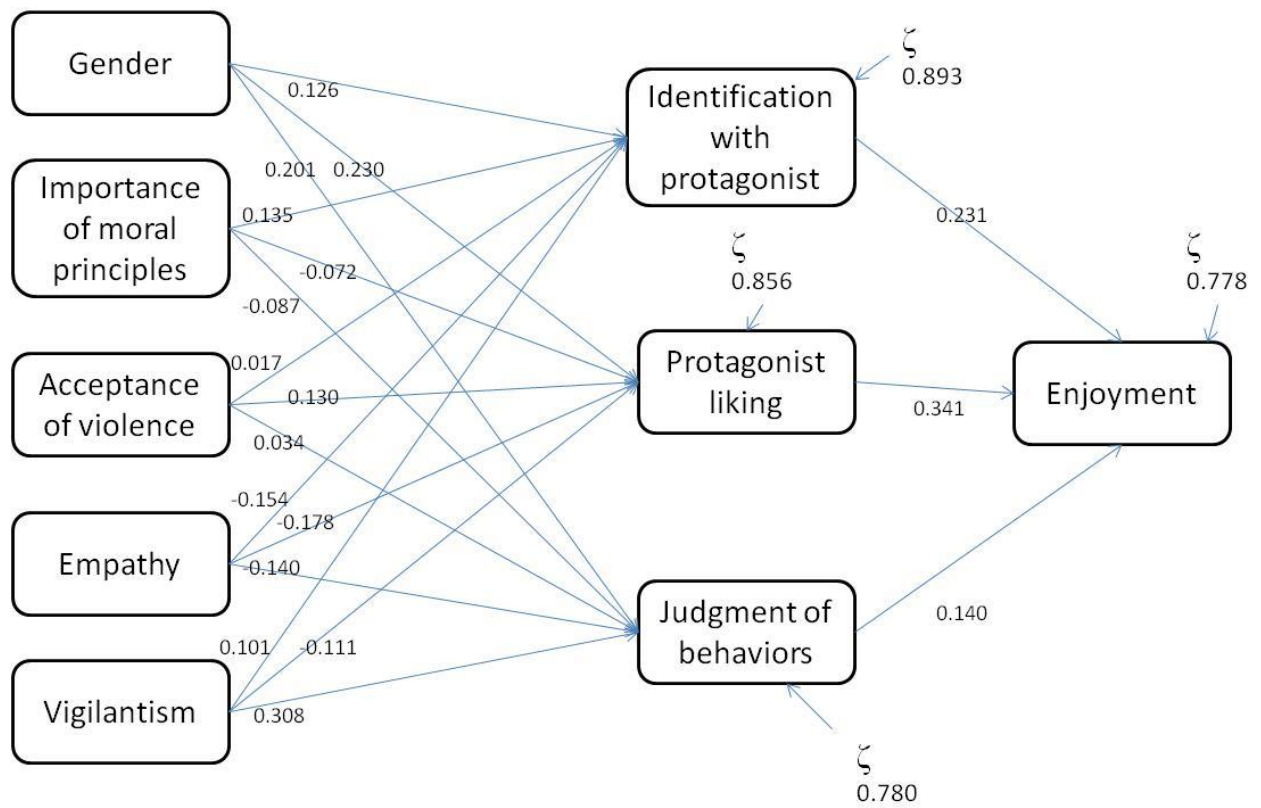


Figure 2. Final path model investigating predictors of antihero film enjoyment (n = 97).

