The role of moral disengagement in the enjoyment of real and fictional characters

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Abstract: According to affective disposition theory, individuals continually monitor and judge characters' actions and form attitudes about characters based on these judgements. However, much entertainment content features characters that do immoral things. It has been proposed that individuals are able to like these characters despite their immoral behaviours through the process of moral disengagement. This study examined how the propensity to morally disengage and the fictionality of a narrative affected individuals' acceptance of immoral behaviours and their overall enjoyment of a narrative. Findings indicate that character liking mediates the relationship between moral disengagement and enjoyment. In addition, the propensity to morally disengage predicts actual moral disengagement, but moral disengagement is unaffected by the realness or fictionality of the narrative. Implications of the findings for entertainment research are discussed.

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1   Introduction

Entertainment content can elicit a range of emotions, from tears to laughter and everything in-between. One of the primary ways that these reactions can be produced is through the bond that individuals form with characters. In fact, disposition theory proposes that individuals' attitudes towards characters drive eventual feelings of enjoyment (Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann and Cantor, 1977). Characters that are consistently good or evil are easy to either love or hate. However, many characters are morally ambiguous in that they do both good and bad things. These characters often behave in ways that would not be acceptable in real life, but some individuals excuse these behaviours and enjoy content featuring these types of characters (Krakowiak and Oliver, 2009; Raney et al., 2009). One possible explanation for this is offered by Raney (2004) who suggests that individuals are able to like morally ambiguous characters even if they disagree with some of these characters' behaviours through the process of moral disengagement (see Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996). Individuals may justify bad behaviours because they want to like characters and to be entertained by them; however, individuals may not be so forgiving if the entertainment content features real events and individuals. This study thus examines how moral disengagement affects the enjoyment of morally ambiguous characters, both fictional and non-fictional.

2   Moral disengagement

Bandura (1986, 1999, 2002, 1991) identified moral disengagement as the process by which individuals come to accept and defend morally reprehensible behaviours performed by themselves and others. Moral disengagement can occur via one of several mechanisms.

> The disengagement may centre on redefining harmful conduct as honourable by moral justification, exonerating social comparison and sanitising language. It may focus on agency of action so that perpetrators can minimise their role in causing harm by diffusion and displacement of responsibility. It may involve minimising or distorting the harm that flows from detrimental actions; and the disengagement may include dehumanising and blaming the victims of the maltreatment. (Bandura, 2002, p.102)

Therefore, there are several routes to disengagement. For example, individuals may justify an immoral action, such as torture, by explaining that the action was necessary in order to ensure a greater good (moral justification), by using words such as 'enhanced interrogation techniques' (euphemistic labelling) or by contrasting the action with even more horrendous crimes, such as murder (advantageous comparison). Individuals may also reason that those who tortured should not be held responsible for their actions because they were ordered to do so by others (displacement of responsibility). Likewise, the responsibility of any one individual for the torture may be lessened if many

individuals participated in the torture (diffusion of responsibility). Finally, the harmful consequences of the torture may be minimised (distortion of consequences), or the victims may be perceived to be less than human (dehumanisation) or as somehow responsible for the torture (attribution of blame).

Individuals may use these moral disengagement mechanisms to excuse not only their own and others' immoral behaviours, but also the behaviours of characters in entertainment content. The justification of bad behaviours may be particularly likely to occur when characters are well liked or when they are presented as protagonists. Individuals want to like these characters and often hope that they succeed. Moral disengagement may thus help to explain how individuals are able to enjoy content featuring morally ambiguous protagonists (Raney, 2004).

2.1   Propensity to morally disengage

Certain individual difference variables may affect individuals' acceptance of immoral behaviours. For example, Raney et al. (2009) found that individuals' perceptions of the acceptability of violence and the importance that individuals placed on their own moralities as behaviour-guiding principles predicted their enjoyment of antihero narratives. Another factor that may influence individuals' perceptions of immoral actions is their propensity to morally disengage. Individuals who have a greater propensity to morally disengage are more ready to resort to moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanisation and attribution of blame to excuse various types of immoral conduct (Bandura et al., 1996). Moreover, greater propensity for disengagement has been found to be positively related to involvement in detrimental and aggressive behaviours, and to be negatively related to involvement with prosocial activities (Bandura et al., 1996). Minimal research has examined the effect of moral disengagement propensity on interpretations of entertainment content; however, there is some evidence that this propensity influences how individuals interpret violent video games. Specifically, individuals with a lower propensity to disengage perceived violent video game acts as being more graphic than did individuals with a greater propensity for disengagement (Lewis et al., 2006). Furthermore, individuals with a greater propensity for disengagement identified more strongly with the characters in the video games. It is possible that the propensity for disengagement will also affect interpretations of other types of entertainment content. Specifically, it is hypothesised that an individual's propensity for moral disengagement will affect his or her acceptance of a protagonist's immoral behaviours.

H1: The propensity for moral disengagement will be positively associated with actual moral disengagement.

2.2   Enjoyment

The realness of characters may also affect moral disengagement and thereby enjoyment. One of the main ways that players of violent video games cope with moral concerns raised by their game play is by distinguishing game play from reality (Klimmt et al., 2006). This distinction between reality and fiction could likewise apply to other forms of entertainment. As in game play, it may be easier to justify bad behaviours of fictional

rather than non-fictional characters because no one suffers the consequences of fictional behaviours. In other words, individuals may be more likely to morally disengage when presented with entertainment content that is fictional.

Moral disengagement, in turn, may affect enjoyment. Shafer (2009) found that moral disengagement was one of the strongest predictors of enjoyment of a video game clip featuring a morally ambiguous character. This may occur because moral disengagement could ensure that individuals' positive dispositions towards a character remain in tact. According to affective disposition theory, individuals derive enjoyment from watching liked characters succeed and disliked characters fail (Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann and Cantor, 1977). One of the ways that individuals form attitudes about characters is by monitoring and judging their actions and behaviours (Zillmann, 2000). If characters are consistently immoral, they will likely be disliked; however, if characters are consistently good, they will likely be liked. However, morally ambiguous protagonists perform both good and bad actions and are thus harder to judge. Nevertheless, individuals are motivated to like these types of characters and may thus justify their bad behaviours. If individuals are able to maintain positive affective dispositions towards an immoral protagonist through the process of moral disengagement, their enjoyment will not suffer. Therefore, it is hypothesised that moral disengagement will mediate the effect of fictional and non-fictional characters on enjoyment.

H2a: Individuals who read a fictional story featuring a morally ambiguous protagonist will be more likely to morally disengage than will individuals who read a true story.

H2b: Moral disengagement will be positively associated with enjoyment.

Moreover, it is hypothesised that the effect of moral disengagement on enjoyment will be mediated by character liking.

H3a: Moral disengagement will be positively associated with favourable affective dispositions.

H3b: Favourable affective dispositions will be positively associated with enjoyment.

3 Method

3.1 Participant and procedure

A total of 312 students participated in this study for extra credit. Participants were recruited from a variety of communication classes at two large universities in the USA. The sample was comprised of 71.8% females and 28.2% males, ranging in age from 17 to 49 ($M = 19.28$, $SD = 3.55$). The racial composition of the sample was 4.5% African American, 11.5% Asian, 8.3% Latino, 1% Native American, 1.3% Pacific Islander, 76.6% white and 7.7% other.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (fiction and non-fiction) in an online between subjects post-test only experiment. Participants first answered a pre-questionnaire, which measured their propensity for moral disengagement and demographic information. They then read a narrative featuring a morally ambiguous character. The introduction of each narrative described it as either a 'true story' or 'fiction'. After reading the narrative, participants answered a post-questionnaire,

measuring the dependent variables of moral disengagement, affective dispositions and enjoyment.

To ensure that the manipulation was successful, two questions which measured individuals' perceptions of the truth and fictionality of the story on seven-point Likert-type scales from 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree) were added to the questionnaire (e.g. *This was a true story, This was a fictional story*). Independent sample *t*-tests revealed that individuals perceived the story to be significantly more true in the non-fiction condition ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.90$) than in the fiction condition ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(310) = 9.86$, $p < 0.001$; conversely, the story was perceived to be significantly more fictional in the fiction ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.59$) than in the non-fiction condition ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.86$), $t(310) = -7.97$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, the manipulation was successful at creating both fiction and non-fiction narratives.

3.2   Stimulus materials

A short story, which detailed a mountain climber's attempted ascent of Mount Everest, was used in this study. The main character was described as doing both good (e.g. helping a stranded climber) and bad (e.g. embezzling money) things. The story was previously tested to ensure that the character was perceived to be morally ambiguous. Specifically, the protagonist was rated as having equally high amounts of both positive and negative attributes, which differentiated him from characters who performed either only good acts or only bad acts (see Krakowiak and Oliver (2009) for full description of results).

3.3   Measures

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

3.3.1   Propensity for moral disengagement

Individuals' propensity to morally disengage was measured with 31 items adapted from Bandura et al. (1996). Examples of items measuring propensity for moral disengagement include: *It is all right to fight to protect your friends, It is okay to tell small lies because they do not really do any harm, Stealing some money is not too serious compared to those who steal a lot of money*, etc. A propensity for moral disengagement scale was created by averaging the ratings of the 31 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.61$).

3.3.2   Actual moral disengagement

Even though moral disengagement has been addressed as a theoretical concept (e.g. Raney, 2004), no scale for actual moral disengagement in a media context has been developed. As a result, 15 moral disengagement measures were created using Bandura's (2002) descriptions of the different mechanisms used for moral disengagement. Moral justification was measured with four items (e.g. *It was all right for Craig and Phillip to leave Jon behind because they knew he would be safe*, etc.); advantageous comparison was measured with two items (e.g. *Embezzling money from a company is not as bad as*

stealing money from an individual, etc.); diffusion of responsibility was measured with one item (e.g. *Craig should not be blamed for leaving Jon behind since he and Phillip made the decision together*); distortion of consequences was measured with two items (e.g. *Embezzling money from a company does not really hurt anyone*, etc.), and attribution of blame was measured with three items (e.g. *It was the company's fault for letting itself be embezzled by Craig*, etc.). No items were created for euphemistic labelling, dehumanisation, or displacement of responsibility because the content of the story did not lend itself to the use of those mechanisms for moral disengagement. Three additional items were added to measure individuals' overall moral disengagement of the main character's actions (e.g. *Craig was morally justified in all his actions*, etc.). Two items measuring the attribution of blame (i.e. *It was Jon's fault for forgetting his lunch, It was Jon's fault that he was left behind*) showed low levels of item-to-total correlations and were subsequently dropped from the scale. A moral disengagement scale was created by averaging the ratings of the 13 remaining items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.84$).

3.3.3 Affective dispositions

Character liking scales are typically used to measure affective dispositions (e.g. Zillmann and Bryant, 1975; Zillmann and Cantor, 1977). Therefore, two items assessing character liking were used in this study (i.e. *I like Craig, I dislike Craig* (reverse-coded)). However, affective dispositions towards characters may also include other types of feelings and thoughts about characters. As a result, three additional items were added (e.g. *I would like to be friends with someone who is like Craig, I admire Craig*, etc.). Two items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicate more favourable attitudes towards characters. An affective dispositions scale was created by averaging the ratings of the five items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$, $M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.30$).

3.3.4 Enjoyment

The conceptualisation of enjoyment has been widely debated (see Nabi and Krcmar, 2004; Oliver and Nabi, 2004; Vorderer et al., 2004). In this study, enjoyment was conceptualised as an attitude, consisting of affective, cognitive and behavioural components, and was measured with 20 items adapted from those used in previously reported studies (Krcmar and Renfro, 2005; Raney, 2002; Raney and Bryant, 2002). Three items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicated greater enjoyment. Examples of items include: *This story made me think, I felt good reading this story, I would like to read other stories that are similar to this one*, etc.

Because enjoyment is a multidimensional concept, an exploratory factor analysis using principal components extraction and varimax rotation was employed to examine the factor structure of the 20 enjoyment items. The analysis revealed cross-loadings for five items: *I tried to predict what was going to happen next, I would have liked to be able to do other things while I read this story* (reverse-coded)*, I really got involved in the plot, I would hate to be distracted while reading this story, I did not enjoy the subject matter of this story* (reverse-coded). Consequently, these variables were dropped. The final subsequent analysis revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 that accounted for 65.25% of the variance. Table 1 reports the variables and factor loadings for these two factors.

Table 1   Factor loadings for enjoyment using principal components and varimax rotation

	Affective	*Cognitive*
I enjoyed reading this story	*0.867*	0.279
I liked reading this story	*0.844*	0.267
I had a good time reading this story	*0.812*	0.331
It made me happy to read this story	*0.798*	0.194
I would not recommend this story to others	*0.730*	0.253
I felt good reading this story	*0.721*	0.125
This story was entertaining	*0.643*	0.488
I would like to read other stories that are similar to this one	*0.637*	0.484
This story was exciting	*0.621*	0.513
I would like to analyse this story	0.109	*0.855*
I would like to talk about this story with other people	0.261	*0.817*
I really thought about the story when I read it	0.249	*0.724*
I would like to seek out additional information about this story	0.293	*0.699*
I would like to reread this story	0.282	*0.691*
This story made me to think	0.265	*0.622*
Eigenvalue	8.09	1.69
Proportion of variance	53.95	11.29

The first factor included nine items measuring affective components of enjoyment, such as feeling good or being happy while reading the story; the second factor included six items measuring the cognitive aspects of enjoyment, such as thinking deeply about the story or wanting to analyse it. Two scales were created by averaging the item responses for each factor (affective, $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.16$; cognitive, $\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.28$).

4   Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of regressions and path analyses were conducted. H1 predicted that the propensity to morally disengage would be positively related to actual moral disengagement. To test this hypothesis, a simple linear regression was performed in which actual moral disengagement was regressed on the propensity to morally disengage. The analysis showed that propensity to morally disengage predicted actual moral disengagement ($\beta = 0.49$, $t = 9.98$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that moral disengagement would mediate the effect of fictional and non-fictional characters on enjoyment. Specifically, H2a predicted that individuals would be more likely to morally disengage in the fictional rather than non-fictional condition. Furthermore, H2b predicted that moral disengagement would lead to greater enjoyment of the narratives. To test these hypotheses, a path analysis was conducted in which condition (non-fiction = 0 and fiction = 1) was treated as an exogenous variable, and affective and cognitive enjoyment were employed as the final variables in the path.[1] Figure 1 contains the model in this analysis with all paths reporting standardised

coefficients. This model illustrates that the fictionality or non-fictionality of a narrative did not have a significant effect on moral disengagement ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.16$), affective enjoyment ($\beta = -0.10$, $p = 0.08$) or cognitive enjoyment ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.19$). However, moral disengagement did have a significant positive effect on affective enjoyment ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), but not on cognitive enjoyment ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.14$). Therefore, H2 was partially supported. Specifically, H2a was not supported because the fictionality of the narrative did not significantly affect moral disengagement; H2b was partially supported because moral disengagement predicted affective enjoyment, but not cognitive enjoyment. Furthermore, there were no significant direct effects of condition on enjoyment.

To explore the reasons for the lack of support for the hypothesised relationships, another path analysis was conducted. However, for this analysis, the condition variable was replaced with the measure for perceived trueness. This measure was treated as an exogenous variable, and affective and cognitive enjoyment were employed as the final variables in the path. Figure 2 contains the model in this analysis with all paths reporting standardised coefficients. This model illustrates that the perceived trueness of a narrative did not significantly affect moral disengagement ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.59$). However, narratives that were perceived to be more true were significantly more affectively ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$) and cognitively ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$) enjoyed.

H3 predicted that positive affective dispositions would mediate the effect of moral disengagement on enjoyment. To test this hypothesis, a path analysis was conducted in which moral disengagement was treated as an exogenous variable, and affective and cognitive enjoyment were employed as the final variables in the path. Figure 3 contains the model in this analysis with all paths reporting standardised coefficients. This model illustrates that moral disengagement affected enjoyment, though the paths from these variables were indirect. Specifically, moral disengagement predicted favourable affective dispositions ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), and favourable affective dispositions predicted both affective ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and cognitive ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) enjoyment. Moreover, bootstrapping of the indirect effects of moral disengagement on enjoyment revealed significant indirect effects on both affective ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$) and cognitive ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$) enjoyment. In other words, individuals who accepted the immoral actions of the protagonist liked the character more than individuals who did not perceive these behaviors as ethical. Character liking, in turn, led to more affective and cognitive enjoyment. Therefore, H3 was supported in that moral disengagement was positively associated with character liking (H3a), and character liking was positively associated with enjoyment (H3b).

Figure 1   Mediation analysis for condition, moral disengagement and enjoyment
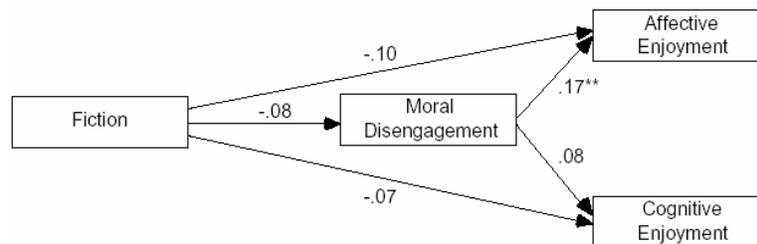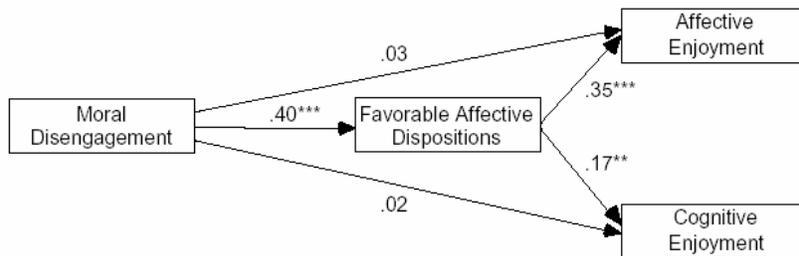

$*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$.

Figure 2   Mediation analysis for perceived trueness, moral disengagement and enjoyment
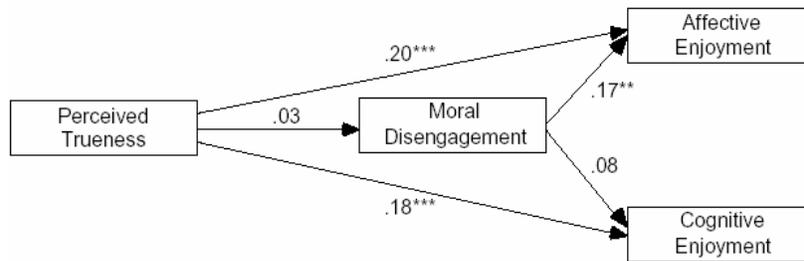
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Figure 3   Mediation analysis for moral disengagement, affective dispositions and enjoyment

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

5   Discussion

The present study examined how the propensity to morally disengage, and the fictionality or trueness of a narrative affected individuals' actual moral disengagement and the enjoyment of a narrative featuring a morally ambiguous protagonist. The study also examined how moral disengagement leads to enjoyment through character liking. The results indicate that some individuals are more prone to morally disengage than others. Furthermore, the results suggest that moral disengagement is an important variable to consider in entertainment research as it affects character liking as well as overall enjoyment.

Individuals' propensity to morally disengage predicted their acceptance of the protagonist's immoral actions. In other words, individuals who are prone to morally disengage in their everyday lives are also more likely to excuse the immoral actions of a morally ambiguous protagonist. This finding supports Bandura's (Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996) idea that the propensity for moral disengagement affects not only an individual's proclivity to engage in delinquent behaviours but also his or her perceptions of others' immoral actions. Individuals with a greater propensity to disengage are more willing to accept immoral actions, and this occurs regardless of whether the actions are performed by a fictional character or a real individual. These findings could help to explain differences in individual preferences for certain types of entertainment content.

For example, it is possible that individuals who have a lower propensity for disengagement avoid content that features too many immoral actions.

Surprisingly, narratives that were labelled as 'true stories' elicited equal levels of moral disengagement as did narratives that were labelled 'fictional stories'. It was predicted that it would be easier for individuals to morally disengage if they knew that the actions of the protagonist had no real-life consequences. However, this was not the case. In fact, individuals' perceptions of the trueness of a story had no effect on moral disengagement even though stories that were perceived to be truer were enjoyed more than stories that were perceived to be less true. One possible explanation for this finding is that individuals may not consider the potential reality of the consequences of character actions while enjoying entertainment content. That is, they may not engage in this type of moral consideration because doing so would hamper their entertainment experiences. Perhaps the distinction between reality and fiction is more important when the immoral actions are being performed by an individual via a character (i.e. video game play as suggested by Klimmt et al. (2006)) rather than when the action is performed by a character in other types of media content. This may occur because individuals may feel guiltier when they are the ones performing the immoral actions.

The results also revealed that moral disengagement predicts enjoyment and that this relationship is mediated by character liking. Specifically, individuals who justified the immoral actions of the protagonist ended up liking him more than those who did not justify the actions or who did so to a lesser extent. Furthermore, greater character liking resulted in more overall enjoyment of the narrative. These findings support the proposed theory that individuals are able to enjoy entertainment content featuring a morally ambiguous character by morally disengaging (e.g. Raney, 2004). Moreover, justifying a character's immoral behaviours heightens the likeability of the character; this, in turn, leads to greater enjoyment.

5.1 Limitations and directions for future research

This study has some limitations and therefore proposes some avenues for future research. Although this research found that the propensity to morally disengage is related to actual moral disengagement, it is worth noting that individuals in the sample reported generally low levels of either type of moral disengagement (propensity to disengage: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.61$; actual disengagement: $M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.84$). It is possible that college students are less prone to morally disengage than others, and/or that social desirability played a role in these results. Future studies could examine the role of moral disengagement propensity in other populations and its effect on the perceptions of other types of entertainment content.

In addition, although this research suggests that individuals are just as likely to justify immoral actions performed by fictional and non-fictional characters, it is possible that the entertainment function of the stories affected these results. The narratives in this research were both presented and written as short stories, which are generally read for enjoyment. However, the results may have been different if the narratives were written as news stories, which are generally read for information. Specifically, entertainment expectations may result in moral disengagement for the sake of enjoyment; without these expectations, individuals may be less motivated to morally disengage. Future research could thus examine the effect of entertainment expectations on moral disengagement.

Finally, in this study, a moral disengagement scale was designed to measure actual mechanisms of moral disengagement used by individuals while reading a particular narrative. However, the items did not measure every possible moral justification that could have been used by individuals while reading the narrative. It may thus be worthwhile for researchers to employ in-depth interviews and other techniques to develop a more comprehensive scale for actual moral disengagement that could be used in subsequent entertainment studies.

6   Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study enhance our understanding of the process by which individuals enjoy morally ambiguous protagonists. Specifically, the results bolster the proposition that moral disengagement plays a role in the enjoyment of immoral behaviours. Moreover, the findings reveal that moral disengagement results in increased character liking, which in turn, leads to greater enjoyment. In addition, this study shows that the propensity to morally disengage influences actual levels of moral disengagement, but that moral disengagement is unaffected by the trueness or fictionality of entertainment content.

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Note

[1] In this and all subsequent path analyses, the error terms for the two enjoyment factors were allowed to correlate.