

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Dual Role of Morally Ambiguous Characters: Examining the Effect of Morality Salience on Narrative Responses

K. Maja Krakowiak<sup>1</sup> & Mina Tsay-Vogel<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Mass Communication, Advertising and Public Relations, Boston University, MA 02215, USA

*Using social comparison theory as a framework, 2 experiments examined the effects of a person's self-perception on responses to characters who display varying levels of morality. Study 1 found that individuals whose vices were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a narrative featuring a morally ambiguous character (MAC) than one featuring a bad character. Study 2 found that individuals whose virtues were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a narrative featuring a good character than one featuring a MAC. Findings thus indicate that morality salience is an important factor determining responses to different character types. Avenues for future research and theoretical implications of the dual role of MACs are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Morality, Social Comparison, Affect, Enjoyment, Moral Disengagement, Morally Ambiguous Characters, Antiheroes.

doi:10.1111/hcre.12050

Morally ambiguous characters (MACs) or antiheroes have become prevalent in entertainment content in recent years. Unlike traditional hero characters, MACs often behave in immoral ways; however, they also have redeeming qualities that differentiate them from villains. Examples of these characters include Dexter Morgan, a likeable serial killer who only targets other killers and who works for the police department as a blood spatter expert; Walter White, a chemistry teacher who starts to cook methamphetamines in order to provide for his family; Tony Soprano, a mob boss who is a loving family man, and countless others.

The proliferation of these characters has recently attracted the attention of media scholars (e.g., Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). The main question asked by researchers is “Why are people drawn to these

---

Corresponding author: K. Maja Krakowiak; e-mail: mkrakowi@uccs.edu

characters?" Affective disposition theory (ADT) provides a framework for understanding the process by which individuals derive enjoyment from entertainment content; however, its applicability to MACs may be limited (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Research has also shown that moral disengagement (see Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2006; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Raney, 2004), identification (see Raney & Janicke, 2013; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), transportation (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012), suspense (see Eden et al., 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012), and some personality traits (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Raney, Schmid, Niemann, & Ellensohn, 2009) play a role in the enjoyment of these types of characters.

However, no research has yet examined how moral self-perception may impact the appeal of characters who behave badly. According to social comparison theory, individuals compare themselves to similar others (Festinger, 1954). When the other who is used for comparison is perceived to be worse than the self, the individual may feel better about him or herself. This may be particularly true when an individual's self-perception is threatened. The current research thus empirically tests whether the appeal of different character types changes based on individuals' perceptions of their own morality. Two experiments were conducted in which participants' virtues or vices were made salient. In Study 1, responses (affect, enjoyment, and character perceptions) to bad characters and MACs were examined, and in Study 2, the same responses to good characters and MACs were compared.

### **Affective disposition theory**

According to ADT individuals derive enjoyment from watching liked characters succeed, and disliked characters fail (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Individuals continually judge the morality of characters' actions and motivations to determine their goodness or badness. Generally, characters who are perceived to be good or moral are liked, whereas those who are perceived to be bad or immoral are disliked (Zillmann, 2000). However, Raney (2004) has argued that individuals are so motivated to enjoy entertainment content that they justify characters' bad behaviors in an effort to maintain character liking and thereby enjoyment. Recent research supports this proposition by showing that at times individuals may be willing to excuse the bad behaviors of protagonists through a process of moral disengagement (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Shafer, 2009; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

Furthermore, individuals are most likely to pardon bad character behaviors for the sake of enjoying a narrative or liking the character when such actions are warranted by selfless or justifiable intentions and outcomes (see Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Although excusing bad behaviors may increase audience enjoyment, researchers have worried about the potential negative effects of such moral justifications and negative character behaviors in general. For example, research has shown that violent character actions can increase real-world aggression (see Anderson et al., 2003 for review), and sexually explicit content may increase promiscuity in some cases (see Harris & Barlett, 2009 for review).

However, negative character actions may possibly benefit some individuals through advantageous comparison and the process of downward social comparison. To date, research has not taken into account how moral self-perceptions impact the appeal of characters who behave badly. Through a social comparison lens, the salience of one's own morality or immorality may influence responses to narratives featuring morally questionable characters by means of preserving one's self-concept.

## Study 1

### **Moral disengagement: Advantageous comparison**

According to Bandura (1986, 1999, 2002), moral disengagement is the process by which moral self-sanctions are disengaged for reprehensible conduct. When individuals perform actions that violate their moral standards, they undergo a process of self-condemnation. However, by selectively activating and disengaging self-sanctions, individuals can accept conduct that they would otherwise consider to be immoral. Bandura identified eight mechanisms that can be used to morally disengage. The disengagement can focus on redefining the immoral conduct through moral justification, advantageous comparison, or euphemistic labeling. It can further center on minimizing the agentive role of the perpetrator through the diffusion or displacement of responsibility. Moreover, it can involve minimizing or distorting the consequences of the action, or it can focus on dehumanizing or blaming the victim of the maltreatment. The mechanism of palliative/advantageous comparison is particularly relevant for the current study. This mechanism relies on comparing immoral conduct to behavior that is deemed to be even more morally reprehensible. The more flagrant the contrasting behavior, the less malevolent an individual's own behavior appears.

Previous entertainment studies have examined how individuals may reinterpret a *character's* immoral actions by comparing these actions to something more heinous (see Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Similarly, individuals may compare their *own* behaviors to those of a character in entertainment content. For example, a person who is feeling guilty because she flirted with a married man may feel better after watching a movie in which the heroine cheated on her husband, because the viewer may reinterpret her own behavior as being not so bad in comparison to the cheating behavior of the character in the movie. Therefore, individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened may experience more positive affect and enjoyment after being exposed to characters who are more immoral than themselves.

### **Social comparisons with immoral characters**

Exposure to characters' immoral actions may similarly result in positive responses through the process of downward social comparison. Predicated on the notion that humans have a fundamental tendency to compare themselves with others (Festinger, 1954), social comparisons play a significant role in impacting how individuals think, feel, and behave. Motivationally speaking, people not only desire

to attain knowledge about themselves, but also strive to hold stable and accurate self-perspectives (Taylor, Wayment, & Carrillo, 1996a), generally fulfilling needs such as self-enhancement and self-improvement (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002; Wood & Taylor, 1991).

In the context of entertainment media, research has provided support for downward social comparison in that viewers feel better about themselves after witnessing others who are suffering or who are worse off (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003; Mares & Cantor, 1992). Such entertainment fare potentially allows viewers to feel that they are not alone or are in fact doing better than others, ultimately heightening their own subjective well-being. In contrast, people may also compare themselves to others who are superior and, thus, undergo upward social comparison. In this case, perceiving themselves as similar to others who are outperformers may be ego-enhancing because it provides viewers with useful information to improve (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

In light of the explanatory mechanisms underlying social comparison processes and their psychological benefits, the present study investigates whether priming one's morality (virtues) or immorality (vices) has a bearing on emotional and cognitive responses to a story featuring either a bad character or a MAC. Given that social comparisons are more likely to occur with similar others (Festinger, 1954; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Suls, Gaes, & Gastorf, 1979), as those who are psychologically divergent do not provide useful information to form accurate self-evaluations, it is reasonable to suggest that those whose vices are made salient would socially compare themselves with characters who commit immoral actions. Furthermore, for these individuals whose subjective well-being is most threatened, downward comparisons are more readily employed in order to enhance positive self-views (Wills, 1981; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Therefore, we expect people whose vices are made salient will generally experience more positive emotions and find the narrative experience more enjoyable when exposed to a story about a bad character than one about a MAC. However, for those reminded of their virtues, a narrative about a bad character or MAC should elicit no difference in affective and enjoyment responses. In this instance, social comparisons are least likely to happen due to character dissimilarity.

In sum, downward social comparison suggests that individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened will feel better when exposed to similar others who are worse off. Similarly, by employing the moral disengagement mechanism of advantageous comparison, individuals who are reminded of their immoral actions may lessen their feelings of guilt by comparing their actions to even more heinous ones committed by others. Given this line of reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that (a) those whose vices are made salient will report more positive affect after reading a narrative about a bad character compared to those who read one about a MAC, whereas (b) those whose virtues are made salient will exhibit no difference in positive affect.

- H2: There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that (a) those whose vices are made salient will report greater enjoyment after reading a narrative about a bad character compared to those who read one about a MAC, whereas (b) those whose virtues are made salient will exhibit no difference in enjoyment.

Although the aforementioned predictions focus on the emotions produced by and enjoyment of stories with immoral characters, we are also interested in examining the degree to which morality salience and character type (MAC or bad) impact the moral qualities attributed to these characters. Although ADT focuses largely on character liking and enjoyment as a function of a character's moral actions (Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), perceptions of the goodness or badness of these characters can help inform the social comparison process taking place, particularly when individuals' virtues or vices are made salient. Thus, we propose the following research question:

- RQ1: Do perceptions of character attributes differ as a function of morality salience and character type?

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

One hundred ninety-two undergraduate students (ages ranged between 18 and 53,  $M = 21.08$ ) participated in an online experiment for extra credit. Participants were recruited from three large universities in different areas of the United States.

After reading an informed consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue)  $\times$  2 (Character: morally ambiguous and bad) experiment. In order to make either participants' virtues or vices salient, a priming manipulation adapted from Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) was used. Participants were instructed to spend 10 minutes listing three recent experiences in which they either "went against one of their most important values and felt guilty" (vice condition), or "demonstrated one of their most important values and felt proud of themselves" (virtue condition).

After completing the morality salience task, participants answered manipulation check items measuring the perceived morality of their actions. Participants were then thanked for completing the first part of the study about subjective memory and were instructed to continue to the second part of the study about perceptions of entertainment. In this part of the study, participants were directed to read a short story (approximately 1,800 words). After finishing the story, participants answered a questionnaire measuring the dependent variables and demographic information. The presentation order of the dependent variables and the measurement items of each dependent variable were randomized using Qualtrics survey software to avoid order effects.

### *Manipulation check*

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure that the morality salience manipulations were successful. After completing the salience task, participants were asked to indicate the perceived morality of their actions on six 7-point scales ranging from

1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) adapted from measures of general morality used by Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez (1990) (e.g., My actions are: “moral,” “ethical,” “honest,” etc.). The six items were averaged to create a scale of moral self-perceptions ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). As expected, the analysis revealed that individuals rated their actions to be more morally sound in the virtue condition ( $M = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) than in the vice condition ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ),  $t(176) = -2.84$ ,  $p < .01$ . Levene’s test indicated unequal variances ( $F = 4.58$ ,  $p < .03$ ) so degrees of freedom were adjusted from 190 to 176.

### Materials

Two short stories used by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) were utilized for the character type (bad vs. morally ambiguous) manipulations. One of the stories, *The Suspect*, is written in the first person and details a day in the life of a detective. During the course of the story, the detective interrogates a prime suspect in the murder of a young girl. However, the suspect suddenly falls ill, and the detective must decide whether to save his life. The descriptions of the detective and the actions he performs were manipulated to create the two character conditions. Specifically, in the bad character condition, the detective is described as doing only bad things (e.g., stealing drugs from a crime scene, beating up the suspect, and letting the suspect die). In the MAC condition, the detective is described as doing both bad things (e.g., stealing drugs from the crime scene, and beating up the suspect) and good things (e.g., saving the suspect’s life).

The second story, *Summit Fever*, is written in the third person and describes a mountain climber’s attempted ascent of Mt. Everest. The main character is climbing the mountain with two friends, but one of them starts to fall behind. Later, the main character encounters a disoriented mountain climber whom everyone assumed was dead. As with the first story, the descriptions of the main character and his actions were edited to create the two character conditions. In the bad character condition, the main character does not share his food with his friend, leaves his friend behind, and pushes the disoriented climber off a ridge. In the MAC condition, the main character does not share his food and leaves his friend behind, but he saves the disoriented climber. These stories have been previously tested to ensure that the character manipulations are successful (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

In sum, four short stories were used in the experiment: Two stories featured a MAC and two featured a bad character. However, each participant read only one short story.

### Measures

The dependent variables included affect, enjoyment, and character attributes.

*Affect.* Participants’ overall affect after reading the stories was assessed with seven items adapted from Barrett and Russell (1998). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt a list of emotions on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at*

all) to 7 (*very much*) (e.g., “happy,” “content,” “depressed” (reverse-coded), etc.). The seven items were averaged to create an affect scale with higher values indicating more positive affect ( $\alpha = .79, M = 3.95, SD = 1.19$ ).

*Enjoyment.* Participants’ enjoyment of the stories was measured with four items adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010). The items were measured on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged to create an enjoyment scale with higher values indicating more enjoyment (e.g., “It was fun for me to read the story,” “I enjoyed this story,” etc.;  $\alpha = .92, M = 3.98, SD = 1.54$ ).

*Character attributes.* Perceptions of the main character’s positive attributes were measured with five items adapted from person perception and impression formation literature (Hoffner, 1996; Pfau & Mullen, 1995). The items were measured on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged to create a character attributes scale with higher values indicating more positive perceptions (e.g., “The main character does some good things,” “The main character has some positive attributes,” etc.;  $\alpha = .96, M = 3.73, SD = 1.86$ ).

**Results**

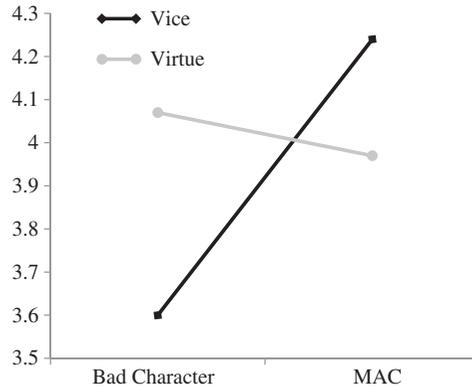
*Affect*

H1 predicted that for those whose vices were made salient, exposure to a bad character would produce more positive affect than exposure to a MAC; however, there would be no difference in positive affect for those whose virtues were made salient. In order to test this hypothesis, a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue)  $\times$  2 (Character: morally ambiguous and bad) analysis of variance test was performed on positive affect. The analysis yielded a main effect for character, with participants reporting significantly greater positive affect after being exposed to the MAC ( $M = 4.11, SE = .12$ ) than to the bad character ( $M = 3.84, SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 188) = 2.51, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .01$ . This main effect should be interpreted in light of a Morality Salience  $\times$  Character interaction that was also obtained,  $F(1, 188) = 4.79, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .03$  (see Table 1 for means). Figure 1 illustrates that positive affect was greater after exposure to the MAC than to the bad

**Table 1** Affect: Morality Salience  $\times$  Character (Bad, MAC) Interaction

Morality Salience		Character	
		Bad	Morally Ambiguous
Vice	<i>M</i>	3.60 <sub>aA</sub>	4.24 <sub>bA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.16	.18
Virtue	<i>M</i>	4.07 <sub>aB</sub>	3.97 <sub>aA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.17	.17

*Note:* Using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ ; within columns, means with no upper case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 1** Interaction effect of morality salience and character (bad, MAC) on affect.

character for those whose vices were made salient; however, positive affect did not differ across characters for those whose virtues were made salient. Moreover, among those who read the story featuring the bad character, positive affect was greater for those whose virtues were made salient than for those whose vices were made salient. Although a significant difference in positive affect across characters in the vice condition was found, the nature of this relationship was contrary to the direction that was predicted. Therefore, H1a was not supported. Nevertheless, patterns indicate that those whose virtues were made salient elicited no difference in positive affect after reading about the MAC as compared to the bad character, showing support for H1b.

#### *Enjoyment*

H2 predicted that for those whose vices were made salient, exposure to a bad character would elicit greater enjoyment than exposure to a MAC; however, there would be no difference in enjoyment for those whose virtues were made salient. In order to test this hypothesis, a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue)  $\times$  2 (Character: morally ambiguous and bad) ANOVA test was employed on enjoyment. The analysis revealed only a main effect for character, indicating that participants enjoyed the story with the MAC ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SE = .16$ ) significantly more than the story with the bad character ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 188) = 3.85$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ . Therefore, H2 was not supported.

#### *Character attributes*

RQ1 asked whether perceptions of character attributes differ as a function of morality salience and character. A 2 (Morality Prime: vice and virtue)  $\times$  2 (Character: morally ambiguous and bad) ANOVA test was conducted on character attributes. The analysis yielded a main effect for character, showing that participants reported significantly more positive perceptions of MACs ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) than of bad characters ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 188) = 265.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .59$ .

## Discussion

The focus of this research was to investigate the effects of morality salience on the appeal of bad characters and MACs in a narrative. This goal was theoretically grounded on the premise that exposure to immoral characters may offer ego-enhancing comparisons for those whose own moralities are threatened through the process of downward social comparison and the moral disengagement mechanism of advantageous comparison. Contrary to our predictions, the patterns of results suggest that when an individual's vices are most pronounced, a story about a morally questionable character produced significantly more ego-enhancing benefits (e.g., more positive emotions) than a story about a bad character. However, in support of our expectations, individuals whose moral goodness was induced experienced no difference in positive emotions after reading a narrative featuring either a MAC or a bad character. In addition, individuals in both vice and virtue conditions enjoyed stories featuring MACs more than those featuring bad characters, and MACs were perceived to have more positive attributes than bad characters.

These findings indicate that exposure to a MAC (as compared to a bad character) makes people who are feeling insecure about their own moralities feel better. This suggests that social comparisons may be more readily made with characters who, although they commit antisocial behaviors, also execute actions that are morally warranted. Performing a blend of both good and bad actions may have allowed a MAC to be a stronger comparison target than a bad character for those whose vices were made salient. Two potential explanations offer insight to these results. First, MACs perhaps are deemed more similar to humans as we may not always adhere to ethical standards depending on situational and environmental contexts, constraints, and pressures. In fact, Konijn and Hoorn (2005) found that MACs are perceived to be more realistic than other types of characters. Furthermore, according to Raney and Janicke (2013), the flaws that these characters exhibit may make them easier to relate to and identify with for audiences. Social comparison literature documents the important role of similarity as a driving force that determines with whom we make social comparisons (Gruder, 1971; Wheeler, 1966); in other words, our need to construct an accurate self-perspective predominantly leads us to select those with similar standards and attributes for comparison. Therefore, it is reasonable that individuals who felt somewhat morally ambiguous themselves were more likely to compare themselves to MACs than to bad characters.

However, social learning theory offers an alternative explanation for why exposure to a bad character produced less positive emotional responses as compared to a MAC for those whose immoralities were most salient (Bandura, 1977). In the case of narratives featuring a bad character, there was an absence of positive consequences for others following the character's immoral behaviors. However, for the MACs, antisocial behaviors were complemented by morally righteous actions. Subsequently, this type of narrative potentially portrays the character as someone whose intentions, decisions, and behaviors are morally defensible (see Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Thus, the representation of MACs as being morally justified in some of their actions could serve

a disinhibitory role that encourages one's own immorality to be pardoned through vicarious learning. In contrast, the narratives about the bad character possibly inhibited individuals to feel better about their own vices as no positive outcomes or motivations were described. This may also explain why those whose immoralities were made salient felt less positive emotions after reading a story about a bad character than those whose virtues were more pronounced. These patterns of results are further informed by the notion that MACs were perceived to have more positive attributes than bad characters, regardless of whether vices or virtues were made salient for participants.

Counter to our expectations, those whose virtues were made salient enjoyed stories featuring MACs more than those featuring bad characters, even though these individuals did not experience a difference in positive affect as a result of character type. This may indicate that positive affect does not always correspond to enjoyment. In other words, feeling good in general or about oneself does not necessarily lead to enjoyment of specific entertainment content. This line of reasoning is consistent with suggestions that enjoyment does not always correspond with positive emotions (see Oliver, 1993; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Furthermore, earlier research has shown that narratives featuring MACs are more enjoyable than those featuring bad characters (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Thus, the morality salience manipulation possibly did not counteract these effects.

In sum, the findings interestingly point to an idea that MACs potentially offer psychologically positive benefits to audiences, especially in the case when one's moral self-perceptions are undesirable. The theoretical explanations underlying our original predictions were aligned with the tenets of downward social comparison and the moral disengagement mechanism of advantageous comparison (as the focus of our study was to examine responses to immoral characters). Our results suggest the need for further inquiry into how MACs compare to "good" characters (those who perform only ethical and noble deeds). If MACs are able to produce positive emotional responses that help individuals strategically cope with their own immoralities, then how would these characters measure up against strictly good characters? To answer this question, a second study was conducted to investigate the *same* relationships, but with characters who were portrayed either as good or morally ambiguous.

## Study 2

Whereas the previous investigation focused on self-enhancing mechanisms to forecast the appeal of immoral characters, this subsequent study takes into consideration the tenets of upward social comparison to predict responses to good characters versus MACs depending on whether participants' vices or virtues are made salient. In the context of witnessing others who are better off or more morally righteous than themselves, ego-enhancing experiences can take place if individuals find utility in such comparisons. In other words, upward social comparisons are made when people are enlightened by outperformers as this process encourages self-improvement (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major et al., 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). These upward

standards, which people consider meaningful to their self-concept, serve to motivate them to progress through increased perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Lirgg & Feltz, 1991). With this reasoning in mind, individuals whose virtues are made salient would more likely favor and enjoy self-supporting and inspirational narratives with good characters, as compared to stories about characters who commit antisocial behaviors. However, individuals whose vices are made salient may experience the opposite effect when comparing themselves to characters who only do good deeds. Because these individuals' self-perceptions are threatened, reading about someone who is better off or more virtuous may make them feel even worse (Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1985). In contrast, reading about a flawed character may elicit more positive responses.

Therefore, based on assumptions of upward social comparison, this study predicts that individuals whose virtues are made salient would feel more positive emotions and greater enjoyment when exposed to a story featuring a good character as compared to a MAC. In contrast, those whose vices are made salient will experience more positive emotions and greater enjoyment when reading a story featuring a MAC as compared to a good character. Specifically, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that (a) those whose vices are made salient will report greater positive affect after reading a narrative about a MAC compared to those who read one about a good character, whereas (b) those whose virtues are made salient will report greater positive affect after reading a narrative about a good character compared to those who read one about a MAC.

H4: There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that (a) those whose vices are made salient will report greater enjoyment after reading a narrative about a MAC compared to those who read one about a good character, whereas (b) those whose virtues are made salient will report greater enjoyment after reading a narrative about a good character compared to those who read one about a MAC.

Similar to Study 1, we are interested in the perceptions of the goodness or badness of these characters as such attributions may help inform the social comparison processes individuals take when their moralities or immoralities are made salient. Thus, in the context of comparing a good character and a MAC, we propose the following research question:

RQ2: Do perceptions of character attributes differ as a function of morality salience and character type?

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

One hundred eighty undergraduate students (ages ranged between 18 and 46,  $M = 20.80$ ) participated in an online experiment for extra credit. Participants were recruited from three large universities in different areas of the United States.

The procedure for this study was identical to the first study except that in this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue)  $\times$  2 (Character: good and morally ambiguous) experiment.

### *Manipulation check*

A manipulation check was conducted in order to ensure that the morality salience manipulations were successful. Six items were averaged to create a scale of moral self-perceptions ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) (see Study 1 for a full description of measures). The analysis revealed that individuals rated their actions to be more morally sound in the virtue ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) than in the vice condition ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $t(178) = -1.90$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### *Materials*

As in Study 1, two short stories used by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) were utilized for the character type (good vs. morally ambiguous) manipulations. The MAC stories were identical to those used in Study 1. In the good character conditions, however, the main characters were described as doing only good things. Specifically, in the good character condition of “The Suspect” story, the detective is driven to get justice for the young murder victim, he follows the rules, and he saves the suspect’s life. In the good character condition of the “Summit Fever” story, the main character shares his food with his friends, waits for the friend who has fallen behind, and saves the disoriented climber’s life.

### *Measures*

The dependent variables used in this study were identical to those used in Study 1.

*Affect.* Seven items were averaged to create an affect scale with higher values indicating more positive affect ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

*Enjoyment.* Four items were averaged to create an enjoyment scale with higher values indicating more enjoyment ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ).

*Character attributes.* Five items were averaged to create a character attributes scale with higher values indicating more positive perceptions ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).

## **Results**

To test the proposed hypotheses and answer the research question, the same set of factorial ANOVAs as in Study 1 were employed; however, character differences were examined between a good character and a MAC.

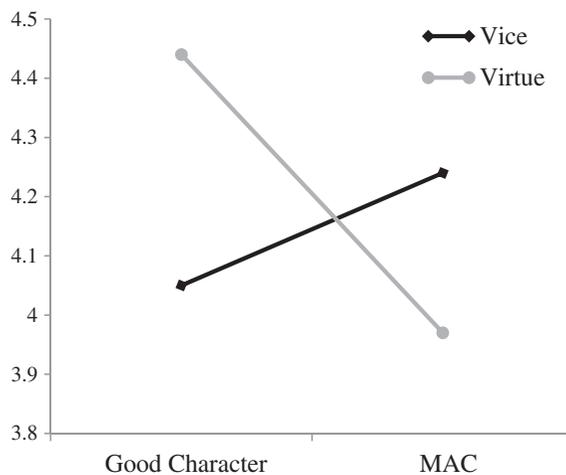
### *Affect*

H3 predicted that for those whose vices were made salient, exposure to a MAC would produce more positive affect than exposure to a good character; however, for those whose virtues were made salient, the reverse would be true. In order to test this

**Table 2** Affect: Morality Salience × Character (Good, MAC) Interaction

Morality Salience		Character	
		Good	Morally Ambiguous
Vice	<i>M</i>	4.05 <sub>aA</sub>	4.22 <sub>aA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.17	.19
Virtue	<i>M</i>	4.44 <sub>aB</sub>	3.96 <sub>bA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.17	.18

*Note:* Using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ ; within columns, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 2** Interaction effect of morality salience and character (good, MAC) on affect.

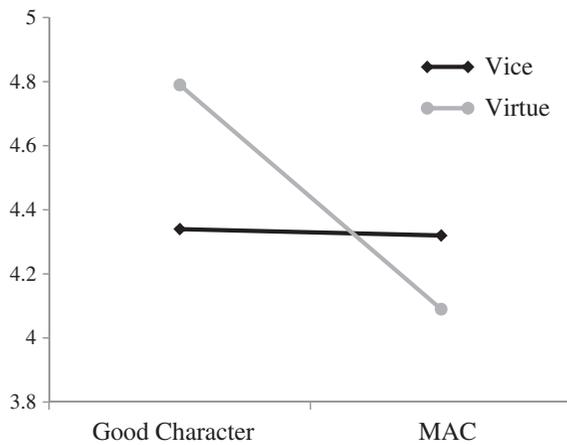
hypothesis, a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue) × 2 (Character: good and morally ambiguous) ANOVA test was performed on positive affect. The analysis revealed a Morality Salience × Character interaction,  $F(1, 176) = 3.35, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$  (see Table 2 for means). Figure 2 illustrates that for those whose vices were made salient positive affect did not differ across characters, but for those whose virtues were made salient positive affect was greater after exposure to a good character than a MAC. Furthermore, among those who read the story featuring a good character, positive affect was greater for those whose virtues were made salient than for those whose vices were made salient. Therefore, findings show support for H3b, but do not support H3a.

*Enjoyment.* H4 predicted that for those whose vices were made salient, exposure to a MAC would elicit greater enjoyment than exposure to a good character; however for those whose virtues were made salient, the reverse would be true. In order to

**Table 3** Enjoyment: Morality Salience × Character (Good, MAC) Interaction

Morality Salience		Character	
		Good	Morally Ambiguous
Vice	<i>M</i>	4.34 <sub>aA</sub>	4.33 <sub>aA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.19	.21
Virtue	<i>M</i>	4.79 <sub>aB</sub>	4.12 <sub>aA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.18	.20

*Note:* Using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ ; within columns, means with no upper case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .



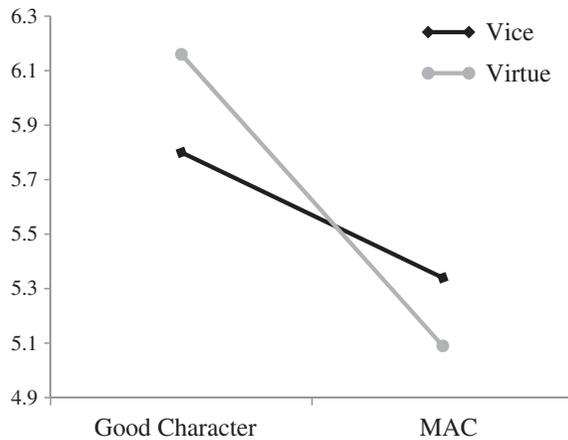
**Figure 3** Interaction effect of morality salience and character (good, MAC) on enjoyment.

test this hypothesis, a 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue) × 2 (Character: good and morally ambiguous) ANOVA test was employed on enjoyment. The analysis yielded a main effect for character,  $F(1, 176) = 2.97, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$ , indicating that participants enjoyed the story with the good character ( $M = 4.56, SE = .13$ ) significantly more than the story with the MAC ( $M = 4.23, SE = .14$ ). This main effect should be interpreted in light of a Morality Salience × Character interaction that was also obtained,  $F(1, 176) = 2.90, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$  (see Table 3 for means). Figure 3 illustrates that those whose vices were made salient enjoyed the good character and MAC stories equally, but those whose virtues were made salient enjoyed the good character stories significantly more than those featuring MACs. Moreover, those whose virtues were made salient enjoyed reading the story featuring the good character significantly more than those whose vices were made salient. Thus, findings show support for H4b, but do not support H4a.

**Table 4** Character Attributes: Morality Salience × Character (Good, MAC) Interaction

Morality Salience		Character	
		Good	Morally Ambiguous
Vice	<i>M</i>	5.80 <sub>aA</sub>	5.33 <sub>bA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.14	.15
Virtue	<i>M</i>	6.16 <sub>aB</sub>	5.10 <sub>bA</sub>
	<i>SE</i>	.14	.15

*Note:* Using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post-hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ ; within columns, means with no upper case subscript in common differ at  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 4** Interaction effect of morality salience and character (good, MAC) on character attributes.

*Character attributes*

RQ2 asked whether perceptions of character attributes differ as a function of morality salience and character. A 2 (Morality Salience: vice and virtue) × 2 (Character: morally ambiguous and bad) ANOVA test was conducted on character attributes. The analysis revealed a main effect for character, showing that participants reported significantly more positive attributes for good characters ( $M = 5.98, SE = .10$ ) than for MACs ( $M = 5.21, SE = .11$ ),  $F(1, 175) = 27.94, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .14$ . This main effect should be interpreted in light of a Morality Salience × Character interaction that was also obtained,  $F(1, 175) = 4.08, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$  (see Table 4 for means). Figure 4 illustrates that although participants rated good characters as having significantly more positive attributes than MACs regardless of morality salience, those whose virtues were made salient reported more positive attributes for good characters than did those whose vices were made salient.

## Discussion

The focus of this study was to determine the effect of morality salience on the appeal of good characters and MACs. On the basis of upward social comparison, we hypothesized that individuals whose virtues were made salient would reap the most benefits (i.e., positive affect and enjoyment) from reading a story featuring a good character as compared to a MAC; whereas the opposite was expected for those whose vices were made salient.

In support of upward social comparison, the results indicate that those whose moral goodness was induced experienced the most ego-enhancing benefits after reading a story about a good character than a MAC. Contrary to predictions, however, those who were induced to feel insecure with their morality experienced no difference in affect or enjoyment after reading a story featuring a MAC or good character. In addition, good characters were perceived to have more positive attributes than MACs, but those in the virtue condition rated good characters as having more positive attributes than did those in the vice condition.

The findings thus indicate that those who feel secure about their own moralities may compare themselves to characters who perform good deeds. Furthermore, these individuals may benefit from such comparisons because they perceive these characters to be similar to (if not slightly better) than themselves, which may also encourage self-improvement (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major et al., 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). MACs, on the other hand, are perceived to have fewer positive attributes than good characters, which may make them seem less similar to individuals whose virtues are made salient. Because similarity is an important factor driving social comparisons (Gruder, 1971; Wheeler, 1966), those who felt virtuous may not have made social comparisons with MACs. As a result, exposure to MACs resulted in less positive affect and enjoyment than did exposure to good characters with whom upward social comparison was likely to occur.

In contrast, those who felt worse about their own moralities did not differentiate between good characters and MACs. That is, in both cases, individuals experienced an equal amount of positive affect and enjoyment. One explanation for these findings is that people who felt morally insecure perhaps perceived both types of characters as relatively good in comparison to themselves even though they rated good characters as having more positive attributes than MACs. As such, these individuals may have also undergone upward social comparison with both types of characters. In general, social comparison theory predicts that those whose self-perceptions are threatened will feel worse after seeing someone who is better off than themselves (Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1985). However, those in the vice condition may not have felt sufficiently threatened by the manipulation to undergo this process. This notion is supported by the fact that although individuals in the vice condition felt their actions were less moral ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than did those in the virtue condition ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), people whose vices were made salient nonetheless rated their actions as relatively favorable on a 7-point scale. Consequently, individuals who felt slightly less moral may have still experienced ego-enhancing benefits after exposure to morally ambiguous and good

characters through the process of upward social comparison; however, they did not experience as much benefit after exposure to good characters as did those who felt more virtuous. This could have occurred because after the morality salience manipulation, those in the virtue condition may have had a higher positive affect baseline than those in the vice condition. Alternatively, if the vice condition manipulation produced more negative self-perceptions, we may have found a difference in affect and enjoyment between MACs and good characters in the vice condition, supporting our hypotheses.

Interestingly, those whose vices were induced perceived good characters to have fewer positive attributes than did those whose virtues were made salient. Perhaps, this occurred because individuals who felt less morally virtuous wanted to identify with and feel more similar to these characters and thereby rated these characters as being less good. Similarly, those who felt more morally virtuous may have increased their ratings of good characters because they identified with and felt similar to these characters. Future research could examine whether morality salience affects feeling of similarity and identification with different character types.

## Conclusion

The present studies provided a first step in understanding how morality salience affects responses (i.e., positive affect, enjoyment, and perceptions of character attributes) to narratives featuring different character types. Applying theories of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) as a framework, this research examined the appeal of different character types for individuals whose moral self-perceptions are either bolstered or threatened. Recent work has examined the appeal of MACs (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). No research to date, however, has investigated the potential affective benefits of these types of characters for those who are feeling insecure about their own moralities.

Overall, the findings of these studies contribute to positive psychology literature by indicating not only that certain character types are more beneficial than others, but also that one's moral self-perception determines these effects. Specifically, MACs and good characters offer affective benefits to some individuals, supporting the propositions of social comparison (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002; Wood & Taylor, 1991). However, contrary to predictions based on downward social comparison and the moral disengagement mechanism of advantageous comparison, bad characters did not provide such benefits. That is, reading narratives featuring bad characters resulted in the least positive affect and enjoyment, particularly for those whose vices were made salient. On the other hand, these individuals experienced more positive affect after reading narratives featuring MACs suggesting that they may have felt similar to these characters and were thus able to make favorable comparisons between themselves and these characters. This effect was not observed for those who felt more morally virtuous, perhaps because they did not perceive themselves to be

similar to MACs. These individuals, however, experienced more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a narrative featuring a good character indicating that they may have undergone a process of upward social comparison.

Perhaps most interestingly, the present studies revealed that MACs operate differently or hold dual roles based on individuals' moral self-perceptions. Specifically, those who perceived themselves to be the most morally virtuous felt the same amount of positive affect after reading a story featuring a MAC as they did after reading a story featuring a bad character. In contrast, those who felt less morally virtuous responded to MACs in the same way as they did to good characters. One possible explanation for these findings is that people who feel worse about their own moralities are more willing to forgive MACs' bad behaviors; whereas, those who feel morally secure with their own actions are less willing to forgive or recast MACs' immoral behaviors. This would result in MACs operating as good characters for those whose moral self-perceptions are threatened, and as bad characters for those whose moral self-perceptions are bolstered.

According to Bandura (1986, 2002), individuals utilize moral disengagement mechanisms to minimize self-sanctions for their immoral behaviors. Individuals who are reminded of their own moral failings may thus try to absolve themselves of guilt via moral disengagement. Moreover, those who have recently morally disengaged their own bad behaviors may be more likely to disengage others' bad behaviors. Therefore, our manipulation of morality salience may have inadvertently primed individuals who were instructed to think about their moral vices to use moral disengagement mechanisms to forgive both their own bad actions as well as those of the characters they encountered in the short stories. Previous research has shown that moral disengagement may increase character liking (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011) and enjoyment (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010; Klimmt et al., 2006; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012), and future research could examine whether those who feel morally insecure are actually more likely to morally disengage characters' bad behaviors.

It is important to point out that morality salience is not static in nature. Although participants' virtues or vices were made salient at the beginning of the experiment, the activation of their moral or immoral self-perceptions possibly changed throughout the narrative, depending on the development of the character, plot, and outcome. Furthermore, individuals have different moral compasses and consequently, moral self-evaluations and judgments may be influenced by other factors, such as one's tendency to feel guilty, overcome moral violations, and tolerate moral sanctions. Future research may consider taking these individual difference variables into account.

Additionally, previous research has shown that social comparisons may impact the selection of content (e.g., Mares & Cantor, 1992). Future scholarship may thus consider how morality salience impacts not only narrative responses, but also the selection of media fare that features good, morally ambiguous, and bad characters. As social comparisons theoretically helped to inform the emotional and cognitive reactions audiences have with characters of varying moral dispositions, it would be

interesting to explore if upward and downward comparisons occur similarly with the selection of narratives that involve anticipated motivations rather than experienced gratifications.

Moreover, the current studies examined responses to written narratives, which may elicit different responses than video-based forms of entertainment. Films and television programs provide viewers with many more visual and auditory cues about characters than do narratives, and viewers use these cues when making judgments about characters (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1991 for review). Serialized television programs also allow viewers to see many facets of characters by portraying characters in diverse situations over extended periods of time. Thus, viewers' perceptions of and relationships with characters would likely change as they watch them over many episodes. Even other text-based forms of entertainment such as novels provide readers with many details that are not included in short stories. Future research should thus explore how morality salience affects responses to other forms of entertainment. Furthermore, in the current studies, we only examined general perceptions of a character's positive attributes. Although this gave us some information about overall impressions of a character, it did not reveal perceptions of specific character attributes. Future research could examine whether morality salience affects perceptions of different character attributes, such as character knowledge, attractiveness, morality, etc.

Another limitation of this research is that we did not measure individuals' perceived similarity with the characters, and perceived similarity is an important determinant of social comparison (Gruder, 1971; Wheeler, 1966). Therefore, we cannot be certain that individuals' responses to different character types can be attributed to their feeling of similarity with the characters. Future research should thus examine whether morality salience does in fact affect how similar individuals feel to different types of characters and how this impacts identification with these characters.

It is important to note that some of the reported effect sizes in the present studies were small (i.e.,  $\eta^2_p = .01$ ). One possible explanation for these effect sizes is that morality salience is one of many factors that influence a person's affect and enjoyment of content. Similarly, the manipulation of morality salience may have produced only slight differences in participants' self-perceptions. The results should be interpreted in light of these limitations, but the findings should not be entirely discounted, as small effect sizes are common in social science research (Cohen, 1988).

In summary, this research provides evidence that morality salience is an important variable determining audience responses to different character types. Furthermore, such variations in affective and cognitive responses may be explained by the social comparisons made between audiences and characters. Findings invaluable provide paths for further inquiry in the study of positive psychology as we consider the impact of moral self-perceptions and the theoretical implications of the dual role of MACs.

## References

- Anderson, C. A., Berkowitz, L., Donnerstein, E., Huesmann, L. R., Johnson, J. D., Linz, D., ... Wartella, E. (2003). The influence of media violence on youth. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, *4*, 81 – 110. doi:10.1111/j.1529-1006.2003.pspi\_1433.x
- Baldwin, M. W., Carrell, S. E., & Lopez, D. F. (1990). Priming relationship schemas: My advisor and the pope are watching me from the back of my mind. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *26*, 435 – 453. doi:0022-1031/90
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. New York, NY: General Learning Press.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: Freeman.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetuation of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *3*, 193 – 209. doi:10.1207/s15327957pspr0303\_3
- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, *31*, 101 – 119. doi:10.1080/0305724022014322
- Barrett, L. F., & Russell, J. A. (1998). Independence and bipolarity in the structure of current affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 967 – 984. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.74.4.967
- Cohen, G. L., Aronson, J., & Steele, C. M. (2000). When beliefs yield to evidence: Reducing biased evaluation by affirming the self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *26*, 1151 – 1164. doi:10.1177/01461672002611011
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (Vol. 2 ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eden, A., Grizzard, M., & Lewis, R. (2011). Disposition development in drama: The role of moral, immoral, and ambiguously moral characters. *International Journal of Arts and Technology*, *4*, 33 – 47. doi:10.1504/IJART.2011.037768
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, *7*, 117 – 140. doi:10.1177/001872675400700202
- Goethals, G. R., & Darley, J. M. (1977). Social comparison theory: An attributional approach. In J. M. Suls & R. L. Miller (Eds.), *Social comparison processes: Theoretical and empirical perspectives* (pp. 259 – 278). Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- Gruder, C. L. (1971). Determinants of social comparison choices. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *7*, 473 – 489.
- Harris, R. J., & Barlett, C. P. (2009). Effects of sex in the media. In J. Bryant & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 304 – 324). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hartmann, T., & Vorderer, P. (2010). It's okay to shoot a character: Moral disengagement in violent video games. *Journal of Communication*, *60*, 94 – 119. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01459.x
- Hoffner, C. (1996). Children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *40*, 389 – 402.
- Hoffner, C., & Cantor, J. (1991). Perceiving and responding to media characters. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Responding to the screen: Reception and reaction processes* (pp. 63 – 101). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Klimmt, C., Schmid, H., Nosper, A., Hartmann, T., & Vorderer, P. (2006). How players manage moral concerns to make video game violence enjoyable. *Communications: The*

- European Journal of Communication Research*, **31**, 309–328.  
doi:10.1515/COMMUN.2006.020
- Knobloch, S., & Zillmann, D. (2003). Appeal of love themes in popular music. *Psychological Reports*, **93**, 653–658. doi:10.2466/pr0.2003.93.3.653
- Konijn, E. A., & Hoorn, J. F. (2005). Some like it bad: Testing a model for perceiving and experiencing fictional characters. *Media Psychology*, **7**, 107–144.  
doi:10.1207/S1532785XMEP0702\_1
- Krakowiak, K. M., & Oliver, M. B. (2012). When good characters do bad things: Examining the effect of moral ambiguity on enjoyment. *Journal of Communication*, **62**, 117–135.  
doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01618.x
- Krakowiak, K. M., & Tsay, M. (2011). The role of moral disengagement in the enjoyment of real and fictional characters. *International Journal of Arts and Technology*, **4**, 90–101.  
doi:10.1504/IJART.2011.037772
- Krakowiak, K. M., & Tsay-Vogel, M. (2013). What makes characters' bad behaviors acceptable? The effects of character motivation and outcome on perceptions, character liking, and moral disengagement. *Mass Communication & Society*, **16**, 179–199.  
doi:10.1080/15205436.2012.690926
- Lirgg, C. D., & Feltz, D. L. (1991). Teacher versus peer models revisited: Effects on motor performance and self-efficacy. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sports*, **62**, 217–224.  
doi:10.1080/02701367.1991.10608713
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **73**, 91–103.  
doi:10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91
- Major, B., Testa, M., & Bylsma, W. H. (1991). Responses to upward and downward social comparisons: The impact of esteem-relevance and perceived control. In J. Suls & T. A. Wills (Eds.), *Social comparison: Contemporary theory and research* (pp. 237–260). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mares, M., & Cantor, J. (1992). Elderly viewers' responses to televised portrayals of old age: Empathy and mood management versus social comparison. *Communication Research*, **19**, 459–478. doi:10.1177/009365092019004004
- Oliver, M. B. (1993). Exploring the paradox of the enjoyment of sad films. *Human Communication Research*, **19**, 315–342. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1993.tb00304.x
- Oliver, M. B., & Bartsch, A. (2010). Appreciation as audience response: Exploring entertainment gratifications beyond hedonism. *Human Communication Research*, **36**, 53–81. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2009.01368.x
- Pfau, M., & Mullen, L. J. (1995). The influence of television viewing on public perceptions of physicians. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, **39**, 441–459.
- Raney, A. A. (2004). Expanding disposition theory: Reconsidering character liking, moral evaluations, and enjoyment. *Communication Theory*, **14**, 348–369.  
doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2004.tb00319.x
- Raney, A. A., & Janicke, S. (2013). How we enjoy and why we seek out morally complex characters in media entertainment. In R. Tamborini (Ed.), *Media and the moral mind* (pp. 152–169). London, England: Routledge.
- Raney, A. A., Schmid, H., Niemann, J., & Ellensohn, M. (2009, May). *Testing affective disposition theory: A comparison of the enjoyment of hero and antihero narratives*. Paper presented at the 59th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

- Shafer, D. (2009, May). *Moral disengagement for enjoyment's sake: Judging the actions of fictional characters*. Paper presented at the 59th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Shafer, D. M., & Raney, A. A. (2012). Exploring how we enjoy antihero narratives. *Journal of Communication*, **63**, 1–19. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01682.x
- Suls, J., Gaes, G., & Gastorf, J. W. (1979). Evaluating a sex related ability: Comparison with same-, opposite-, and combined-sex norms. *Journal of Research in Personality*, **13**, 294–304. doi:10.1016/0092-6566(79)90020-5
- Suls, J., Martin, R., & Wheeler, L. (2002). Social comparison: Why, with whom, and with what effect? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, **11**, 159–163. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.00191
- Tamborini, R., Weber, R., Eden, A., Bowman, N. D., & Grizzard, M. (2010). Repeated exposure to daytime soap opera and shifts in moral judgment toward social convention. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, **54**, 621–640. doi:10.1080/08838151.2010.519806
- Taylor, S. E., Wayment, H. A., & Carrillo, M. (1996a). Social comparison, self-regulation, and motivation. In R. M. Sorrentino & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition* (pp. 3–27). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Taylor, S. E., & Lobel, M. (1989). Social comparison activity under threat: Downward evaluation and upward contacts. *Psychological Review*, **96**, 569–575. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.96.4.569
- Tsay, M., & Krakowiak, K. M. (2011). The impact of perceived character similarity and identification on moral disengagement. *International Journal of Arts and Technology*, **4**, 102–110. doi:10.1504/IJART.2011.037773
- Vorderer, P., Klimmt, C., & Ritterfeld, U. (2004). Enjoyment: At the heart of media entertainment. *Communication Theory*, **14**, 388–408. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2004.tb00321.x
- Wheeler, L. (1966). Motivation as a determinant of upward comparison. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **2**, 27–31.
- Wills, T. A. (1981). Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological Bulletin*, **90**, 245–271. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.90.2.245
- Wood, J. V., & Taylor, K. L. (1991). Serving self-relevant goals through social comparison. In J. Suls & T. A. Wills (Eds.), *Social comparison: Contemporary theory and research* (pp. 23–49). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wood, J. V., Taylor, S. E., & Lichtman, R. R. (1985). Social comparison in adjustment to breast cancer. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **49**, 1169–1183. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.49.5.1169
- Zillmann, D. (2000). Basal morality in drama appreciation. In I. Bondebjerg (Ed.), *Moving images, culture, and the mind* (pp. 53–64). Luton, England: University of Luton Press.
- Zillmann, D., & Cantor, J. (1977). Affective responses to the emotions of a protagonist. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **13**, 155–165.