



# Are Good Characters Better for Us? The Effect of Morality Salience on Entertainment Selection and Recovery Outcomes

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Two experiments examined whether one's moral self-perception affects the selection of content (Study 1) and whether exposure to different character types results in any recovery benefits (Study 2). Study 1 found that individuals were more likely to select films featuring good characters and morally ambiguous characters than films featuring bad characters regardless of their moral self-perceptions. Study 2 found that individuals whose vices were made salient relaxed and psychologically detached more after reading stories featuring good characters and MACs than after reading a bad character story, whereas those whose virtues were made salient experienced an equal level of recovery benefits regardless of character type. Findings thus indicate that morality salience does not affect selection of content

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featuring different character types, but it does affect the recovery outcomes one experiences after narrative exposure.

Much research has examined how we respond to different character types (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Morally ambiguous characters (MACs), in particular, have received much attention from researchers, as these characters are especially prevalent in entertainment media. However, despite the popularity of MACs, it is not clear when individuals are more likely to choose content featuring these characters. The selection of content may be guided by various factors, including attitudes, needs, moods, and so on. According to mood management theory (MMT) individuals select stimuli that will maintain or restore positive mood states (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985); however, researchers have also found that, at times, individuals may have counterhedonic motivations for their media selections (see Knobloch, 2003; Oliver, 2003, 2008). Furthermore, it is possible that moral self-perceptions may guide the selection of content as predicted by theories of social comparison (e.g., Mares & Cantor, 1992).

Moral self-image may become threatened when individuals do something that goes against their moral codes, making them feel that they are not living up to their own or society's standards. For example, individuals may feel guilty if they ignore a homeless person asking for money, cheat on an exam, or lie. When this occurs, individuals may be particularly motivated to find a way to minimize these feelings of guilt and inadequacy and thus may turn to narratives and other types of entertainment fare. Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, and Ewoldsen (2014) proposed that narratives offer a temporary release from the boundaries of the self (TEBOTS), so individuals whose moral self-images are threatened may be particularly likely to want to immerse themselves in narratives. Moreover, researchers have found that an individual's morality salience affects the way that he or she responds to good characters, bad characters, and MACs (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Specifically, individuals whose vices were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a MAC than a bad character, whereas those whose virtues were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a good character than a MAC. However, it is not known whether reading stories featuring different character types benefited the participants in other ways.

Entertainment has long been considered to provide hedonic gratifications or pleasure for consumers (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). However, new lines of research suggest that entertainment may provide other types of psychological benefits, such as being inspired, moved, or touched (Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012). Moreover, entertainment experiences may improve one's psychological well-being by facilitating recovery processes. That is, viewing films, playing video games, or consuming other types of media fare can lead to relaxation, psychological detachment, and mastery (Reinecke, 2009a; Reinecke, Klatt, & Krämer, 2011; Rieger, Reinecke, Frischlich, & Bente, 2014). However, no research has examined whether content featuring various character types offers different recovery benefits.

Therefore, this research empirically examines whether one's moral self-perception affects the selection of content featuring different characters and whether exposure to distinct character types results in any recovery benefits. Two experiments were conducted in which participants' virtues or vices were made salient. In Study 1, participants' selection of films featuring different character types (good characters, bad characters, MACs) was examined, and in Study 2, participants' recovery responses (psychological detachment, relaxation, and mastery) were measured after they read stories featuring various types of characters.

## TEBOTS

According to Slater et al.'s (2014) TEBOTS theory, one of the main motivations that individuals have for immersing themselves in narrative worlds is to get temporary relief from themselves. Individuals are almost always engaged in the demanding task of constructing and maintaining their own self-images (see Siegel, 1999), and every person's desired self-image is occasionally (if not frequently) threatened. TEBOTS theory suggests that narratives offer individuals a temporary respite from these demanding tasks by allowing them to focus on other worlds and characters (Slater et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened may be particularly likely to seek out narratives in an attempt to get temporary release from the task of identity defense, and experiencing certain types of narratives may lead to some relief of self-related anxieties. Although TEBOTS does not predict the types of narratives that individuals would select, Slater et al. acknowledged that MMT may be useful in determining the specific narrative elements that will be most restorative for individuals whose self-perceptions are threatened. Furthermore, Eden, Daalmans, and Johnson (2017) suggested that narratives featuring MACs may be particularly likely to provide individuals with the opportunity to deliberate about their own moral concept and that this may partly explain their popularity in entertainment.

## Mood Management

MMT suggests that individuals' media consumption is driven by a desire to minimize aversive mood states and to maintain pleasurable ones (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Individuals thus select entertainment content that has made them feel better or given them pleasure in the past, or that is similar to such content. According to the theory, four mechanisms determine media selection (Bryant & Davies, 2006): *hedonic valence* deals with the positive or negative tone of media messages, *excitatory homeostasis* suggests that individuals use media stimuli to attain optimal levels of arousal, *intervention potential* focuses on the level of absorption or engagement that individuals can attain from media messages—those who are in a negative mood state may select content that is more absorbing in order to distract themselves from their currently prevailing mood, and *message-behavioral/semantic affinity* is the similarity of media content to the circumstances that have caused an individual's current mood state—individuals who are in an aversive mood state are more likely to select stimuli that differ in subject matter from the situations that led to their negative mood.

Hedonic valence, in particular, may be relevant for determining how one's moral self-perception affects the selection of content featuring different character types. According to this tenet of MMT, individuals in negative mood states are more likely than those in positive moods to select positively valenced or happy media in an attempt to improve their negative moods. For example, Knobloch and Zillmann (2003) found that individuals in bad moods listened to joyful music longer than those in good moods. Likewise, Biswass, Riffe, and Zillmann (1994) found that women in bad moods were drawn to good news stories more so than those in happy moods. Because one's moral self-perception can affect one's mood state, it may likewise influence entertainment choices featuring different character types. In general, content about morally virtuous characters is more positive in valence than content featuring MACs or bad characters. Content featuring MACs or bad characters can result in negative outcomes for the main characters as well as those around them (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013) and can thus be perceived to be darker and more serious in tone; conversely, films featuring good main characters are generally lighter and more positive in tone. Therefore, it is possible that those whose moral self-perceptions are threatened will be more likely than those whose moral self-perceptions are bolstered to select content featuring good characters in an attempt to improve their negative moods.

In line with this rationale, people have been repeatedly found to turn to television programs to escape their real-life problems and to divert attention away from negative self-perceptions (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Kubey, 1986; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). Therefore,

turning to media may allow people to forget about their own problems. Based on these findings, we can predict that individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened will be less likely to select content featuring bad characters because such content may remind them of their own moral failings.

However, researchers have also found support for counterhedonic motivations, such as seeking information, experiencing meaningfulness, or fulfilling other goals by selecting negatively valenced media (e.g., sad films) or story lines that semantically relate to one's prevailing negative mood (see Knobloch, 2003; Oliver, 2003, 2008). Individuals may also be motivated to compare themselves to others in an effort to improve their own self-perceptions.

### Social Comparison

According to social comparison theory (SCT), individuals compare themselves to similar others (Festinger, 1954) for self-evaluation, self-improvement, or self-enhancement reasons (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999); these three motivations generally lead to lateral, upward, or downward comparisons, respectively.

Self-evaluation is the desire to know more about the self. Therefore, to serve this desire, individuals can undergo lateral comparisons, in which they compare themselves to those who are like themselves. Self-improvement motivations generally result in upward comparisons, in which individuals compare themselves to superior others as a way to boost their own self-perceptions; in other words, perceiving oneself as being similar to a superior target can boost one's own self-image (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Self-enhancement motivations, on the other hand, lead individuals to compare themselves to worse-off others as a way of improving or maintaining their own self-images. In this case, individuals disassociate themselves from inferior targets to enhance self-perception (Wills, 1981).

Individuals whose self-perceptions are enhanced or threatened may be particularly likely to undergo upward or downward comparative processes. Specifically, those whose self-image is threatened are more likely to select downward comparison targets, whereas those whose self-images are enhanced are more likely to select upward comparison targets (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001). Those who are feeling virtuous may think that they are similar to virtuous characters and may also start to believe that they possess other positive attributes that the character embodies. Being exposed to these types of characters may thus enhance the self-image of those who already feel good about themselves.

Many studies have applied SCT to media consumption (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2005; Knobloch, Weisbach, & Zillmann, 2004; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick & Romero, 2011; Nabi & Keblusek, 2014). In one study, Mares and Cantor (1992) found that lonely retirement home residents were more likely than happy residents to select television content that portrayed another lonely individual. Moreover, the lonely residents felt better after viewing this

content. In contrast, happy residents preferred content featuring a well-adjusted individual and felt happier after viewing this content. The authors propose that one explanation for these findings is that lonely individuals used downward social comparison with the lonely character in the television content and that happy residents underwent upward comparison with the well-adjusted character.

More recently, Johnson and Knobloch-Westerwick (2014) found that participants in a negative mood state spent more time viewing social networking profiles of less desirable individuals than did participants in a positive mood, indicating that those in a negative mood engaged in downward social comparison. Similarly, N. Lewis and Weaver (2015) found that individuals whose self-images were threatened felt pride and sympathy while watching a reality television program, which suggests that they engaged in downward social comparison with the characters on the show. Moreover, Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2015) found that individuals whose virtues were primed had more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a good character than a MAC; in contrast, those whose vices were primed experienced more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a MAC than a bad character. Although the findings could indicate that those who had more positive self-perceptions underwent upward social comparison with the good characters in the stories, it is not as clear why those whose self-perceptions were threatened responded more positively to a MAC rather than a bad character. The authors suggested that MACs are more realistic and may have been better comparison targets than bad characters for those whose self-image was slightly threatened.

Nonetheless, no studies have examined whether moral self-image affects the selection of content featuring different character types. Based on the tenets of SCT, it would seem that individuals who feel less morally virtuous would be more likely to undergo downward social comparison with bad characters and would thus select content featuring these types of characters. In contrast, those who feel more morally virtuous would be more likely to undergo upward social comparison with good characters and thus select content featuring these types of characters.

However, based on the hedonic valence mechanism of MMT, individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened may want to avoid content that features characters behaving badly. Instead, these individuals may be motivated to view entertainment that is more positive in tone and that features characters doing good deeds. In other words, negative self-perceptions may lead individuals to select content that offers them a chance to escape from their feelings of moral inferiority by showcasing characters that do only good things. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether morality salience would affect the selection of content featuring MACs. Therefore, because of the different predictions offered by MMT and SCT, and the lack of theories concerning the selection of MACs, the following research questions are proposed:

Will moral self-perception affect individuals' desire to see films featuring good characters (RQ1), bad characters (RQ2) and MACs (RQ3)?

## Outcomes

TEBOTS, MMT, and SCT suggest that individuals' selection of content is driven to some extent by their expectations of positive outcomes, whether they be a temporary release from the task of identity defense (TEBOTS), an increase in pleasurable affect (MMT), or a more positive self-image (SCT). It is also possible that individuals use entertainment as a means of recovery from a stressful task, a challenging day, or a threat to their self-perceptions and that narratives featuring different character types offer unique benefits.

Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2015) found that those whose vices were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a MAC than one featuring a bad character. In a subsequent study, they found that those whose virtues were made salient felt more positive affect and enjoyment after reading a story featuring a good character than one featuring a MAC. However, MACs were compared to bad characters in the first study, and good characters were compared to MACs in the second study. Therefore, all three character types were never compared to one another. In addition, these studies examined only general positive affect outcomes rather than other types of psychological benefits. The current study thus aims to expand this research by examining whether the three character types offer unique recovery outcomes for those whose moral self-perceptions are threatened as compared to those whose moral self-perceptions are enhanced.

Traditionally, entertainment researchers have focused on pleasure and enjoyment as the main motivators for media exposure as well as the main outcomes experienced by media consumers (Vorderer et al., 2004). However, recently, researchers have started to explore other types of psychological benefits offered by media content. For example, different types of stimuli can produce feelings of eudaimonia, which include meaningful affect and feeling moved, touched, and inspired (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver et al., 2012). Researchers have also started to examine other psychological benefits of media exposure, including the recovery experiences of relaxation, psychological detachment, and mastery (see Rieger et al., 2014).

## Media-Induced Recovery

Recovery is defined as "the process of replenishing depleted resources or rebalancing suboptimal systems" (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006, p. 311). Periods of recovery occur during times of leisure or "nonwork" and are essential for physical and psychological health (Craig & Cooper, 1992). Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) identified four facets of the

recovery process: (a) *psychological detachment* concerns the process of distancing oneself from work or other stress-inducing rumination, (b) *relaxation* refers to the process of returning to baseline levels of arousal after stressful events, (c) *control* is associated with the freedom that one feels during leisure-time activities that leads to feelings of autonomy, and (d) *mastery experiences* refer to the learning opportunities and challenges that are presented during certain leisure time activities.

In a series of studies, Reinecke and colleagues found that entertainment media can aid in the recovery process (Reinecke, 2009a, 2009b; Reinecke et al., 2011; Rieger, Reinecke, & Bente, 2015; Rieger et al., 2014). Rieger et al. (2015) compared recovery benefits of media stimuli with negative affective valence to those with positive affective valence and found that both types of media exposure conditions resulted in greater psychological detachment than did a nonmedia break. This finding is in line with the research of Reinecke et al. (2011), which determined that psychological detachment is an important aspect of recovery for noninteractive media. Moreover, Rieger et al. (2015) found that content with positive affective valence resulted in higher levels of relaxation than the non-media control condition. In another study, Rieger et al. (2014) revealed that both hedonic and eudaimonic films produced recovery outcomes; although only eudaimonic entertainment exposure led to mastery experiences, hedonic entertainment exposure led to psychological detachment and relaxation. In addition, Rieger and colleagues' (Rieger et al., 2015; Rieger et al., 2014) studies demonstrate that media-induced recovery outcomes can go beyond mere mood repair and may affect energetic arousal/vitality and cognitive performance. However, due to the nature of entertainment content, the recovery dimension of control has not been examined in the context of noninteractive media recovery.

Although recovery has usually been examined in the context of work or cognitively taxing tasks, other types of stressors or circumstances can result in the need for recovery. Ruminating on one's bad behaviors, for example, could result in a desire to relax and psychologically detach from self-image concerns. Furthermore, as previous studies have demonstrated, some media stimuli are more effective at helping people recover than others (e.g., Rieger et al., 2015; Rieger et al., 2014). It is possible that in line with MMT, the hedonic valence and excitatory potential of entertainment affects the degree of relaxation that individuals feel after consumption. Likewise, the semantic affinity of specific narratives may influence the psychological detachment that one experiences, in that narratives featuring plots similar to one's experiences may allow for less detachment than narratives with story lines that are distinct from one's experiences. Therefore, it is also probable that stimuli featuring distinct character types may affect recovery processes differently. In other words, content that features good characters, bad characters, or MACs may each offer unique outcomes that help individuals recover from negative self-perceptions through relaxation, psychological detachment, or mastery.

Narratives featuring good characters are generally more positive in tone than those featuring bad characters, so individuals whose moral self-perceptions are threatened may feel more relaxation after reading narratives featuring good characters. On the other hand, SCT would predict that narratives featuring bad characters may be more restorative and thereby relaxing for those feeling morally insecure, whereas narratives featuring good characters may be more relaxing for those who are feeling morally virtuous. In addition, psychological detachment could be influenced by the degree to which the main character in a narrative reminds individuals of themselves. It is thus possible that those whose vices are made salient will feel more psychological detachment after exposure to narratives featuring good characters that do not remind these individuals of their own moral failings, whereas those whose virtues are made salient will feel more psychologically detached after reading narratives featuring bad characters. Moreover, TEBOTS suggests that individuals who are morally insecure may be particularly motivated to seek out stories in an attempt to psychologically detach or get release from self-regulation (Slater et al., 2014). However, due to the indeterminate nature of the effects of morality salience and character type on recovery processes the following research questions are posed:

What are the effects of moral self-perception and character type on relaxation (RQ4), psychological detachment (RQ5), and mastery (RQ6)?

## Summary

To summarize, the purpose of this research was to examine whether moral self-perception affected the selection of entertainment featuring different character types (Study 1) and whether narratives featuring different character types offered individuals whose moral self-perceptions were either bolstered or threatened unique recovery outcomes (Study 2).

## STUDY 1

### Method

*Participants and Procedures.* One hundred sixty students (81.3% female) ranging from 18 to 49 years of age ( $M = 21.50$ ,  $SD = 3.61$ ) participated in the study. Participants were recruited from communication courses at two large universities in the United States and received a nominal amount of extra credit for participating.<sup>1</sup> The sample consisted of 73.1% White,

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<sup>1</sup>The Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, approved the study on April 20, 2015.

16.9% Asian, 8.1% Latino, 6.3% African American, 1.3% Native American, and .60% Pacific Islander.

Participants were given a URL to an online questionnaire and were asked to complete it on their own time. After logging into the questionnaire and reading the informed consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of two morality salience conditions (virtue, vice). Participants were informed that the first part of the study would concern subjective memory, and they were instructed to complete a writing task that primed feelings of their own virtue or vice (see Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). After completing the writing task, participants answered manipulation check items about perceptions of their own morality. They were then asked to complete the second part of the study that dealt with entertainment preferences, during which they indicated their desires to see three films, one featuring a good main character, one featuring a bad main character, and one featuring a morally ambiguous main character. The presentation order of the film synopses was randomized using Qualtrics survey software to avoid order effects.

**Morality Salience Priming Task.** To prime feelings of either virtue or vice, a writing task adapted from Cohen, Aronson, and Steele (2000) and used by Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2015) was utilized. Participants were asked to spend 10 minutes writing about three instances in which they either “demonstrated one of their most important values and felt proud of themselves” (virtue condition) or “went against one of their most important values and felt guilty” (vice condition). After completing the writing task, participants answered questions about the morality of their actions to check the efficacy of the manipulation at priming feelings of either virtue or vice. The three 7-point scales anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*) included the following items: *I regret or am sorry about something that I have done, I have done something wrong, and I ought to be blamed for something*. These items were averaged to create a scale of immoral self-perceptions ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ). As expected, individuals in the vice condition ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) had stronger immoral self-perceptions than those in the virtue condition ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(158) = -3.25$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Film Preferences.** Nine brief (approximately 50 words in length) film synopses were written by the researchers to assess participants’ desire to view films featuring different character types (good, bad, morally ambiguous). Three distinct scenarios were created to represent different film plots: The main character is described as a CIA agent involved in counterterrorism, a defense attorney who is defending a man accused of murder, or a psychiatrist whose clients are retired Hollywood stars. The descriptions of the main character’s actions were manipulated to create three

character types within each plot type. Specifically, good characters were described as doing only good things, bad characters were described as doing only bad things, and MACs were described as doing both good and bad things. This technique has been previously employed to create distinct character types in written narratives (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Three of the synopsis featured good main characters (e.g., An undercover CIA agent returns home from a mission in Iraq only to find himself in the middle of a massive terrorist plot against the United States. He does everything he legally can to save the country from the terrorist attack while maintaining his integrity and protecting his family), three featured bad main characters (e.g., A defense attorney takes on the biggest case of his career. His client is accused of killing dozens of women across the country over the last 20 years. The defense attorney knows his client is innocent but makes a deal with the prosecutor to purposefully lose the case), and three featured morally ambiguous main characters (e.g., A young psychiatrist moves to a small community of retired Hollywood stars and begins to learn the tawdry details of her clients' lives. The psychiatrist keeps her clients' secrets but lies to a journalist in order to gain a financial reward). In sum, each type of film plot description (i.e., CIA agent, attorney, psychiatrist) was manipulated to create three types of main characters (i.e., good, bad, MAC).

To limit redundancy, each participant was asked to rate their desire to see three films, one featuring a bad main character, one featuring a good main character, and one featuring a morally ambiguous main character, and each of the film descriptions presented a different plot (i.e., CIA agent, attorney, psychiatrist). Therefore, six combinations of plots and characters were possible (i.e., 1 = CIA–good, Attorney–bad, Psychiatrist–morally ambiguous; 2 = C–g, A–m, P–b; 3 = C–b, A–g, P–m; 4 = C–b, A–m, P–g; 5 = C–m, A–g, P–b; 6 = C–m, A–b, P–g). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six plot-character type conditions that each included three film synopses that varied both the morality of the main character and the film plot. Each participant was asked to rate how much they would like to view each of the three films on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The ratings for each film were used to create three entertainment preference scales: good character preference ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ), bad character preference ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ), and MAC preference ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ).

**Film Plot.** To test whether the film plots impacted the effect of morality salience on entertainment preferences, two film plot variables were created—one for the good character type and one for the bad character type (FilmPlot–Good, FilmPlot–Bad). For each participant, the FilmPlot–Good variable showed which

of the three film plots (CIA agent, attorney, psychiatrist) featured a good character. The FilmPlot–Bad variable showed which of the film plots featured the bad character. A third variable for the MAC film plot was not created because knowing the plots of the good and bad film synopses would automatically indicate the MAC film plot.

## Results

Participants' film preferences were examined using a 3 (character type: good, bad, morally ambiguous)  $\times$  2 (morality salience: virtue, vice)  $\times$  3 (plot type good: attorney, CIA agent, psychiatrist)  $\times$  3 (plot type bad: a, c, p) mixed-model repeated measures analysis of variance with character type as a within-subjects factor. The analysis revealed no main effect for morality salience,  $F(1, 148) = 1.83, p = .18, \eta^2 = .01$ , but a significant main effect for character type was obtained, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .93, F(2, 147) = 5.35, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$ . Participants reported that they would prefer to see films featuring good characters ( $M = 4.96, SE = .17$ ) and MACs ( $M = 4.91, SE = .18$ ) more than ones featuring bad characters ( $M = 4.23, SE = .19$ ). However, the Character Type  $\times$  Morality Salience interaction was not significant, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .98, F(2, 147) = 1.92, p = .15, \eta^2 = .03$ .

## Discussion

The focus of this research was to investigate the effects of morality salience on the selection of content featuring different character types. Three research questions were posed because MMT and SCT offered different predictions about the directionality of the relationships for good (RQ1) and bad (RQ2) characters, and no theories clearly indicated whether morality salience would affect the selection of MACs (RQ3). Specifically, the hedonic-valence tenet of MMT suggested that individuals whose moral self-images are threatened would be more likely to select content featuring good characters as a way to improve their moods and escape from their own moral insecurities. In contrast, SCT suggests that those whose moral self-perceptions are threatened would be more likely to choose stimuli that featured bad characters in order to undergo the process of downward social comparison. Conversely, those whose moral self-perceptions were bolstered would be more likely to select content featuring good characters in order to improve their self-images through upward social comparison. However, the results revealed that moral self-perception does not affect the selection of content featuring different character types. In other words, individuals whose moral self-perceptions were threatened selected the same content as those whose moral self-perceptions were bolstered. Furthermore, all individuals preferred to view films featuring good characters and MACs more

than films featuring bad characters. These findings suggest that individuals may be interested in viewing more positive media fare regardless of their moral self-image.

## STUDY 2

Whereas the previous investigation focused on the effects of morality salience on the selection of content featuring different character types, this subsequent study examined whether different character types offer unique psychological benefits to those whose moral virtues or vices are made salient.

### Method

*Participants and Procedures.* Ninety-three students (83.9% female) ranging from 18 to 37 years of age ( $M = 21.29$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ) participated in Study 2. Participants were recruited from communication courses at two large universities in the United States and received a nominal amount of extra credit for participating.<sup>2</sup> The sample consisted of 76.3% White, 15.1% Asian, 6.5% African American, 4.3% Latino, 2.2% Native American, and 1.1% Pacific Islander.

Participants were given a URL to an online questionnaire and were asked to complete it on their own time. After logging into the questionnaire and reading the informed consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (morality salience: virtue, vice)  $\times$  3 (character: good, bad, morally ambiguous) experiment. The first part of the procedure that primed morality salience was identical to Study 1. After completing the writing task, participants answered manipulation check items about their perceptions of their own morality. They were then asked to complete the second part of the study that dealt with entertainment responses and were randomly assigned to one of three character conditions (good, bad, morally ambiguous). Participants then read a short story (approximately 1,100 words). After finishing the story, participants answered a questionnaire measuring manipulation check items, the dependent variables, and demographic information. The order of the dependent variables and measurement items of each dependent variable were randomized using Qualtrics survey software to avoid order effects.

*Morality Salience Priming Task.* The same writing task that was used in Study 1 to prime morality salience was used in this study. A manipulation check was conducted to ensure the manipulation was successful. Three items were

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<sup>2</sup>The Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, approved the study on April 20, 2015.

averaged to create a scale of immoral self-perceptions ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ; see Study 1 for a full description of measures). The analysis revealed that individuals in the vice condition ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) had stronger immoral self-perceptions than those in the virtue condition ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $t(91) = -1.77$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Narrative.** A short story adapted from Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) was utilized for the character (good, bad, morally ambiguous) manipulations. The story, "Summit Fever" (shortened), details a mountain climber's ascent of Mount Everest. The main character, Craig, and his friend, Jon, are climbing together. Jon realizes that he forgot his lunch but continues the ascent. Later, the two climbers encounter a disoriented climber whom everyone had assumed was dead. The descriptions of the main character and his actions were manipulated to create three character conditions. Specifically, in the good character condition, Craig shares his food with Jon and saves the disoriented climber's life instead of reaching the summit. In the bad character condition, Craig does not share his food with Jon and pushes the disoriented climber off a cliff, and in the MAC condition, Craig does not share his food with Jon, but he saves the disoriented climber.

Although longer versions of the narratives have been previously tested to ensure that the character manipulations were successful (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), the shortened versions were tested in this study to confirm that they were effective at creating three distinct character types. Perceptions of the main character's moral attributes were measured with 10 items that were adapted from those used by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012). The 10 items were on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (e.g., *the main character has some moral attributes, the main character behaves in a moral way some of the time*;  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). As expected, the main character in the good character condition ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) was perceived to be significantly more moral than the character in the MAC condition ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and the character in the bad condition ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). The character in the MAC condition was perceived to be significantly more moral than the character in the bad character condition,  $F(1, 93) = 84.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .65$ . Therefore, the manipulations were successful at creating three distinct character types.

**Measures.** The recovery experience dependent variables of relaxation, psychological detachment, and mastery were assessed with the four-item subscales of the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). The items were adapted from Rieger et al. (2014) to match the experimental task of reading the narratives. The items were measured on a

7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Example items included, *When I read the story, I used the time to relax* (relaxation), *When I read the story, I took a break from the demands of the writing task* (psychological detachment), and *When I read the story, I learned something new* (mastery). All three subscales had acceptable reliabilities (Relaxation,  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ; Psychological Detachment,  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ; Mastery,  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ).

**Results**

RQ4 asked whether there would be a relationship between morality salience, character type, and the recovery dimension of relaxation. The analysis yielded no significant main effects for morality salience,  $F(1, 93) = 2.61$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , or character,  $F(2, 93) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .06$ . However, the Morality Salience  $\times$  Character interaction was significant,  $F(2, 93) = 3.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .07$  (see Table 1 for means). Figure 1 illustrates that relaxation did not differ across characters for those whose virtues were made salient; however, for those whose vices were made salient, relaxation was greater after exposure to stories featuring either a MAC or a good character than after exposure to a story featuring a bad character. Moreover, among those who read the story featuring a MAC, relaxation was greater for those whose vices were made salient than for those whose virtues were made salient.

RQ5 asked about the effects of morality salience and character on the recovery dimension of psychological detachment. The analysis yielded no significant main effects for morality salience,  $F(1, 93) = .33$ ,  $p = .57$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .00$ , or character,  $F(2, 93) = .89$ ,  $p = .41$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ . However, the Morality Salience  $\times$  Character interaction was significant,  $F(2, 93) = 3.25$ ,

TABLE 1  
Relaxation: Morality Salience  $\times$  Character Interaction

| Morality salience | Character |                    |                    |                    |
|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                   |           | Good               | Morally ambiguous  | Bad                |
| Virtue            | <i>M</i>  | 4.11 <sub>aA</sub> | 4.00 <sub>aA</sub> | 4.46 <sub>aA</sub> |
|                   | <i>SE</i> | .34                | .36                | .43                |
| Vice              | <i>M</i>  | 4.59 <sub>aA</sub> | 5.00 <sub>aB</sub> | 3.52 <sub>bA</sub> |
|                   | <i>SE</i> | .40                | .37                | .39                |

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

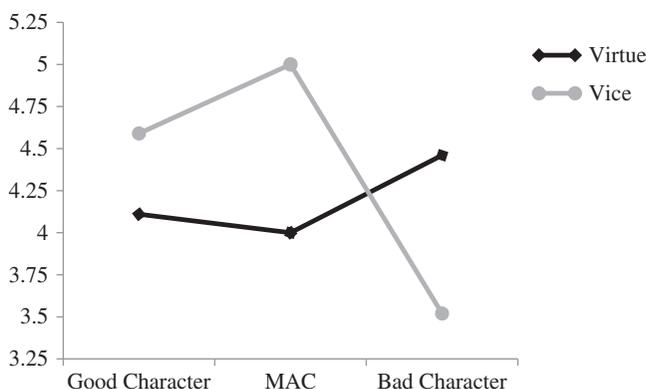


FIGURE 1 Interaction of morality salience and character on relaxation.  
 Note. MAC = morally ambiguous characters.

$p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .07$  (see Table 2 for means). Figure 2 illustrates that psychological detachment did not differ across characters for those whose virtues were made salient; however, for those whose vices were made salient, psychological detachment was greater after exposure to stories featuring either the MAC or the good character than after exposure to a story featuring a bad character. Moreover, among those who read the story featuring a MAC, psychological detachment was greater for those whose vices were made salient than for those whose virtues were made salient.

RQ6 asked about the effects of morality salience and character on the mastery dimension of recovery. The analysis yielded no significant main effects for morality salience,  $F(1, 93) = .25, p = .62, \eta^2_p = .00$ , or character,  $F(2, 93) = 2.06, p = .13$ ,

TABLE 2  
 Psychological Detachment: Morality Salience × Character Interaction

| Morality salience | Character |                    |                    |                    |
|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                   | Good      | Morally ambiguous  | Bad                |                    |
| Virtue            | <i>M</i>  | 4.28 <sub>aA</sub> | 4.02 <sub>aA</sub> | 4.19 <sub>aA</sub> |
|                   | <i>SE</i> | .28                | .30                | .35                |
| Vice              | <i>M</i>  | 4.86 <sub>aA</sub> | 5.16 <sub>aB</sub> | 3.70 <sub>bA</sub> |
|                   | <i>SE</i> | .33                | .31                | .32                |

Note. Using Holm’s sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lowercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .01$ ; within columns, means with no uppercase subscript in common differ at  $p < .01$ .

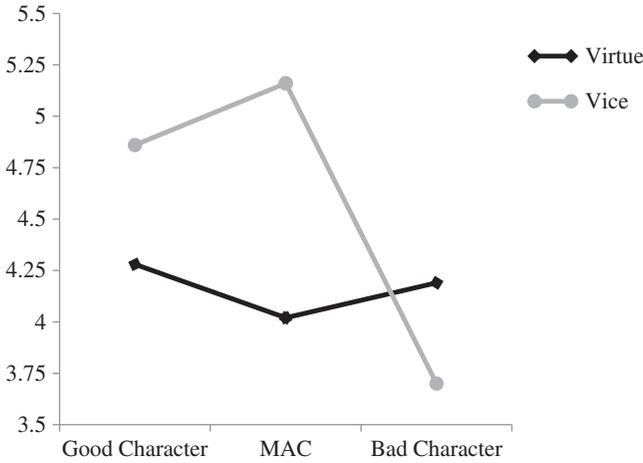


FIGURE 2 Interaction of morality salience and character on psychological detachment. Note. MAC = morally ambiguous character.

$\eta^2_p = .05$ . In addition, the Morality Salience  $\times$  Character interaction was not significant,  $F(2, 93) = 2.21, p = .12, \eta^2_p = .05$ .

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of morality salience and character type on recovery. Previous research has shown that entertainment media can aid in the recovery process (Reinecke, 2009a, 2009b; Reinecke et al., 2011; Rieger et al., 2014). However, no study has examined the potential effects of moral self-perceptions or character types on these outcomes. Therefore, three research questions were posed, each addressing a distinct recovery outcome: relaxation (RQ4), psychological detachment (RQ5), and mastery (RQ6). The results revealed that one’s moral self-image affected the degree to which narratives featuring different character types resulted in relaxation and psychological detachment. However, no differences were found for the mastery dimension of recovery.

Those whose moral self-perceptions were bolstered felt equally relaxed and had the same levels of psychological detachment after reading a narrative featuring a good, bad, or morally ambiguous character. However, those whose moral self-perceptions were threatened felt more relaxed and had greater levels

of psychological detachment after reading a narrative featuring a MAC or good character than one featuring a bad character.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present studies extend research on selective exposure and positive psychology by focusing on the effects of morality salience on the selection of content featuring different character types and the recovery outcomes such content provides. Applying theories of *TEBOTS* (Slater et al., 2014), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), mood management (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), and recovery (Sonntag & Fritz, 2007) as a framework, this research reveals not only how moral insecurities affect our entertainment choices but also whether these choices ultimately benefit us.

Surprisingly, moral self-perception did not affect the selection of content featuring different character types. Rather, all individuals were more likely to select films featuring good characters and MACs than those featuring bad characters. This suggests that contrary to SCT, morally insecure individuals were not anticipating that downward social comparison with bad characters would make them feel better. Furthermore, for those who were morally insecure, reading narratives featuring bad characters was less relaxing and resulted in less psychological detachment than reading stories featuring good characters or MACs. It is thus unlikely that individuals either anticipated comparing or actually compared themselves to bad characters in an attempt to improve their own moral self-perceptions. One reason this could be the case is that the characters presented in the film synopses and stories may not have been similar enough to participants (in profession or in their moral and immoral behaviors) in order to make them good comparison targets (see Gruder, 1971; Wheeler, 1966). If the characters in the synopses and stories were more similar to participants, participants may have been more likely to make social comparisons with these characters.

The finding that all individuals, regardless of moral self-image, selected content featuring good characters and MACs may be explained by disposition-based theories (Raney, 2003) in that films featuring characters with at least some redeeming qualities were perhaps expected to be enjoyable, hence potentially providing individuals with a hedonically pleasant media experience. Although we predicted that based on the hedonic valence mechanism of MMT, morally insecure (as compared to secure) individuals would have a stronger motivation to view positively valenced content, it is possible that all individuals seek out the potential mood-enhancing benefits of this type of entertainment. Furthermore, it is possible that mood improvement may occur

either in conjunction with or via the recovery outcomes of relaxation and psychological detachment.

Of interest, films featuring MACs were equally likely to be selected as were films featuring good characters. Perhaps individuals perceived these films to be just as enjoyable as those featuring morally pure characters (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Alternatively, MACs may have been perceived to offer other types of benefits, such as greater potential for self-expansion as predicted by TEBOTS. These types of characters provide individuals with more opportunities to contemplate and expand upon their own moral self-concept (Eden et al., 2017; R. J. Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2014), which may be particularly beneficial for those whose moral self-perceptions are threatened. This is supported by the findings of the current study that reading narratives featuring MACs offered those with a weakened self-image (as compared to those with an enhanced self-image) more relaxation and psychological detachment.

In fact, morally insecure individuals who selected the MAC and good character films would have likely benefitted from viewing these films if given the chance. That is, the results of Study 2 revealed that individuals whose moral self-perceptions were threatened were able to relax and psychologically detach more after reading a story featuring a good character or a MAC than after reading a story featuring a bad character; in contrast, the character featured in the story did not make a difference in terms of recovery for those who felt morally virtuous.

Rieger et al. (2015) found that the valence (either positive or negative) of films affected recovery outcomes. Specifically, viewing positively valenced films resulted in higher levels of relaxation than did taking a break but viewing negatively valenced films did not; however, positively and negatively valenced films resulted in equal levels of psychological detachment. Therefore, the more positive tone in the MAC and good character stories as compared to the bad character story may have more strongly contributed to the differences in relaxation than psychological detachment experienced by participants.

It is also possible that the different character-type manipulations in the stories resulted in varied levels of enjoyment and appreciation, which in turn affected recovery outcomes. R. J. Lewis et al. (2014) found that narratives about moral conflicts were more appreciated when they featured mixed endings (i.e., both positive and negative) than either all-positive or all-negative endings. This suggests that moral ambiguity may result in more eudaimonic experiences. Furthermore, Rieger et al. (2014) found that eudaimonic and hedonic entertainment satisfied different recovery needs. Specifically, hedonic experiences were associated with the recovery dimensions of relaxation and psychological detachment, whereas eudaimonic experiences were related to mastery experiences. Morally insecure participants may have thus enjoyed the good and MAC stories more than the bad character stories, and this hedonic experience may have led to more relaxation and psychological detachment.

However, it is not clear why morally secure participants did not experience a difference in recovery outcomes if they too enjoyed good and MAC stories more than bad character stories.

Another possible explanation is that the bad character film synopses and story reminded individuals who felt morally insecure about their negative self-perceptions. These films were thus avoided and, indeed, reading bad character stories did not result in the same beneficial outcomes as did reading stories featuring characters who were more morally righteous. This may be particularly true for the psychological detachment facet of recovery, which relies on distancing or distracting oneself from stress-related rumination that can impede recovery processes (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). Reading a story about a character that is morally repugnant may serve to remind individuals of their moral failings rather than help them to forget about them. This is in line with recent findings that revealed that shame and guilt were negatively associated with media-induced recovery outcomes (Reinecke, Hartmann, & Eden, 2014). In the current study, reading a story about a morally reprehensible character may have heightened feelings of remorse, guilt, and shame for those who were already reminded of their moral failings, and these negative feelings perhaps, in turn, lessened the recovery outcomes felt by these participants. Similarly, these findings could suggest that content featuring bad characters may impede the process of self-expansion (see Eden et al., 2017; Slater et al., 2014).

Although the story featuring a MAC also described the character behaving badly, the ending of the story redeemed the character to some extent, which may explain why the MAC story also resulted in greater psychological detachment and relaxation than did the bad character story for those whose vices were primed. This pattern of results is supported by Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel's (2015) findings that individuals who were morally insecure felt equal levels of positive affect after exposure to stories featuring good and MAC characters. Moreover, individuals may have anticipated the redemptive nature of MAC narratives, which may help to explain why MAC films were selected more than bad character films.

Of interest, the MAC story resulted in the only difference in relaxation and psychological detachment between the vice and virtue conditions. Specifically, those whose moral self-images were threatened felt more relaxation and psychological detachment after reading the MAC story than did those whose moral self-images were enhanced. However, this finding should be interpreted in light of the fact that recovery outcomes for those exposed to good characters and MACs did not differ significantly for either vice- or virtue-primed participants. Nonetheless, perhaps the redemptive quality of the MAC story gave those who were feeling morally insecure hope that their good actions outweigh the bad, which aided their recovery, whereas this type of story may not have been as beneficial to those who were feeling particularly virtuous.

However, character types did not affect the mastery dimension of recovery for individuals in either the vice or virtue condition. Mastery experiences are those that provide learning opportunities and challenges that ultimately boost self-confidence, self-efficacy, and expertise (Hobfoll, 1998). It is possible that reading the short stories did not produce any mastery experiences, or that the level of mastery experienced after reading the different stories was equivalent regardless of morality salience. Rieger et al. (2014) found that mastery experiences were associated only with eudaimonic entertainment and that relaxation and psychological detachment were related only to hedonic entertainment. Furthermore, according to Oliver and Bartsch (2010, 2011) meaningful affect and appreciation can result from the depiction of moral virtues (present in the good character story) and from thought-provoking content (represented by the MAC and bad character stories). Therefore, the short stories in the present study may have all resulted in equal levels of appreciation and mastery, albeit for different reasons.

### Limitations

It is important to point out that although the morality salience priming task resulted in significantly different moral self-perceptions, the variability was slight (less than a .75 difference on a 7-point scale). In other words, those in the vice condition did not feel much more morally insecure than those in the virtue condition. This likely occurred because the manipulation that was used was not strong enough to produce extremely negative self-perceptions. Nonetheless, the morality salience priming task did result in some differences in recovery outcomes. Future research could examine other types of beneficial outcomes for those who have more negative mood states or who have completed more stressful tasks.

Also, although prior research used similar scenario-based techniques as those used in Study 1 to manipulate character type, future research should assess participants' moral evaluation of the characters to confirm that the stimuli that varied across character types had the intended effects. Furthermore, although film synopses were an ecologically valid means to examine character preferences, results may be different in the context of authentic film stimuli. Therefore, the specified nature of the experimental stimuli used in this study raises concerns over the external validity of our findings. Last, although the study was theoretically motivated by tenets of mood management, the design lacked a neutral condition in which a film synopsis featured neither moral nor immoral behaviors. Hence, future research should consider including a control condition that considers a media choice absent of moral references.

It is also worth noting that film preference in Study 1 was measured with one item, which could have threatened the reliability and validity of the measurement. In addition, the samples from both studies were composed of

mostly female participants (81.3% and 83.9% female). Although gender was not a variable that we predicted would affect selection or recovery outcomes, it is possible that men and women select and respond to content differently; future studies should thus examine these variables with more balanced samples.

Another limitation of this research is that the selection task focused on film synopses, whereas the recovery benefits were measured after exposure to short narratives. It is possible that different forms of media produce different selection and recovery outcomes. For example, interactive media, such as video games, aid recovery using different processes than noninteractive media (see Rieger et al., 2015). The findings dealing with recovery outcomes may thus be applicable only to short narratives. Moreover, only one short story was used as the stimulus in Study 2. Although previous research using this short story and another story did not find meaningful differences between the two (see Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015), it is possible that the findings from this study are due to some inherent differences between the conditions in the used story rather than to the character type manipulations alone. Future research should thus examine how moral self-perceptions influence recovery outcomes produced by other types of stories and other forms of media (see Reeves, Yeykelis, & Cummings, 2016).

In summary, this research provides evidence that morality salience affects recovery outcomes and that different character types may offer various benefits to individuals depending on their moral self-perceptions. Good or morally righteous characters, in particular, may allow individuals who are feeling morally insecure the opportunity to distance themselves from their own moral failings, further supporting the notion that entertainment can offer a variety of psychological benefits to consumers. Moreover, individuals' selection of content may be driven to some extent by their expectations of beneficial recovery outcomes that go beyond mere enjoyment, and perhaps, more important, their predictions of the type of content that will make them feel better may be correct.

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