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Beyond Heroes and Villains: Examining Explanatory Mechanisms Underlying Moral Disengagement

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In recent years, theorizing regarding the role and importance of media entertainment in everyday life has garnered much serious attention by media effects scholars. The role of moral judgments, sanctions, and lack thereof are areas in which theoretical development has expanded. The present study examines narrative exposure, identification, and moral judgment as indicators of the degree to which individuals may morally disengage during mediated entertainment experiences. In addition, this study attempts to further expand disposition theory and theorizing about the role of moral disengagement by moving beyond conceptualizations of good, bad, and morally ambiguous characters to explore more subtle moral distinctions between characters as they exist

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within the same narrative and along a continuum. Results suggest that identi-fication and moral judgment serve as important mediators predicting moral disengagement; however, the nature of these relationships are moderated by the perception of the character's moral fortitude.

In recent years, theorizing regarding viewer–character relationships has expanded exponentially. Most relevant to the current project is scholars' movement in the examination of affective disposition theory (ADT), a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role moral assessments play in the enjoyment of a mediated experience. Initial theorizing and operationali-zations of morality from this perspective argued moral determinants ulti-mately lead to either enjoyment or distress (see Raney, 2003, for overview).

Recent research has explored the idea that perceived moral attributes are not solely black or white *or* good or bad, extending beyond protagonists and antagonists to include antiheroes and morally ambiguous characters (MACs) in examinations of viewer–character connections and enjoyment of narra-tives (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; see Raney & Janicke, 2013, for overview). Scholarship grounded in ADT and character perceptions has found that viewers relate to and enjoy morally questionable and/or complex characters (Sanders, 2005, 2010), and the cognitive process by which viewers draw their moral conclusions can be either heuristically based or complex and effortful (Davies, Smith, & Brantley, 2008; Raney, 2004). Therefore, it is possible that through identi-fication, involvement, or other cognitive and affective mechanisms, viewers may think positively about morally questionable characters. Scholars have also more recently pointed out that varied exposure to narratives and nature of the exposure play a role in how perceptions are formed, as well as their impact (Eden et al., 2014).

The present study's objectives are threefold: (1) to propose a relationship between exposure to a narrative series and one's tendency to morally disen-gage, (2) to examine two psychological mechanisms—identification and moral judgment—as mechanisms mediating the influence of narrative exposure on moral disengagement, and (3) to test the aforementioned relationships in a model across characters of distinct moral complexities along a moral continuum from most moral to most immoral. In general, this research seeks to expand the broader understanding of moral perceptions in entertainment experiences but also expand theory by examining an even wider range of moral presentations, going beyond the classic character archetype dichotomy of "good versus bad." This examination also poses implications for our understanding of cognitive processing in forming and maintaining moral evaluations across varying amounts of exposure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the same vein as enjoyment-oriented theories such as mood management, uses and gratifications, and excitation transfer, disposition-based theories focus on the role of affective responses in predicting media enjoyment (Raney, 2003, 2004; Zillmann, 2002). According to the theory, moral evaluation is the key factor that determines affiliation with characters. Moral judgments regulate the degree of character liking, the hopes and fears viewers have for characters, and the overall feelings that individuals possess at the story's resolution. Thus, cognition and emotion are highly interrelated, as they interact to impact enjoyment. Raney's (2002) disposition-based integrated model of enjoyment relies on the idea that moral evaluation occurs repeatedly, and not always automatically. Viewers evaluate the characters, their behaviors, and the plotline or justice sequence, as well as the outcomes and the role the characters play in these outcomes, in order to evaluate him or her along moral lines. Dispositional affiliations and the role of moral judgments have been examined within the contexts of news, dramas, comedy, sports, and reality television (for an overview, see Raney, 2003; Zillmann, 2013). Raney (2004) suggested that the manner in which viewers arrive at their moral judgments may vary and that viewers may use cognitive strategies such as moral disengagement to maintain liking and enjoyment of the experience when a character unexpectedly deviates from his or her moral code, or when a plot formula is untraditional.

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement, although connected to moral judgments, is not judgment in and of itself. It is a cognitive process that allows a person to disengage self-sanctioning when evaluating the moral appropriateness of behaviors in various contexts (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Disengagement directly influences the ability to perform and accept delinquent behavior while reducing anticipatory guilt (Bandura et al., 1996). Moral disengagement applies not only to extreme contexts such as war or to individuals with little to no moral values. The cognitive mechanisms can be used in everyday situations, including media-viewing situations depending on the genre, medium, and narrative cues provided (Hartmann, 2013; Schafer & Raney, 2012). Disengagement can serve as an underlying process that may create or change the nature of moral judgments, or operate as a result of previously formed judgments (i.e., "This person is a good person; therefore, I should be more tolerant of questionable behaviors"). This framework of cognitive mechanisms aids in partially explaining how viewers maintain the enjoyment experience and cognitively and affectively sustain dispositional alliances.

For example, the moral justification mechanism involves mentally reconstructing behavior, such that conduct is deemed as serving socially worthy or moral purposes (Bandura, 1999). So, by the sheer nature of being a good person,

extreme violence by heroes against villains is justified (Hartmann, 2013; Raney, 2004).Viewers also may rationalize that the injurious actions will prevent more suffering than they will cause, thus making what was once condemnable a source of value (Bandura, 1999). Related findings show that altruistic motivations and positive outcomes for characters impact perceived character attributes, liking, and moral disengagement (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013).

Media scholars have found that various mechanisms of moral disengagement play an integral role in enjoyment of video games (see Hartmann, 2013) and other entertainment media. Krakowiak and Tsay (2011) found that moral disengagement impacts cognitive and affective enjoyment through character liking. The moral disengagement process also connects a character's motivations and the outcomes that befall him or her to character liking, as well as how positively and negatively viewers characterize him or her (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). Furthermore, identification and perceived similarity with MACs increase the tendency for viewers to justify immoral behaviors, ultimately increasing affective enjoyment of a narrative (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Sanders (2010) argued that moral disengagement is an important cognitive process for forming impressions of characters, especially when a viewer is presented with seemingly discrepant information about a character. When disengagement cues are provided within a narrative, moral judgments are sometimes given less value in the enjoyment process (Shafer & Raney, 2012).

Much of the extant literature examines moral disengagement as an antecedent or mediator. However, Shafer and Raney (2012) suggested moral disengagement as an outcome variable triggered by the presence of various explicit cues. Thus, one's existing judgments, along with other factors (e.g., amount of exposure to a narrative, identification with a character, and one's preexisting moral perceptions), could influence one's willingness to morally disengage.

Narrative Exposure Impacting Moral Disengagement

Less attention in entertainment scholarship has been given to understanding how exposure to a narrative may impact moral evaluations of characters. Narrative exposure may include dimensions such as frequency (e.g., number of times exposed to a narrative), as well as narrative completeness (e.g., degree to which exposure to the full plotline is complete), and multimodal exposure or exposure to the narrative in multiple modalities (e.g., textual, audiovisual, combination). Although relevant literature examining moral disengagement points to its role in facilitating enjoyment (Zillmann, 2002) and highlights content features and audience responses that increase one's tendency to pardon immoral character actions, knowledge of a narrative and its characters through long-term, repeated, and/or multimodal consumption may also influence the degree to which justifications for morally questionable behaviors are made.

Initial theorizing about moral judgments in an entertainment context considered the role of schemas in making character assessments (Raney, 2004). According to

Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman, and Davis (2002), media lend themselves to story schemas that are formed through repeated exposure to narratives, the most traditional in entertainment being the conflict between good and evil (Zillmann, 2013). Such scripting serves as narrative guides and helps establish and govern viewers' expectations of characters, ultimately influencing narrative interpretations (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter et al., 2002; Raney, 2004). Hence, it is possible that story schemas based on expectations of good versus evil that have been shaped through various forms of exposure to a narrative could impact one's moral evaluations. Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, and Grizzard (2010) found that as exposure frequency increases, liking of characters increases and moral judgments become more polarized, with judgments of a MAC becoming more conservative. It is also possible that individuals with previous exposure to certain narratives, even within a series, have different viewing experiences compared to people with little to no previous exposure (Shafer & Raney, 2012). Thus, viewers can come to understand the nature of characters and connect with them differently through varied exposure, including whether they have the full story or access to the complete narrative. Davies et al. (2008) found evidence that a default assumption is to perceive a character as good unless narrative cues suggest otherwise. However, varying exposure levels may also differ in information retrieval; some individuals may not complete a narrative and have less information or exposure to narrative cues that would prompt a change in moral evaluations. Cues, such as unexpected events, backstory, and other plot devices, cause a viewer to question a favored character's morality, prompting individuals to use cognitive strategies at their disposal to maintain enjoyment and dispositional affiliations (Raney, 2004).

Extant research has also supported the idea of more effortful processing in disposition formation (see Sanders, 2010), mostly focusing on MACs and moral disengagement strategies as integral cognitive mechanisms in entertainment consumption. Exposure to a narrative series is likely to facilitate stronger connections (Herzog, 1944), as well as enhance perceived membership in a fan community (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2015). In addition, individuals with greater and fuller exposure have a deeper familiarity and understanding of the overall complexity of the narrative and the nature of character intentions, actions, and motivations (Potter et al., 2002), making them more likely to pardon immoral behaviors, as compared to those with lighter and less complete exposure. Thus, greater exposure not only may encourage more effortful thinking regarding moral issues but also may lead to moral disengagement as a means of protecting positive dispositions (Eden et al., 2014; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Moreover, media exemplars can activate representativeness heuristics associated with morality. Exposure to strong moral exemplars, such as heroes, antiheroes, and villains, results in viewers being more sensitive to violations than to adherence to moral propriety (Eden et al., 2014). This increased sensitivity, provided by frequency and completeness of exposure, especially for those previously judged

and connected with, may encourage the use of mechanisms to maintain that connection. Hence:

H1: Exposure to a narrative will be positively associated with moral disengagement.

However, the likelihood of morally disengaging may not increase through exposure alone but may also be impacted by elements associated with the viewer–character relationship.

Mediating Roles of Moral Judgment and Identification

Cohen (2001) conceptualized identification as a process in which an individual replaces his or her personal identity and role as an audience member with those of a character's. This form of perspective taking consists of affective (i.e., empathy) and cognitive components (i.e., evaluation of goals, motives, etc.). Viewers possess "an affinity toward the character that is so strong that they become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding for the feelings the character experiences, and for his or her motives or goals" (Cohen, 2006, p. 184). In essence, identification with characters leads to increased involvement with narratives, as it provides a perspective from which to view the story, increased intimacy, emotional connections with and understanding of character motivations, and viewers' investment in their outcomes (Cohen, 2006).

Very often, identification is treated as an antecedent, induced not only by perceived similarity in terms of attitudes, motives, and actions (Cohen, 2006; Eyal & Rubin, 2003) but also by the presence of various character traits such as humor, strength (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), and morality (Sanders, 2004). Extant research also shows identification to be a strong predictor and mediator of various media effects. Most relevant to the present study are findings illustrating that identification serves as a means through which positive dispositions toward characters are formed, leading to greater enjoyment (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Greater exposure provides viewers with even greater insight into characters' motivations, leading to stronger perceptions of the characters and identification, and potentially leading to these connections despite characters' moral failings (Raney & Janicke, 2013). Identification occurs with both characters that individuals see as positive and characters with negative traits. For example, Raney, Schmid, Niemann, and Ellensohn (2009) found that identification with antiheroes mediates the relationship between moral evaluations of this type of character and enjoyment. Thus, identification may work in conjunction with, in opposition to, or even amplify viewer assessments of and relationships with a character. If identification is particularly strong, it may encourage individuals to alter their

moral standards or find other ways to morally disengage when they witness beloved, attractive characters committing immoral actions. Hence:

H2: Exposure to a narrative will be positively associated with identification.
H3: Identification will be positively associated with moral disengagement.

Generally, scholars have attempted to investigate how moral judgments come to exist, as well as their consequences. From a social cognitive perspective, moral judgments are partly based on one's understanding of morality as learned from direct and vicarious experiences (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2013). In regard to emotional processing, an individual's notion of justice and appropriate retribution can induce concordant emotions including suspense, joy, sadness, distress, and elevation, but also feelings of sympathy and deservedness (Raney & Bryant, 2002). In many instances, moral judgments have been found to influence approach and avoidance tendencies in regard to interacting with real and mediated others (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005), as well as the experience of discordant affect.

Most often, moral judgment has been examined in connection with overall evaluation of an experience. According to ADT, it is an important factor in the mediated experience, as it can lead to various emotional reactions, affinity with characters, anticipatory hopes and fears, expectations for outcomes, and pleasure (Raney & Janicke, 2013; Zillmann, 2013). Judgments are malleable in that they can change when a figure behaves in a way that is counter to expectations, or simply as a narrative progresses (Tamborini et al., 2010). More positive moral judgments, however, do not always lead to affinity. In fact, Shafer and Raney (2012) found that moral judgments can either work with or independently of character liking, whereby individuals can separate moral evaluations from feelings toward the character. Raney and Janicke (2013) suggested that judgments may play a less significant role in character liking, especially for morally gray characters who from a moral perspective may be more difficult to like. Such judgments can be impacted by or lead to affinity, identification, and moral disengagement (Raney, 2003; Raney & Janicke, 2013). The present study continues to examine moral judgment as an antecedent, examining the role that formulated judgments may play in the use of moral disengagement strategies.

H4: Identification will be positively associated with more favorable moral judgments.
H5: More favorable moral judgments will be associated with moral disengagement.

Although identification is expected to be directly related to moral disengagement (as stated in H3), it is likely that moral judgment can also serve a mediating

role in this process, influencing the extent to which viewers morally disengage when exposed to a narrative.

PROPOSED MODEL

In light of extant literature, this study tests the idea that several variables serve as explanatory mechanisms to predict the degree to which individuals morally disengage (see Figure 1). Varied exposure to a narrative should be associated with greater identification (H2) and moral disengagement (H1). Identification is expected to lead to more positive moral judgments (H4) and moral disengagement (H3). Lastly, more positive moral judgments should predict greater moral disengagement (H5). Based on theoretical explanations of the identification process (Cohen, 2001, 2006) and the role of affective dispositions in predicting audience responses (Raney, 2003, 2004; Zillmann, 2002), we propose three indirect effects that consider identification and moral judgment as mediators: (a) narrative exposure leads to moral disengagement via identification, (b) exposure leads to moral judgment via identification, and (c) identification leads to moral disengagement via moral judgment.

Moral Continuum

Original formulations of disposition theory suggest that enjoyment varies as a function of moral assessments of characters, outcomes, and degree of liking, such that emotional connections exist along a continuum ranging from like-ability through indifference to disliking. Although early scholarship examined
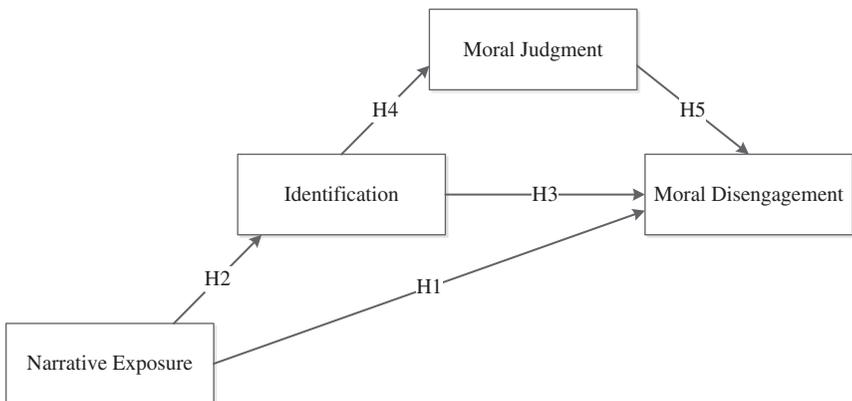

FIGURE 1 Proposed model representing hypothesized paths.

likeability in its more continuous nature, moral makeup of characters was often operationalized dichotomously. Moral assessments were either positive or negative. However, within the original model feedback loops exist that allow for continuous evaluation of complex characters, such that one character can be evaluated as morally upstanding in some instances and morally questionable and even repugnant in others (Zillmann, 2013). Media characters possess a variety of traits, and the current landscape of media narratives arguably more fully reflects the complexity of individuals and the situations in which they find themselves, providing an added sense of realism to the characterizations.

Extant research has found that MACs, characters who perform both morally good and bad behaviors, are more engaging and thus encourage higher levels of identification and appreciation (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Identification (Raney et al., 2009), perceived similarity (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), or moral evaluation of MACs can induce increased perceptions of perceived realism and emotional and cognitive enjoyment (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). In regard to antiheroes, protagonists with heroic qualities who behave in morally inappropriate ways for seemingly unjustifiable reasons, Raney et al. (2009) found that the antihero is equally liked and enjoyed, but it is through identification, instead of liking, that moral judgment is linked to enjoyment. Similarly, Shafer and Raney (2012) found that despite differences in perceived moral virtue, heroes and antiheroes are equally liked. Janicke and Raney (2011) revealed that fans, viewers with a vested connection with content, exhibited stronger liking, identification with, attraction to, and enjoyment of an antihero, as compared to nonfans, suggesting that fans tend to provide more moral latitude to characters.

Given these findings, one may argue that viewers connect with characters who display a variety of moral, immoral, and amoral behaviors, and with varying degrees of moral virtue via a variety of processes. Rather than characters being categorized as either moral or immoral, characters may exist along a moral continuum just as disposition theory argues for an affective continuum representing dispositional alignments. The idea of a moral continuum provides additional theoretical insight into how viewers connect with not only archetypal heroes and villains but also characters exhibiting a more nuanced range of moral complexities, with implications on how viewers may fight to maintain the valence and strength of the relationship despite the characters' wrongdoings.

RQ1: How do the paths to moral disengagement vary as a function of characters' moral complexity?

METHODS

Fans of the *Harry Potter* franchise had multiple opportunities across a 15-year time span to develop relationships with its characters through books, merchandise, and feature films. Also, fans have the opportunity to continue interacting with the fictional world through two theme parks and the UK-based studio tour. During the initial publication and film release period, character impressions may have solidified and multiple opportunities for moral disengagement may have taken place because of plot twists. The present study took advantage of this context through an online survey of general *Harry Potter* fans.

Participants

A total of 254 participants responded to requests for participation in the study. Respondents were recruited using various nonprobability sampling techniques. Students from a large southern and a large northeastern university were recruited via classroom solicitation. A student sample was appropriate, as many traditional students grew up with the characters in the *Harry Potter* series. Additional participants were recruited by posting the survey link on various *Harry Potter* forum sites, Facebook, and Twitter. Participants were recruited between July 15 and September 15, 2011, after the theatrical release of the final *Harry Potter* film.[1]

To assess the amount of narrative exposure to the world of *Harry Potter* through multiple modalities, an exposure score was created by summing the number of books and movies consumed (range = 1–15). This score thus represented completeness of the narrative exposure, while taking into account that the exposure may have come from different types of media. Twenty-nine participants were removed from the analysis due to skewness and missing data, yielding a final sample of moderate to high-exposure participants ($N = 225$; exposure: $M = 12.76$, $SD = 2.56$). Of the respondents, 57.9% read all seven books, and 81.3% had seen all eight films. On average, participants reported reading 5.38 ($SD = 2.18$) of the books and seeing 7.64 ($SD = .94$) of the film adaptations.

The majority of respondents (69.3%) were female, with an average age of 20.62 ($SD = 5.13$; range = 18–50). The majority (88%) were White, whereas another 12% were either African American (4%), Hispanic/Latino (3.6%), or of Asian descent (4.4%). The sample also represented an active group of general movie consumers, going to the movies 2.92 ($SD = 1.42$) times a month and renting movies 4.44 ($SD = 2.54$) times a month.

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[1] Institutional Review Board approval for this study was obtained from Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board.

Procedures

An online survey was created to explore the relationships under study. Respondents were asked questions about their consumption of the *Harry Potter* stories through the books and films, as well as their general media-viewing habits. They were also asked their identification with, moral judgment of, and moral disengagement with one of five characters featured in the series. Randomization of question order was enacted within the questionnaire.

Through random assignment, respondents were asked information regarding their feelings and impressions of one of the following *Harry Potter* characters: Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy, and Voldemort. These characters were selected because their unique motivations and actions throughout the series potentially varied in regard to morality, thus representing a continuum of moral behavior, ranging from moral to immoral.

Measures

Identification, moral judgment, and moral disengagement were all measured on Likert-type scales anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Identification was assessed using nine items adapted from Cohen (2001). Items measured aspects of identification such as similarity, empathy, and perspective taking. One item was dropped from further analysis, yielding an internal consistency level of .85. Items included "[The character] and I are completely different" (reverse coded); "While viewing/reading, I feel the emotions [the character] portrays"; and "I tend to understand the reasons why [the character] does what he does."

Moral judgment was measured via seven items as provided by Raney et al. (2009). These items pertained to the righteousness of the character's behaviors and the motivations behind them. However, one item was found to be consistently uncorrelated with the others; therefore, it was dropped from further analysis ($\alpha = .92$). Example items included "[The character] is right to fight for other witches and warlocks," "I think [the character] behaves morally correct," and "In my opinion, it is ok that [the character] takes matters into his own hands."

Moral disengagement was assessed using 10 items. For this study, the dimensions of moral justification, advantageous comparisons, and displacement of responsibility informed by Bandura et al. (1996) were measured, as they were most relevant and appropriate for the narrative. Items included "I would personally never use violence, but it is good that [the character] does so if there is no other solution"; "Compared to the harmful things [another character] does, [the character]'s deceit is not very serious"; and "[The

character] can't be blamed for ethically misbehaving if [another character] forces him to." A moral disengagement index was calculated by averaging respondents' answers ($\alpha = .89$). All of the aforementioned responses were asked in relationship to one character.

RESULTS

Hypothesis Testing

A series of simple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine H1 through H5. Although narrative exposure did not predict moral disengagement ($\beta = .10$, $R^2 = .02$), $F(1, 223) = 2.09$, $p > .05$, narrative exposure was a positive predictor of identification ($\beta = .31$, $R^2 = .10$), $F(1, 223) = 23.81$, $p < .001$. Therefore, H2 was supported, whereas H1 was not. In support of H3, higher levels of identification predicted higher levels of moral disengagement ($\beta = .60$, $R^2 = .37$), $F(1, 223) = 127.96$, $p < .001$. Identification was also a positive predictor of moral judgments ($\beta = .64$, $R^2 = .41$), $F(1, 223) = 152.42$, $p < .001$, supporting H4. Finally, regression analysis yielded support for H5; moral judgment positively predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = .79$, $R^2 = .63$), $F(1, 223) = 371.23$, $p < .01$.

Model Testing

The proposed model (Figure 1) was tested in AMOS, using maximum likelihood estimation. Using latent-composite modeling, all of the variables were modeled as single indicator constructs with errors estimated as $(1-\alpha) \sigma^2$. This model resulted in an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(1) = 2.28$, $p = .13$, comparative fit index = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation = .08, 90% confidence intervals (CIs) [.00, .21].[2] Similar to the results of the regression analyses, the analysis indicated that all of the predicted paths were statistically significant except for the direct path from narrative exposure to moral disengagement (see Figure 2). Specifically, narrative exposure increased identification (H2: $\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), identification led to both greater moral disengagement (H3: $\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) and more positive moral judgments (H4: $\beta = .64$, $p < .001$), and moral judgment predicted moral disengagement (H5: $\beta = .68$, $p < .001$). In regard to mediation, the path from exposure to moral disengagement was mediated by identification ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$), 95% CIs [.12, .27]. Likewise, the path from narrative exposure to moral judgment was mediated by identification ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$), 95% CIs [.12, .28]. Last, the

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[2] For all model analyses, bootstrapping procedures using 2,000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals were used.
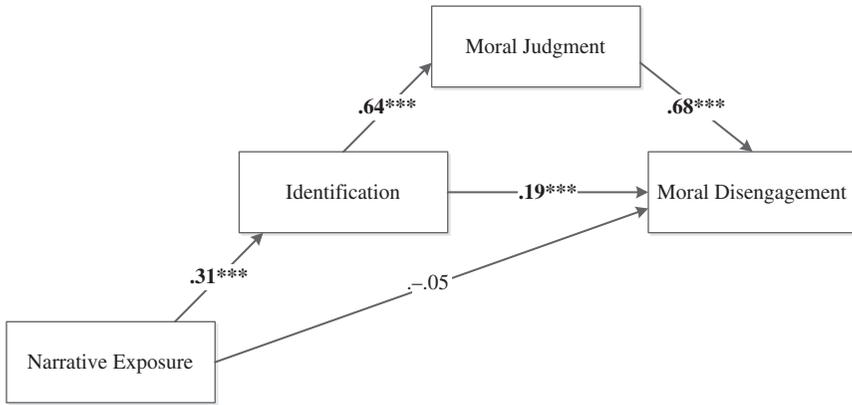
FIGURE 2 Resultant model.
Note. $\chi^2(1) = 2.28$, $p = .13$, comparative fit index = 1.00, root mean square error of approximation = .08, 90% confidence interval [.00, .21]. ***$p < .001$. Coefficients represent direct effects.

indirect path from identification to moral disengagement was mediated by moral judgment ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$), 95% CIs [.35, .51].

Multiple Group Analyses

To establish that the five characters selected were perceived as varying in morality, participants responded to the item "Would you say that [the character] behaves in a manner that is very moral or immoral?" Results from a one-way analysis of variance suggest the characters did, indeed, represent a continuum of moral behaviors (see Table 1). Differences in perceived moral fiber were statistically different across characters, $F(4, 220) = 146.05$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .73$. The characters also elicited various levels of identification and overall moral evaluations. Henceforth, to represent the moral continuum, characters will be referred to by the following descriptors (i.e., most moral character, somewhat moral character, etc.) rather than by name: Harry Potter (most moral character), Albus Dumbledore (somewhat moral character), Severus Snape (morally ambiguous character), Draco Malfoy (somewhat immoral character), and Voldemort (most immoral character).

To determine whether the model was invariant across characters, the unconstrained model was compared to five additional models, with varying constraints (see Byrne, 2010). A significant decrease in model fit and corresponding increase in chi-square value from the unconstrained to the constrained models

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Moral Fiber, Identification, Moral Judgment, and Moral Disengagement of Characters

Character	Perceived Moral Fiber	Identification	Moral Judgment	Moral Disengagement
Overall M	−.01 (2.18)	4.62 (1.13)	4.31 (1.42)	3.82 (1.46)
Most moral character (Harry)	6.20_a (.17)	5.84_a (.11)	5.41_a (.14)	4.66_a (.15)
Somewhat moral character (Dumbledore)	5.40_b (.17)	5.01_b (.11)	$5.12_{a,b}$ (.13)	4.61_a (.15)
Morally ambiguous character (Snape)	4.47_c (.17)	4.36_c (.12)	4.83_b (.14)	4.38_a (.16)
Somewhat immoral character (Malfoy)	2.72_d (.17)	4.56_c (.11)	3.71_c (.14)	3.51_b (.15)
Most immoral character (Voldemort)	1.07_e (.17)	3.26_d (.12)	2.44_d (.14)	1.87_c (.16)
F statistic	146.05***	67.63***	80.05***	57.97***
Partial η^2	.73	.55	.59	.51

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Within column, numbers with no subscript in common differ at $p < .001$. ***$p<.001$.

indicated a significant difference in the strength of the respective paths between the various characters, $\Delta\chi^2 \geq 65.26$, ΔCFI $\geq .24$, all $ps < .001$. Given the findings of noninvariance of the model, additional tests were conducted to examine the individual paths, maintaining constraints cumulatively, as paths were found to be invariant. Each path was found to differ across character groups, with the exception of the direct path from identification to moral disengagement, $\Delta\chi^4 = 3.982$, $\pi > .01$, and the direct path from moral judgment to moral disengagement, $\Delta\chi^2 = 19.48$, $\pi > .01$, As shown in Table 2, differences were significant across all pairings of characters. The following sections report significant paths for each of the five characters in order of who was perceived as most moral to least moral (see Figures 3a–e). Subsequently, key differences in the direct and indirect relationships among narrative exposure, identification, moral judgment, and moral disengagement are discussed.

Most moral character.   For the character perceived as most moral, the hero Harry, the analysis indicated that all paths were significant except for the direct path from identification to moral disengagement (see Figure 3a). Specifically, more exposure to the narrative increased identification ($\beta = .33$, $p < .05$) and moral disengagement ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$). Identification led to more positive moral judgments ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), and moral judgment predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = .69$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 2
Pairwise Comparisons for Multiple Group Analysis

Character	Narrative Exposure → Moral Disengagement	Narrative Exposure → Identification	Identification → Moral Disengagement	Identification → Moral Judgment	Moral Judgment → Moral Disengagement
Most Moral Character (Harry)	$.26_a$*	$.33_{a,b}$*	$-.08_a$	$.45_a$*	$.69_{a,d}$*
Somewhat Moral Character (Dumbledore)	$-.07_{b,c}$	$-.14_b$	$.20_a$	$.68_a$***	$.44_{a,b}$**
Morally Ambiguous Character (Snape)	$.14_{a,b}$	$.35_{a,c}$**	$.28_a$*	$.21_{ab}$	$.44_{b,c}$***
Somewhat Immoral Character (Malfoy)	$-.17_{a,b}$	$.61_c$***	$.10_a$	$.25_b$	$.74_d$***
Most Immoral Character (Voldemort)	$-.48_c$***	$.48_{a,c}$***	$.28_a$	$.00_b$	$.21_c$

Note. * p<.05, ** p <.01, *** p<.001. Within a column, numbers with no subscript in common differ at p < .05.

Furthermore, the indirect path from narrative exposure to moral judgment was mediated by identification (β = .06, p < .05), CIs [.01, .12], whereas the indirect path from identification to moral disengagement was mediated by moral judgment (β = .61, p < .001), CIs [.34, 1.02].

Somewhat moral character.   The analysis indicated two significant paths (see Figure 3b). Stronger identification levels predicted more positive moral judgments (β = .68, p < .001), and moral judgment led to moral disengagement (β = .44, p < .01). In addition, a significant indirect path emerged from identification to moral disengagement through moral judgment (β = .36, p < .05), CIs [.07, .66].

Morally ambiguous character.   For the morally ambiguous character, the analysis revealed three significant direct paths (see Figure 3c). Specifically, more narrative exposure increased identification (β = .35, p < .05), stronger identification
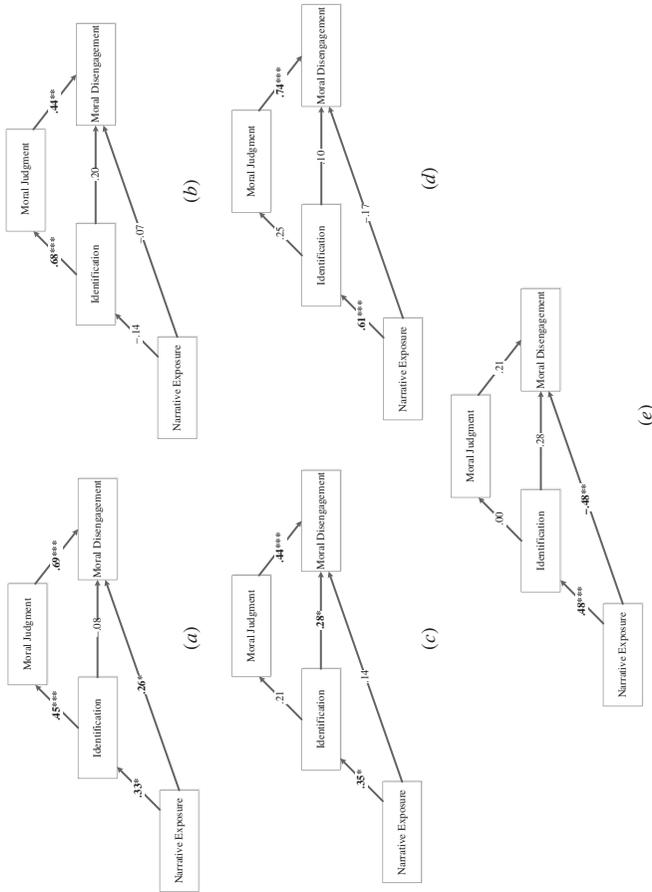
FIGURE 3 Resultant model across characters. (a). Most moral character. (b). Somewhat moral character. (c). Morally ambiguous character. (d). Somewhat immoral character. (e). Most immoral character. Coefficients represent direct effects.

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

levels led to moral disengagement ($\beta = .28, p < .05$), and more positive moral judgments predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = .44, p < .001$). Moreover, a significant indirect path was found whereby identification mediated the relationship between exposure and moral disengagement ($\beta = .05, p < .05$), CIs [.01, .13].

Somewhat immoral character.   For the character perceived as the second-to-most immoral, the analysis indicated two significant direct paths (see Figure 3d). Greater narrative exposure led to greater identification ($\beta = .61, p < .001$). But, unlike the more morally righteous characters, only one direct path to moral disengagement was found. More positive moral judgments increased moral disengagement ($\beta = .74, p < .001$). There were no significant indirect paths.

Most immoral character.   For the character perceived as most immoral, the analysis revealed only two significant direct paths (see Figure 3e). Specifically, greater narrative exposure increased identification ($\beta = .48, p < .001$) but decreased moral disengagement ($\beta = -.48, p < .01$). There were no significant indirect paths to moral disengagement.

Results Summary

The initial model indicated all significant direct paths except for the relationship between narrative exposure and moral disengagement. Identification, generally, served multiple roles within the model—as a direct path to moral disengagement and moral judgment but also as a mediator for the association between narrative exposure and moral disengagement. Moral judgment also provided multiple pathways, directly influencing moral disengagement but also mediating the influence of identification. However, when considering the moral nature of the character, several noteworthy differences emerged.

1. Although greater narrative exposure increased moral disengagement for the most moral character (e.g., hero), it decreased moral disengagement for the most immoral character (e.g., villain).
2. Greater exposure to the narrative was associated with identification for all characters but had a direct influence on moral disengagement for only the most moral character. Similarly, exposure's influence on moral judgment was mediated by identification with this character but not for others.
3. Identification levels had a direct influence on moral disengagement and mediated the influence of exposure, but only for the morally ambiguous character.

4. For the two characters on the more moral end of the continuum, moral judgment arose as a significant mediator between identification and moral disengagement, whereas for characters who were perceived as more immoral, these indirect paths to moral disengagement became nonsignificant.

5. Moral judgments led to more moral disengagement for all characters, except for the most immoral character, where moral judgments did not influence moral disengagement at all.

DISCUSSION

The central focus of this study was to investigate the explanatory mechanisms underlying the moral disengagement process by taking into account narrative exposure and two key mediators—identification and moral judgment—while exploring these relationships across characters of different moral statures. Whereas much of the literature on moral disengagement focuses on character liking as a fundamental determinant of the process, the present research reinforces the notion that identification and moral judgment play substantial roles in predicting the degree to which moral pardons for characters are granted. Identification continued to serve as a strong mediator, linking exposure to the narrative to both moral judgments and moral disengagement. These more complex cognitive processes that extend beyond merely the valence of character dispositions should be given greater weight in theorizing about moral disengagement. Identification may be one necessary component through which other evaluations of characters, outside of morality (i.e., liking, attractiveness, perceived realism, etc.), also influence moral disengagement. Although the full model's results supported theoretical expectations in regard to the relationships between the variables, arguably the more provocative elements of the findings stem from the analysis of the moral complexity of the character as a moderator.

Contrary to most entertainment literature that documents the impressions and effects of characters that are categorically defined as heroes, villains, or those with morally ambiguous qualities, the results demonstrate that characters may exist along a continuum based on perceptions of morality. In particular, not only is the moral nature of the character related to the number of avenues through which moral disengagement occurs, but it also appears to dictate which factors lead to moral disengagement. The model operated differently depending on the moral attributes of the character, as there were different predictors of disengagement. Specifically, the MAC exhibited more direct paths to moral disengagement, whereas there were more indirect paths to moral disengagement for the more morally righteous characters. Furthermore, there were overall fewer paths to moral disengagement for the less virtuous characters.

These patterns of results imply support for heuristic and systematic processing (Raney, 2004) and the character impression formation model (Sanders, 2010). For the character who is most morally ambiguous, we may infer that systematic processing in the evaluation of moral behaviors occurs, as there are a variety of avenues leading to moral disengagement. Similar to the full model, for a true MAC that falls in the middle of the moral continuum both identification and moral judgment directly facilitated moral disengagement. This was not the case for the other characters. In addition, identification significantly mediated the association between exposure and moral disengagement for the most morally complex character. Thus, MACs may be more likely to serve as identification targets in a narrative as it progresses, because these characters are generally perceived as more realistic than other characters (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). In other words, because humans are imperfect and have flaws, MACs are potentially most relatable and similar to viewers (Raney & Janicke, 2013). Consequently, although MACs are morally questionable and complex in their motivations and outcomes, they are, perhaps, more likely to induce perspective taking, empathy, and less moral sanctioning of behaviors due to heightened perceptions of authenticity, as compared to the archetypical hero or villain. In addition, more exposure may provide greater insight. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that systematic processing occurs more readily for characters who possess a blend of both good and bad traits or whose immoral actions can be justified with good intentions or outcomes.

For the characters representing the endpoints of the moral continuum, striking differences emerged. For the hero, there were more paths to moral disengagement, whereas for characters perceived as more immoral, these paths disappeared. Specifically, moral judgment mediated the relationship between identification and moral disengagement for the hero. An explanation for this finding is that viewers potentially are less likely to expect characters generally portrayed as morally ethical to commit antisocial behaviors. This expectation violation may explain why taking on these characters' perspectives is not enough to morally disengage. Through effortful moral reasoning (e.g., attributing more positive moral evaluations to these characters), moral disengagement does occur, implying that systematic processing takes place in the evaluations of characters who are deemed generally heroic. In addition, literature points to the idea that viewers may be likely to morally disengage when characters unexpectedly violate their moral boundaries in order to preserve character liking and enjoyment of their entertainment experiences (Raney, 2004). This appears to be less evident with characters who are perceived as most immoral because there was an absence of significant indirect paths leading to disengagement. In fact, for the most villainous character, even more positive moral evaluations of the character did not induce viewers to morally disengage. Thus, our findings suggest that

there is a threshold on the moral continuum for which moral disengagement occurs.

Results also imply that for those characters who are less gray (strictly moral or immoral), heuristic processing may be more likely to occur. The direct link between exposure and moral disengagement for these characters further supports the idea that schemas play a significant role in narrative responses (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Potter et al., 2002; Raney, 2004). Based on story schemas or initial dispositions toward characters with more defined moral boundaries and standards, mere exposure could impact one's tendency to morally disengage without partaking in the identification and moral judgment processes. Schemas may aid audiences to form a disposition toward a character prior to judgment (Raney, 2004), and this character impression has a direct impact on whether one is willing to use disengagement strategies to maintain positive perceptions. In regard to the more morally upstanding character, specifically the archetypical protagonist, individuals may disengage through a more heuristic-based process as a result of exposure to the narrative or positive moral judgments. Although the results imply support for varied cognitive strategies, the present study did not empirically test cognitive processing and the degree to which involvement in these processes were strategically or subconsciously taking place. Therefore, future studies should establish an empirical foundation for these arguments.

It is noteworthy to mention that although we strived for ecological validity by using *Harry Potter* narratives as the context instead of artificially constructing narrative stimuli to manipulate perceptions of the moral nature of the characters, respondents may have had clear character impressions that were influenced by external situational or environmental factors (e.g., interpersonal discussions) not examined in the study. Thus, experiments should be conducted to not only control for these variables but also establish the temporal order of how the proposed processes operate and are connected, as our data were limited to a cross-sectional survey. In addition, participants in the current study were randomly assigned to evaluate only one character in order to minimize subject fatigue. However, characters do not exist in isolation in a narrative. Therefore, it is important to consider examining characters in tandem, as these character comparisons (as well as comparisons across media formats) may foster richer explanations of moral disengagement, particularly relevant mechanisms such as advantageous comparison.

Regarding narrative exposure, the study yielded intriguing findings. It is possible that complete narrative exposure may not be required for moral disengagement or identification to take place. For example, for more extreme characters, individuals are perhaps operating on story schemas. More complete exposure may be more relevant for those who are in the morally gray area. However, in this study respondents with low exposure scores were not included in the analysis due to skewness, so the full range of narrative completeness was

not examined. This may be, in part, an artifact of the sampling procedure applied in this study, which yielded a sample of primarily fans. It is important to note this, as it creates limited comparisons between individuals who may not have been exposed to key plot lines and those who have. Moreover, exposure is a multidimensional construct consisting of frequency, narrative completeness, and exposure through multiple modalities. Exposure to every plot point in a narrative, although important to theoretical expansion, is not the same as prolonged or repeated exposure. It is possible that individuals may be exposed to the same narrative over a long period or repeatedly by watching the same episode or film, rereading a book, or through transmedia efforts where a person is exposed repetitively to a narrative across different formats. Such exposure could influence identification, moral judgments, and moral disengagement. Although the measure used in this study provided some assessment of two aspects of exposure, it was limited in that it did not assess how often individuals were exposed to each installment across formats. This form of narrative exposure, in addition to the completeness aspect and exposure in multiple modalities, should be examined in future research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present research proposed a moral continuum that helps theoretically inform the variations in how narrative exposure, identification, and moral judgment predict moral disengagement based on characters of diverse moral makeup. Findings elucidate the important roles of identification and moral judgment as explanatory mechanisms underlying the extent to which immoral actions are pardoned. These mechanisms have implications for heuristic and systematic evaluations of characters, which are conditional on the degree to which characters adhere to and violate ethical standards. Our findings suggest that future investigation of narrative responses should not be limited to archetypal heroes, villains, and morally ambiguous characters. Scholars should also consider their subtle moral distinctions and complexities in order to enhance future theorizing about the moral disengagement process.

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