

Effects of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motivations on Film Enjoyment Through Moral Disengagement

Mina Tsay-Vogel & K. Maja Krakowiak

In light of literature documenting differences in viewers' entertainment preferences, this study (N = 168) examined how motivations for film consumption based on pleasure (hedonism) and meaning (eudaimonia) are associated with moral disengagement and enjoyment of content featuring a morally ambiguous character. Findings indicate that whereas hedonic motivation positively influenced moral disengagement, eudaimonic motivation had the reverse effect. Furthermore, eudaimonic motivation had a direct positive influence on enjoyment, and the relationship between hedonic motivation and enjoyment was mediated by moral disengagement. Implications for the role of morality as it relates to individual preferences for media consumption and enjoyment are discussed.

Keywords: Enjoyment; Entertainment Preference; Eudaimonic Motivation; Hedonic Motivation; Moral Disengagement

Extensive empirical research shows that moral disengagement or the assessment of antisocial character behaviors as being morally acceptable is the means through which individuals enjoy their media experiences (Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2006; Raney, 2004). Recently, these evaluations have been found in the context of media featuring morally ambiguous characters (MACs) or those who commit both good and bad actions (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2015; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

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Early work in the area of enjoyment documents the motivations among individuals to seek media for hedonic value (Zillmann, 2000, Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). However, there is growing support for the prevalence of counterhedonic media choices (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Given the variations in individuals' desire to seek pleasure and life's meaning from entertainment media (Oliver & Raney, 2011), it is likely that moral judgment would be distinctly impacted. Due to the gratifications that viewers hope to fulfill through media consumption, such motivational factors could have a bearing on the assessment of antisocial character behaviors, consequently affecting the level of enjoyment experienced.

Moral Disengagement in Relation to Enjoyment

Applying morality to the context of entertainment media, disposition theory argues that enjoyment results when liked characters are rewarded and disliked characters are punished (Zillmann, 2000). However, to ensure that individuals remain liking characters that commit immoral actions, individuals may *disengage* their moral standards and defend reprehensible conduct for the sake of enjoyment (Raney, 2004). Moral disengagement can occur through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, and distortion of consequences) focused on the perpetrator, outcome of the action, or the nature of the action itself (Bandura, 2002). Studies have shown that perceptions of characters and narrative features may facilitate or hinder this process. Tsay and Krakowiak (2011) found that perceived character similarity and identification encourage moral disengagement. Furthermore, altruistic motivations and positive story outcomes foster more favorable perceptions of a character's attributes, character liking, and moral disengagement (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013).

Recently, scholars have shifted their attention to examine MACs, characters that behave in both prosocial and antisocial ways (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; e.g., Dexter, Walter White, and Emily Thorne). Although these characters behave immorally at times, they are nonetheless liked and enjoyed (see, Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2015; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). In these instances, Raney (2004) suggests that individuals are still able to form a positive disposition toward these characters due to the persistent desire to like them and be entertained by them, thus making it easier for people to excuse unethical character behaviors in order to continue enjoying the mediated experience.

Motivations for Entertainment Consumption

Although empirical evidence shows support for moral disengagement in the context of MACs, it is also possible that motivations for media consumption impact the degree to which immoral character actions are deemed as more or less severe. Oliver and Raney (2011) parsed out differences between audience motivations for entertainment by theorizing and developing measures for two types: hedonic and eudaimonic motivations. Hedonic motivation is characterized as more positively valenced and

driven by pleasure when seeking out media. In contrast, focus on extracting meaning from media is characteristic of eudaimonic motivation. In light of these qualitatively distinct preferences for entertainment, it is reasonable to suggest that one's viewing intention could impact the moral assessment of characters. In particular, for individuals more focused on seeking sheer amusement from entertainment, their moral codes are perhaps more disengaged, as compared to those searching for profound insight. Furthermore, people with a stronger desire to search for meaning from media may have a greater inclination to evaluate immoral actions more severely. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Hedonic motivation will be positively associated with moral disengagement.

H2: Eudaimonic motivation will be negatively associated with moral disengagement.

Enjoyment has generally been conceptualized as a pleasurable experience resulting from a multitude of feelings and thoughts derived from media, including liking (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2000), sensory delight, suspense, and achievement (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Drawing from the moral disengagement literature (Raney, 2004), we expect that when viewers are able to justify immoral character behaviors, enjoyment is likely to increase. Taking into account these aforementioned relationships, we also inquire about the mediating role of moral disengagement in the association between intentions for entertainment consumption and enjoyment. Therefore, we address the following research question:

RQ: Does moral disengagement mediate the relationship between entertainment motivations and enjoyment?

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 168 students (age: $M = 19.39$, $SD = 2.39$; gender: 85.1% females) at three large universities in the United States participated in an online experiment. Participants first answered a questionnaire assessing their motivations for film consumption. They were then asked to read a synopsis of a film featuring a MAC. After reading about the film, participants answered a questionnaire measuring moral disengagement and enjoyment.

Stimulus

A fictitious film review Web site, PopcornPreview.com, featuring a synopsis for an upcoming film, *Living on the Edge*, was constructed as the stimulus for this study. The film featured a main character named Barry Watkins, an undercover cop. Assigned to go undercover to break up Philadelphia's most dangerous drug ring, Barry faces a host of moral challenges (e.g., stealing cars, selling drugs, robbing banks, and being ordered to kill).

Measures

All measures used Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). *Hedonic and eudaimonic motivations* were measured by 12 items adapted from Oliver and Raney (2011) to assess entertainment preferences based on pleasure and meaning respectively. An example item for hedonic motivation was: *It's important to me that I have fun when watching a movie* ($\alpha = .83$). An example item for eudaimonic motivation was: *I like movies that make me more reflective* ($\alpha = .90$). *Moral disengagement* was measured after reading the movie preview such that participants rated the moral nature of the main character. Eight items were created to fit the narrative context. An example item was: *Barry Watkins appears to be morally justified in his actions* ($\alpha = .77$). *Enjoyment* was measured by seven items adapted from Krcmar and Renfro (2005) to assess participants' enjoyment while reading the movie preview. An example item was: *I had a good time reading the movie preview* ($\alpha = .93$).

Results

Hypotheses Tests

It was predicted that higher levels of hedonic motivation will facilitate moral disengagement (H1), whereas higher levels of eudaimonic motivation will hinder moral disengagement (H2). As expected, regression analyses indicated that hedonic motivation ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) positively predicted moral disengagement, and eudaimonic motivation ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$) negatively predicted moral disengagement. Therefore, both hypotheses were supported. Findings also revealed that moral disengagement increased enjoyment ($\beta = .24, p < .05$), supporting H3.

Model Test

To address the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between hedonic and eudaimonic motivations and enjoyment (RQ), the proposed relationships were tested in a model using AMOS; the model had acceptable fit, $\chi^2 (DF = 1) = 8.51, p = .24, CFI = 1, RMSEA = .05$ (see Figure 1). Consistent with our hypotheses, the analysis revealed that hedonic motivation ($\beta = .12, p < .05$) increased moral disengagement (H1); however, eudaimonic motivation decreased moral disengagement ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$) (H2). Furthermore, moral disengagement led to greater enjoyment ($\beta = .29, p < .05$) (H3). Although hedonic motivation did not directly predict enjoyment ($\beta = -.07, p = .43$), eudaimonic motivation positively predicted enjoyment ($\beta = .18, p < .05$). Bootstrapping procedures using 2,000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals revealed that whereas the indirect path from eudaimonic motivation to enjoyment was not mediated by moral disengagement ($\beta = .03, p = .21$), the indirect path from hedonic motivation to enjoyment was mediated by moral disengagement ($\beta = .23, p < .05$).

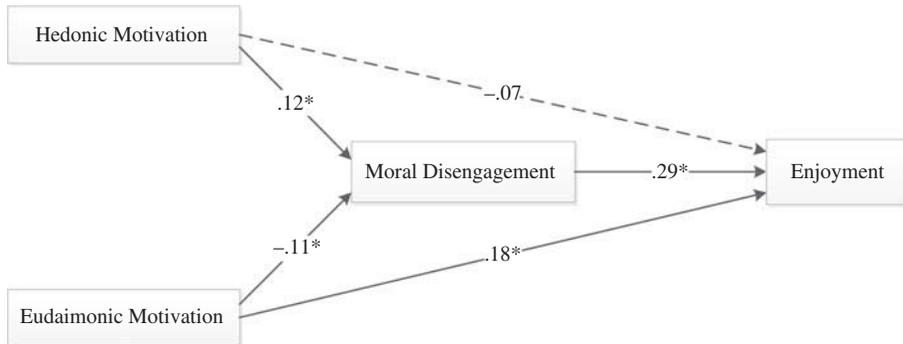


Figure 1 Effects of entertainment motivations on moral disengagement and enjoyment.

Note. * $p < .05$.

Discussion

This study found that audiences' intentions for viewing entertainment have a significant bearing on the moral assessment of characters. Specifically, the motivation to seek pleasure from media impacts the way viewers pardon antisocial character behaviors, suggesting that looser moral standards are employed if driven by *hedonism*. In contrast, the motivation to seek meaning from entertainment encourages viewers to be less susceptible to excusing immoral actions. Instead, these individuals are likely to evaluate morally questionable behaviors as more severe if driven by *eudaimonia*. However, an alternative perspective is that people with higher levels of moral development actively seek out more complex entertainment offerings. Therefore, rather than morally disengaging, they may morally engage with a MAC storyline that taps into higher-order moral webs of decisions.

This study also found that those who morally disengaged were more likely to enjoy the content, demonstrating that the process of moral disengagement is gratifying, consistent with Raney's (2004) arguments. Moreover, this research provides evidence that moral disengagement in the context of MACs facilitates and predicts narrative enjoyment, in line with recent empirical work on characters who are both good and bad in nature (Krakowiak & Tsay, 2011; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2015; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

In addition, moral disengagement fully mediated the relationship between hedonic motivation and enjoyment, whereas this was not the case between eudaimonic motivation and enjoyment. These results theoretically point to the idea that individuals seeking pleasure experience enjoyment through the process of moral justification. Specifically, rationalizing bad behaviors is a *necessary condition for enjoyment to occur*, particularly in the context of a MAC. In essence, this study supports the important role of moral disengagement in facilitating hedonically driven individuals to attain enjoyment from their media experience. On the contrary, the data reveal that although eudaimonic motivation decreases moral disengagement, this desire to seek meaning from entertainment has a direct *positive* relationship to enjoyment. This

finding suggests that for eudaimonically driven individuals, enjoyment is experienced not by excusing immoral behaviors but perhaps by other mechanisms. It is possible that these people may have a higher tolerance for witnessing character mistakes as compared to individuals who are driven by pleasure when consuming media. An alternative explanation is that those with high eudaimonic motivation are potentially more altruistic or tolerant of human flaws and imperfections due to their desire to seek greater life meaning and purpose.

Although this study makes an attempt to tap into moral disengagement and enjoyment as a result of exposure to content featuring a MAC, the stimulus that was used was a film synopsis. Consequently, future research should consider audience's interaction with media as compared to the *potential* interaction with media in order to strengthen the study's explanatory power. Furthermore, due to the brevity of the stimulus exposure, it is possible that the overall level of involvement was peripheral. Therefore, future studies should increase the duration of stimulus exposure by incorporating a clip from a film that features richer character development in order for participants to reach a substantive level of engagement with the character and plot.

In conclusion, findings from this research suggest that motivations to seek pleasure and meaning from entertainment media have a bearing on both moral judgment and enjoyment but in uniquely distinct ways. Whereas enjoyment was facilitated by moral disengagement for hedonically driven individuals, eudaimonically motivated individuals not only were less likely to morally disengage but also experienced enjoyment through other mechanisms that did not involve moral justification. As research continues to expand in entertainment psychology, scholars will hopefully continue to examine the role of morality, as it clearly has implications for the ways we judge characters and derive enjoyment from our media experiences.

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