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The virtues and vices of social comparisons: examining assimilative and contrastive emotional reactions to characters in a narrative

Mina Tsay-Vogel[1] · K. Maja Krakowiak[2]

Abstract

Based on social comparison theory, this study investigates how awareness of one's morality and exposure to a character in a narrative affect emotions associated with four types of social comparisons—upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative. A 2 (Morality Salience: virtue, vice) X 2 (Character: moral, immoral) experiment ($N = 106$) revealed that those whose vices were made salient elicited stronger: (1) contempt (a downward contrastive emotion) toward an immoral character than a moral character, and (2) envy (an upward contrastive emotion) toward a moral character than an immoral character. Whereas envy decreased positive affect, contempt increased it. Implications for assimilative and contrastive social comparisons with media characters that lead to distinct affective outcomes are discussed.

Keywords Morality · Morality salience · Social comparison · Assimilation · Contrast · Emotion · Affect

Introduction

The role of morality in entertainment continues to receive considerable attention, particularly as exposure to different character attributes, behaviors, and outcomes impacts a host of narrative responses. While much focus has been placed on understanding the way viewers react to moral and immoral characters in the realms of identification, character liking, perceived similarity, transportation, and enjoyment (e.g., Krakowiak and Oliver 2012; Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 2011, 2013; Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak 2011, 2016; Hartmann and Vorderer 2010; Shafer and Raney 2012), research has yet to fully explore how individuals *socially compare* with such characters, eliciting uniquely discrete emotional responses.

Drawing from social psychology literature, media scholars have applied Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory to explain how people may likely engage in comparisons with media characters. Extensive research in a mediated context supports the ways in which individuals compare themselves with superior others in the case of upward comparisons (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick and Romero 2011; Nabi and Keblusek 2014) and inferior others in the case of downward comparisons (e.g., Knobloch et al. 2004; Mares and Cantor 1992). Aside from directionality as a way to categorize social comparisons, assimilative or contrastive processes can also occur such that individuals feel either psychologically similar to or divergent from the target respectively, resulting in desirable or undesirable outcomes depending on situational contexts (Smith 2000).

In an entertainment context, people generally assess characters in terms of ethics (e.g., perceiving good or moral characters favorably and bad or immoral characters unfavorably as suggested by affective disposition theory) (Zillmann 2000; Zillmann and Cantor 1977), making them useful targets for social comparisons. Given that social comparisons are motivated by evaluations of one's opinions and abilities (Taylor et al. 1996), recent work supports the important role of morality salience, or awareness of one's morality or immorality, in the appeal of characters with distinct moral qualities (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 2015). Although the researchers found that variations in moral self-perceptions

✉ Mina Tsay-Vogel
minatv@bu.edu

K. Maja Krakowiak
mkrakowi@uccs.edu

[1] Department of Mass Communication, Advertising & Public Relations, Boston University, 640 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, USA

[2] Department of Communication, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs 80918, CO, USA

and the moral nature of a comparison target in a narrative had a bearing on positive affect and enjoyment, they did not consider their impact on a host of discrete emotions affiliated with specific social comparison processes that reflect both directionality (upward vs. downward) and perceived similarity to the target (assimilative vs. contrastive)—an area that has yet to be examined.

Therefore, to fill this gap in the literature, the present study specifically investigates how the salience of one's morality (virtues) or immorality (vices) and exposure to a target character (moral vs. immoral character) affect discrete emotions associated with four social comparison processes, namely upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative. Subsequently, we examine how these social comparison-based emotions have positive or negative implications for an individual's general affect following narrative exposure. To achieve these endeavors, we first discuss the major tenets and motivational mechanisms underlying social comparisons. Next, we explore the ways in which individuals engage in assimilative or contrastive social comparisons and apply them to the context of morality in narratives, subsequently predicting either desirable or undesirable outcomes for those making the comparisons. Lastly, hypotheses and research questions are derived from theoretical assumptions about these comparison domains and then tested in an experiment.

Social comparisons and motivational mechanisms

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that the way people feel, think, and act are primarily determined by the comparisons they make with others. In particular, social comparisons are more readily made with comparison targets who are perceived as similar to the self (Major et al. 1991) and on domains relevant or important to individuals' self-concepts (Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser 1991). Social comparisons are commonly identified based on the target's attributes which imply directionality. Upward social comparison involves comparing oneself with someone who is more superior or "better off." In contrast, downward social comparison entails comparing oneself with someone who is deemed inferior or "worse off." The nature of such comparisons also depends on an individual's comparison standards and the situational contexts in which these comparisons take place (Corcoran et al. 2011).

Motivations for social comparisons are fundamentally grounded in people's attempt to hold stable and accurate self-evaluations (Taylor et al. 1996). However, people may also engage in social comparisons to fulfill needs such as self-enhancement and self-improvement (Suls et al. 2002; Wood and Taylor 1991). The former entails enhancing one's self-perceptions and maintaining self-esteem (Tesser 1988), whereas the latter focuses on improving one's abilities in a given domain (Taylor et al. 1995). Motivations for self-improvement tend to result in upward social comparisons (Wilson and Benner 1971) whereas motivations for self-enhancement tend to result in downward social comparisons (Wills 1981).

Assimilative and contrastive social comparisons

In accordance with Smith (2000), while directionality of the comparison is one way to classify social comparisons, the other is associated with perceived similarity to the comparison target. In other words, the degree to which a person believes that the target's given domain of interest is attainable influences whether an assimilative or contrastive comparison will occur, consequently leading to either favorable or unfavorable effects for the perceiver. Therefore, social comparisons can be categorized into one of four types: upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative, resulting in either desirable or undesirable implications for the self. Moreover, for each of these processes, a host of specific emotional reactions are elicited from these comparisons (Smith 2000).

Desirable outcomes

Both *upward assimilative* and *downward contrastive* processes stimulate positive outcomes for the person engaging in the comparison as they are largely associated with self-improvement and self-enhancement motivations respectively (Smith 2000).

Upward assimilative

When making an upward assimilative comparison, an individual looks up to a superior target and sees that he or she can be similar to the target. Emotions affiliated with this process include feeling admiration for the esteemed target, being inspired to become like the target on a given domain, and feeling optimistic about improving as a person (Smith 2000). Research grounded on theoretical assumptions of upward social comparison has shown that observing a target's successes or accomplishments leads to encouraging and promising outcomes that increase one's self-efficacy (e.g., holding higher expectations of the self and boosting self-confidence) (Lockwood and Kunda 1997; Major et al. 1991; Spencer et al. 2001; Taylor and Lobel 1989). Furthermore, seeing a target with admirable qualities can also facilitate modeling of desired behaviors through vicarious learning according to social learning theory (Bandura 1982).

These aforementioned outcomes are particularly likely when the comparison target is deemed similar to the self based on characteristics pertinent to one's self-concept as social comparison theory posits that people are driven by the need to gain accurate self-evaluations (Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser 1991). Applied to a narrative context, it is then reasonable to suggest that viewers undergo upward comparisons with characters who demonstrate moral or respectable qualities as they desire to be like them, exhibiting high levels of wishful identification (see Hoffner and Buchanan 2005). However, individuals with stronger moral self-perceptions (i.e., awareness of their virtuous qualities) should be more likely to engage in assimilation because they share comparable traits with morally superior characters. In contrast, for people who are primed to ponder over their vices, comparisons with moral targets should be less likely to occur based on the lack of similarity between themselves and such targets (see Wood 1989)—in this case morality is the domain on which social comparisons are predicated. Hence, no difference in upward assimilative emotions should result for such individuals, explained by the self-evaluation function of social comparisons and the tendency of comparisons to take place with similar others posited by social comparison theory. Therefore, in light of these theoretical tenets and the notion that self-improvement mechanisms motivate upward assimilative comparisons especially when the comparison target shares distinctive characteristics with the self, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1 There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that those whose virtues are made salient will elicit stronger upward assimilative emotions about a moral character than an immoral character, whereas those whose vices are made salient will elicit no difference in upward assimilative emotions.

Downward contrastive

In the case of a downward contrastive comparison, an individual looks down on an inferior target and sees that he or she is not similar to the target. Emotions relevant to this process involve feeling pride about one's own attributes or skills, schadenfreude or the experience of pleasure from seeing the target's misfortune, and contempt toward the target who deserves to be in the disadvantaged situation (Smith 2000). Motivated by self-enhancement mechanisms, social comparison theory suggests that people who feel threatened in a given domain tend to engage in downward comparisons in order to escalate their self-esteem and subjective well-being (Gibbons et al. 1994; Wills 1981). Mares and Cantor (1992) found that elderly and lonely individuals prefer watching televised offerings that portray isolated and unhappy people as compared to socially integrated and

happy people. Similarly, romantically disconnected individuals favor music with themes of depressing love over celebratory love (Knobloch et al. 2004). Considering the context of morality in narratives, it is reasonable to expect that people will undergo downward comparisons with morally inferior characters. However, individuals with stronger immoral self-perceptions (i.e., awareness of their wrongdoings or transgressions) should more likely be motivated by self-enhancement mechanisms as they have higher levels of perceived threat and are seeking ways to elevate their self-esteem, hence, eliciting stronger downward contrastive emotions. In contrast, those whose virtues are primed lack not only the drive for self-enhancement as their egos are not at risk (Tesser 1988), but also identification with the comparison target—previously noted as a motivator for accurate self-evaluations (Major et al. 1991; Salovey and Rodin 1984). Consequently, no difference in downward contrastive emotions should result for these individuals as they have minimal defensive tendencies and opportunity for making accurate self-evaluations based on the existence of a dissimilar target. Therefore, taking into account the important role of ego-defense as a mechanism driving downward contrastive comparisons according to the tenets of social comparison theory, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2 There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that those whose vices are made salient will elicit stronger downward contrastive emotions about an immoral character than a moral character, whereas those whose virtues are made salient will elicit no difference in downward contrastive emotions.

Undesirable outcomes

Both *upward contrastive* and *downward assimilative* processes consequently lead to undesirable outcomes for the individual engaging in the comparison (Smith 2000).

Upward contrastive

When making an upward contrastive comparison, an individual looks up to a superior target and feels that he or she cannot be similar to the target. Emotions associated with this process involve resentment toward the target whom is perceived to have an unfair advantage, envy toward the target whose good fortune is something we have no means to attain, and depression due to feeling inferior to the target (Smith 2000). Although upward comparisons are largely motivated by self-improvement mechanisms according to social comparison theory (see Collins 1995), these comparisons come with the risk of emphasizing a person's deficiencies on relevant domains. Research has shown that people who compare themselves to outperformers elicit sadness

and jealousy because they feel personally threatened (Alicke and Zell 2008; DeSteno and Salovey 1996; Tesser and Collins 1998). Due to the lack of resources or skills to become like a superior target on characteristics meaningful to one's self-concept, self-deprecating outcomes are likely to result from increased feelings of vulnerability, leading to states of hopelessness, desperation, and shame (Salovey and Rodin 1984). Applied to the context of narratives, while upward comparisons are more readily made with morally righteous characters, it is reasonable to suggest that those with stronger immoral awareness and who feel most dissimilar to and threatened by characters of moral fortitude would undergo upward contrastive comparisons as they are more prone to believe such honorable qualities are unattainable. In contrast, those whose moral traits are primed have minimal drive for self-improvement as their self-regard is not threatened but rather bolstered. Therefore, such individuals would likely show no difference in upward contrastive emotions due to the lack of threat to their self-concepts and reduced motivation for making these comparisons in the first place grounded on theoretical assumptions of social comparison. With these considerations in mind, the following hypothesis is tested:

H3 There will be an interaction between morality salience and character, such that those whose vices are made salient will elicit stronger upward contrastive emotions about a moral character than an immoral character, whereas those whose virtues are made salient will elicit no difference in upward contrastive emotions.

Downward assimilative

In the case of downward assimilative comparison, an individual looks down on an inferior target and sees that he or she is similar to the target. Emotions relevant to this process entail pity for the target's situation, fear that one's own situation might worsen, and sympathy involving concern for the target and distress over becoming like the target (Smith 2000). As downward comparisons elicit contrastive effects when perceived control is high, assimilative effects are likely to result when perceived control is low (Major et al. 1991; Wood and VanderZee 1997). In particular, expectations about whether one will become like the disadvantaged target dictates the chance of a person undergoing downward assimilation. While most attention on downward comparisons has focused on the beneficial outcomes of downward contrastive effects (Gibbons et al. 1994; Wills 1981), the directionality of the effects of moral self-perceptions and exposure to characters displaying varying moral qualities on downward assimilative emotions is unclear. As suggested by H2, individuals threatened by immoral self-perceptions should likely engage in downward comparisons through

a contrastive process based on self-enhancement motivations to alleviate perceived risks and improve self-esteem. However, for those with high moral self-views, downward comparisons are not likely to occur as there is minimal risk experienced when exposed to immoral characters who are perceived to be dissimilar. If assimilation were to take place for such individuals, it would likely occur under the conditions of upward comparisons as proposed by H3. Due to the unspecified nature of the influence of morality salience and character type on downward assimilative comparisons, the following research question is asked:

RQ1 What are the effects of morality salience and character type on downward assimilative emotions?

Social comparisons eliciting general affect

According to Smith (2000), the four social comparison processes should lead to favorable and unfavorable affective outcomes for the individual engaging in the comparison. Based on the advantageous and disadvantageous consequences of these processes noted by these classifications, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5 (a) Upward assimilative and (b) downward contrastive emotions about a character will be associated with more positive affect whereas (c) upward contrastive and (d) downward assimilative emotions about a character will be associated with less positive affect.

Method

Participants and procedure

One hundred and six students participated in an online experiment for research credit. Participants ranged in age between 18 and 49 years ($M = 21.83$, $SD = 4.31$) and were recruited from communication courses at two large universities in the central and northeastern regions of the United States. The sample included 69.8% White, 18.9% Asian, 11.3% Latino, 6.6% African American, 1.9% Native American, 1.9% American Indian, 0.9% Pacific Islander, and 2.8% with no indication of race.

After reading the informed consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Morality Salience: virtue, vice) × 2 (Character: moral character, immoral character) experiment. For the first part of the study which was presented as research on subjective memory, participants completed a writing task intended to prime morality salience. Following the writing task, participants responded to manipulation check items which measured moral perceptions of their actions. For the second part of the study which was presented as research on entertainment

perceptions, participants were asked to read a short narrative and subsequently respond to questions measuring social comparison-based emotions about the main character and general affect, as well as provide demographic information. The presentation order of the items assessing social comparison based-emotions and general affect were randomized to avoid order effects.

Morality salience priming task

To manipulate morality salience (virtue vs. vice), a writing task was adapted from Cohen et al. (2000). Participants spent 10 minutes writing about three recent personal experiences. In the virtue condition, they were asked to write about instances in which they "demonstrated one of their most important values and felt proud of themselves." In the vice condition, they were asked to write about instances in which they "went against one of their most important values and felt guilty." To test for the efficacy of the manipulation for morality salience, a manipulation check was performed. Following the writing task, participants were asked to rate perceptions of their actions on three 7-point scales anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). Items included: *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 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.46$). As expected, the analysis revealed that individuals felt stronger immoral self-perceptions in the vice condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.28$) as compared to the virtue condition ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(104) = -2.53$, $p = 0.01$.

Narrative stimulus

Two story instantiations adapted from Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) and used in previous studies (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 2011, 2015; Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak 2011) were utilized to manipulate character type (moral character vs. immoral character). The stories were of approximately 1300 words in length. The first story, *Summit Fever*, describes a mountain climber's journey with his companions up Mount Everest. During the ascent, the main character encounters a disoriented mountain climber whom everyone assumed was dead and faces a major decision. The main character's decision was edited to construct the two character conditions. In the moral character condition, the main character saves the disoriented climber whereas in the immoral character condition, the main character pushes the disoriented climber off a cliff. The second story, *The Suspect*, details a day in the life of a detective in which he is interrogating a prime suspect for the murder of a young child. Suddenly, the suspect falls ill and the detective faces a major decision. The detective's decision was manipulated to create the two character conditions. In the moral character condition, the detective saves the suspect's life whereas in the immoral character condition, the detective lets the suspect die.

To test the efficacy of the character manipulation, 11 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) measured perceptions of the character's moral nature (see Appendix A). Example items include: *The main character has moral attributes* and *The main character is an ethical person*. These items were averaged to create a scale for perceived character's morality (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$, $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.24$). A 2 (Story: Summit Fever, The Suspect) × 2 (Character: moral character, immoral character) factorial ANOVA was employed to ensure there were significant differences in perceptions of the main character's morality and no story type effects. As expected, the analysis revealed only a main effect for character type such that individuals perceived the main character in the moral character condition ($M = 3.83$, $SE = 0.14$) as significantly more ethical than that in the immoral character condition ($M = 2.36$, $SE = 0.14$), $F(1, 102) = 57.73$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.36$. Therefore, these four short stories served as the narrative stimulus for the experiment such that two stories featured a moral character and two stories featured an immoral character.

Measures

Social comparison-based emotions

After reading the narrative, participants were asked the extent to which they felt a series of emotions about the main character based on Smith's (2000) model of social comparison-based emotions. These items were measured on 7-point scales anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*). Upward assimilative emotions included admiration ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.95$), inspiration ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.86$), and optimism ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.67$). Downward contrastive emotions included pride ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.85$), schadenfreude ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.62$), and contempt ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.76$). Upward contrastive emotions included resentment ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.96$), envy ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.30$), and depression ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.83$). Downward assimilative emotions included pity ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.81$), fear ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.92$), and sympathy ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.81$). As Smith (2000) classified these discrete emotions based on directionality (upward vs. downward) and perceived similarity to the target (assimilative vs. contrastive), the three emotions under each of the four categories are not intended to be analyzed as a single construct (see Lewis and Weaver 2015).

General affect

Participants' overall affect following exposure to the narrative was assessed with 7 items adapted from Barrett and Russell ([1998](#)). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt a list of emotions on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The items included: happy, excited, content, elated, upset, sad, and depressed (with the last three items reverse-coded). The mean of these items created a general affect scale with higher values indicating more positive affect (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.98$).

Results

Effects of morality salience and character on social comparison-based emotions

To test H1–H3 and address RQ1, a 2 (Morality Salience: virtue, vice) × 2 (Character: moral character, immoral character) factorial MANOVA was employed to examine the effects of morality salience and character on 12 social comparison-based emotions. The analysis revealed significant differences in social comparison-based emotions between the characters, Multivariate $F(12, 87) = 4.84$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.40$. In addition, there was a significant Morality Salience × Character interaction, Multivariate $F(12, 87) = 2.79$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.37$. The following sections detail results from the univariate analyses with the significant interaction effects subsuming the significant main effects reported.

Upward assimilative

H1 expected that those whose virtues were made salient would exhibit stronger upward assimilative emotions toward a moral character than an immoral character, however, those whose vices were made salient would exhibit no difference in upward assimilative emotions. Significant main effects for character emerged for admiration, $F(1, 102) = 39.84$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.28$, inspiration, $F(1, 102) = 43.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.30$, and optimism, $F(1, 100) = 41.44$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.29$. Specifically, participants felt greater admiration, inspiration, and optimism toward the moral character ($M = 3.87$, $SE = 0.23$; $M = 3.90$, $SE = 0.21$; $M = 3.76$, $SE = 0.19$) than the immoral character ($M = 1.82$, $SE = 0.23$; $M = 1.87$, $SE = 0.22$; $M = 1.97$, $SE = 0.20$) respectively. Because morality salience did not significantly influence upward assimilative emotions as expected between the character types, H1 was not supported.
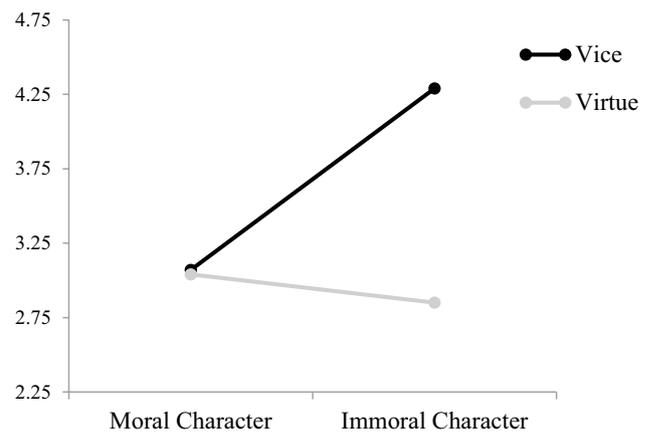

Fig. 1 Morality salience × character on contempt (downward contrastive emotion)

Table 1 Contempt (downward contrastive emotion): morality salience × character interaction

Morality salience	Character	
	Moral	Immoral
Vice		
M	3.07_{aA}	4.29_{bA}
SE	0.32	0.35
Virtue		
M	3.04_{aA}	2.85_{aB}
SE	0.33	0.33

Using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at $p < 0.05$; within columns, means with no upper case subscript in common differ at $p < 0.05$

Downward contrastive

H2 predicted that those whose vices were made salient would exhibit stronger downward contrastive emotions toward an immoral character than a moral character, yet those whose virtues were made salient would exhibit no difference in downward contrastive emotions. A significant main effect for character was revealed for pride, $F(1, 102) = 29.44$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.22$. Specifically, participants felt greater pride toward the moral character ($M = 3.64$, $SE = 0.22$) as compared to the immoral character ($M = 1.89$, $SE = 0.23$). A significant main effect for morality salience also emerged for contempt, $F(1, 102) = 4.96$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, such that those whose vices were primed ($M = 3.68$, $SE = 0.23$) felt more contempt toward the main character than those whose virtues were primed ($M = 2.95$, $SE = 0.23$). Moreover, although a Morality Salience × Character interaction was not yielded for pride or schadenfreude, it emerged for contempt, $F(1, 102) = 4.56$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ (see Fig. 1; Table 1 for

means), indicating that those primed with their vices felt significantly more contempt toward the immoral character than those primed with their virtues. Additionally, contempt toward the immoral character was significantly stronger than that toward the moral character among those primed with their vices. Therefore, H2 was partially supported.

Upward contrastive

 H3 predicted that those whose vices were made salient would exhibit stronger upward contrastive emotions toward a moral character than an immoral character, however, those whose virtues were made salient would exhibit no difference in upward contrastive emotions. Significant main effects for character were found for resentment, $F(1, 102) = 10.10$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$, and envy, $F(1, 102) = 4.06$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. In particular, stronger resentment and less envy were felt toward the immoral character ($M = 4.04$, $SE = 0.26$; $M = 1.60$, $SE = 0.18$) as compared to the moral character ($M = 2.91$, $SE = 0.25$; $M = 2.09$, $SE = 0.17$) respectively. Significant main effects for morality salience also emerged for resentment, $F(1, 102) = 8.48$, $p = 0.004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$, and depression, $F(1, 102) = 7.68$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, such that those whose vices were primed ($M = 3.99$, $SE = 0.25$; $M = 3.90$, $SE = 0.24$) felt more resentment and depression toward the main character than those whose virtues were primed ($M = 2.95$, $SE = 0.25$; $M = 2.95$, $SE = 0.24$) respectively. Furthermore, although a Morality Salience × Character interaction was not yielded for resentment or depression, it emerged for envy, $F(1, 102) = 5.60$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ (see Fig. 2; Table 2 for means), indicating that those primed with their vices felt significantly more envy toward the moral character than those primed with their virtues. Envy toward the moral character was also significantly stronger than that
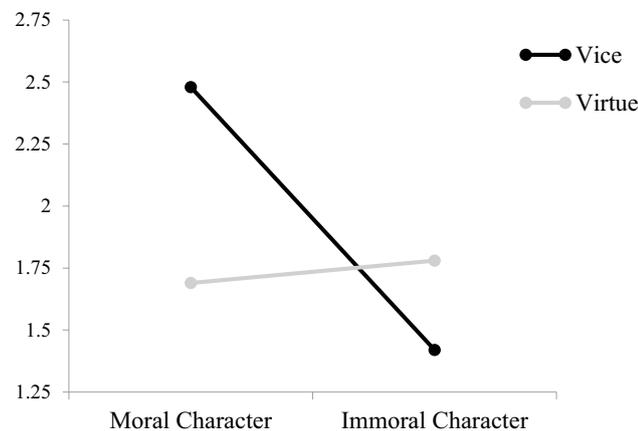
Table 2 Envy (upward contrastive emotion): morality salience × character interaction

Morality salience	Character	
	Moral	Immoral
Vice		
M	2.48$_{aA}$	1.42$_{bA}$
SE	0.23	0.26
Virtue		
M	1.69$_{aB}$	1.78$_{aA}$
SE	0.25	0.24

Using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower case subscript in common differ at $p < 0.05$; within columns, means with no upper case subscript in common differ at $p < 0.05$

toward the immoral character among those primed with their vices. Thus, H3 was partially supported.

Downward assimilative

RQ1 inquired about the effects of morality salience and character on downward assimilative emotions. Significant main effects for character were revealed for pity, $F(1, 101) = 5.08$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, and sympathy, $F(1, 101) = 37.68$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.27$. Specifically, participants felt greater pity and sympathy toward the moral character ($M = 3.41$, $SE = 0.24$; $M = 3.76$, $SE = 0.21$) as compared to the immoral character ($M = 2.62$, $SE = 0.25$; $M = 1.88$, $SE = 0.22$) respectively.

Social comparison-based emotions and general affect

To test H5 which predicted that (a) upward assimilative and (b) downward contrastive emotions about the character would lead to more positive affect, whereas (c) upward contrastive and (d) downward assimilative emotions about the character would lead to less positive affect, a multiple regression was conducted. The analysis indicated two significant emotions predicted positive affect. Specifically, while contempt toward the character led to more positive affect ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.03$), envy toward the character led to less positive affect ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.04$). Therefore, findings show support for H5b (a desirable outcome following a downward contrastive comparison) and H5c (an undesirable outcome following an upward contrastive comparison), and not for H5a and H5d.

Model test

A path analysis was performed using AMOS to test a model based on the significant interactions between morality

Fig. 2 Morality salience × character on envy (upward contrastive emotion)

salience and character on the social comparison-based emotions of envy and contempt and their relationships to general affect (see Fig. 3). Except for morality salience and character, all of the variables were modeled as single indicator latent constructs with errors estimated as $(1-\alpha)\sigma^2$. The analysis yielded an acceptable model fit, $\chi^2(6) = 10.69$, $p = 0.10$, $CFI = 1.0$, $RMSEA = 0.05$. Specifically, less envy was felt toward the immoral character than the moral character ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.03$). Furthermore, those whose vices were made salient felt greater contempt toward the main character than those whose virtues were made salient ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.03$). Whereas envy as an upward contrastive emotion led to less positive affect ($\beta = -0.16$, $p = 0.04$), contempt as a downward contrastive emotion led to more positive affect ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.03$). Lastly, bootstrapping procedures using 2000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals revealed that envy toward the character ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.04$) and contempt toward the character ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.03$) mediated the indirect paths between character and affect and morality salience and affect respectively.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this study was to extend prior work on the effects of morality salience and character type beyond positive affect and enjoyment responses. Specifically, we consider their impact on a series of social comparison-based emotions affiliated with processes that reflect both directionality (upward vs. downward) and perceived similarity to the comparison target (assimilative vs. contrastive) based on Smith's (2000) model. In sum, although our findings do not suggest assimilative effects, they do so for contrastive effects in both upward and downward comparison contexts, specifically for individuals threatened by their vices. Consistent with our predictions, people with immoral self-perceptions showed stronger contempt toward a morally inferior character than a morally superior character (suggesting downward contrastive comparison) *and* stronger envy toward a morally superior character than a morally inferior character (suggesting upward contrastive comparison), yet there were no differences in discrete emotions between the characters for those with moral self-views. Further, whereas envy directed at the character decreased one's overall

positive affect, contempt increased it, confirming the notion that downward contrastive comparison results in a desirable outcome for the person engaging in the comparison, while on the contrary, upward contrastive comparison leads to an undesirable consequence (Smith 2000).

In line with previous research on social comparisons when one's self-image is threatened (Gibbons et al. 1994; Mares and Cantor 1992; Knobloch et al. 2004; Wills 1981), our data strongly support the idea that more vulnerable individuals look down to lesser or disadvantaged others for self-enhancement or self-protective purposes in an effort to increase self-esteem in relevant domains—in this case, moral integrity and honor. Unique to our research, the inter-action effect between morality salience and character type on the discrete emotion of *contempt* suggests that characters displaying immoral qualities are not only highly scorned upon, but also perceived as psychologically divergent to the self particularly when immoral self-perceptions are robust. This contrastive effect is consistent with Konijn and Hoorn's (2005) finding that people generally view bad fictional characters as more dissimilar to the self than good fictional characters. Our results also show that contempt toward a character further intensified positive emotions following narrative consumption, corroborating the positive psychological benefits of entertainment featuring antiheroes especially for those with threatened moral self-views. In a similar vein, media scholars have found that characters who are morally questionable produce a host of positive viewer responses (Krakowiak and Oliver 2012; Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 2011, 2013; Shafer and Raney 2012; Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak 2011, 2016).

Although those whose immoralities were primed appeared to be motivated by self-enhancement when confronted with morally flawed characters, expected aversive effects in the case of *envy* were revealed when they were exposed to morally honorable characters. Specifically, morally threatened individuals felt greater envy for a superior character as compared to an inferior character. This finding is in line with research showing self-deprecating outcomes (e.g., jealousy and shame) for people who compare themselves to outperformers (Alicke and Zell 2008; DeSteno and Salovey 1996; Salovey and Rodin 1984; Tesser and Collins 1998). In light of strong support for both downward and upward contrastive based emotions in this study, one

Fig. 3 Path analysis of effects of morality salience and character on upward and downward contrastive emotions about the character and general affect. Morality salience is coded as 0 = virtue and 1 = vice and character is coded as 0 = moral and 1 = immoral. *$p < 0.05$
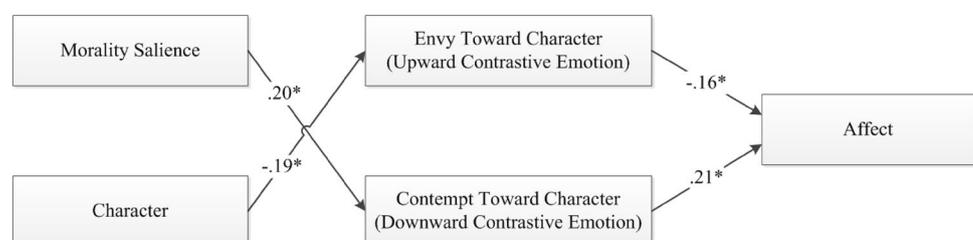
explanation is related to beliefs about the changeability of the perceived discrepancy (Aspinwall 1997; Buunk and Ybema 1997; Wood and VanderZee 1997). Applied to the context of this research, discrepancies in moral characteristics between the self and a target character that appear unchangeable are perhaps stimulating contrastive emotional reactions such that those lacking moral self-esteem feel envious toward highly respectable characters as they believe they could never be like them. Thus, perceived control has a bearing on how these discrepancies are viewed and the affective responses elicited (Major et al. 1991; Testa and Major 1990). Hence, envy arguably resulted when those primed with their vices were unable to reduce the perceived moral gap between themselves and the good character. In addition, contempt resulted when these individuals potentially increased the perceived moral distance between themselves and the bad character in an effort to increase self-worth. Thus, the present research shows that moral and immoral characters produce psychologically distinct affective outcomes for people whose moral self-image is most at risk. Although contrast effects occurred for these individuals, upward comparison with a moral character (through envy) decreased positive affect *whereas* downward comparison with an immoral character (through contempt) increased positive affect. These results indeed have important theoretical and practical implications for enjoyment related to antihero narratives and distress related to hero narratives. Specifically, antihero narratives portraying characters who display unethical behaviors have the potential to boost one's overall experience of pleasure as feelings related to contempt drive this process. In contrast, hero narratives featuring characters who exemplify honorable actions can impair pleasure due to feelings associated with envy. Such affective outcomes as a result of narrative exposure to varying character types have profound implications for one's psychological well-being in the real world if social comparisons with these targets are made in a media context.

The current study did not find effects of morality salience and character type on assimilative comparison-based emotions for both upward and downward contexts. Although a host of discrete emotions associated with assimilation (e.g., admiration, inspiration, and optimism) were expressed toward the moral character more so than the immoral character, those primed with their virtues did not elicit stronger upward assimilative emotions toward the moral character as compared to the immoral character. Likewise, these patterns did not emerge for downward assimilative-based emotions. One explanation is that participants did not perceive the main character (a mountain climber or a detective) of the narratives as relatable. Research shows that perceived similarity is an important factor in social comparison processes such that cueing for similarities between the viewer and target character tends to lead to assimilative effects (Häfner 2004; Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall 2006; Papies and Nicolaije 2012). Although the relevant domain for comparison was based on morality for this study (i.e., moral goodness and badness as made salient for the individual and those portrayed by the character in the narrative), scholars have found that gender and age are effective cues for stimulating similarity. In particular people tend to perceive same-age and same-gender comparison targets as being similar to themselves (Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall 2006).

An alternative explanation for the null effects for assimilation is that individuals primed with their virtues when exposed to a moral character and those primed with their vices when exposed to an immoral character still perceived some moral discrepancy between themselves and the character, limiting their perceived control. For the virtue condition, we had asked participants to write about instances which demonstrated their most important moral values, but their personal experiences may not have been semantically related to those of saving the life of another human being as was portrayed in the narratives for the good character condition. Likewise for the vice condition, participants' experiences that went against their most important moral values were perhaps not semantically-related to those of letting another human being die. Therefore, although high perceived control through upward comparisons should likely increase self-efficacy and motivate performance (Major et al. 1991), it is possible that the moral characters in the narratives were perceived even by morally good individuals as outperformers rather than characters who have attainable attributes and skills (Lockwood and Kunda 1997). This may be particularly true for super hero narratives. Similarly, the severity of the immoral actions of the bad characters could have made assimilation among those primed with their vices improbable, potentially leading to advantageous comparison effects (Bandura 2002). In these aforementioned cases, the prospects for eliminating moral discrepancy seem to have fallen short.

Some limitations and directions for future research are worthy to note. First, it is possible that the characters featured in the narratives were not deemed relatable due to the nature of the moral or immoral actions displayed. Therefore, future studies should consider other relevant domains (e.g., age and gender cues) which can also be applied to the context of morality as these factors have been found to increase perceived similarity (Hoffner and Buchanan 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall 2006; Lewis and Weaver 2015). Second, while our study found contrasting effects for contempt and envy toward a character on one's general affect following narrative exposure, it would be meaningful to consider alternative outcomes internally related to the narrative experience (e.g., enjoyment and appreciation of the content) or externally related to the narrative experience (e.g., behavioral motivations related to the content).

While much attention has been given to understanding the enjoyment and appreciation of moral and immoral presentations in entertainment (Oliver and Bartsch 2010; Raney and Janicke 2013), how social comparisons operate along the four domains of upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative has yet to be fully examined on feelings of pleasure and meaningfulness derived from media offerings. Furthermore, recent work by Nabi and Keblusek (2014) found that discrete emotions related to hope and envy mediate the effect of social comparisons on behavioral intentions. Therefore, future research should consider how morality salience and character type not only impact discrete emotions toward target characters, but also how these affective responses provoke motivations that translate to actions (e.g., prosocial and antisocial behaviors in the real world) or influence self-perceptions (e.g., audiences may consume media featuring certain characters to satisfy self-esteem or self-evaluation needs, experiencing negatively valenced emotions like contempt and envy in the process). Third, our study was limited in that we used only two story instantiations to test for social comparative emotional reactions. Future studies would certainly benefit from considering the variability in and complexity of media messages particularly in message sampling in order to avoid generalizing large categories of media content (see Reeves et al. 2015). Fourth, as our study relied on self-reported emotional reactions to the character in the narrative, future research should consider collecting facial expression data through biometric means to more accurately assess experienced emotions during media exposure. Lastly, the present research solely considered target characters in a fictional context. It is possible that the effects would differ for non-fiction contexts as in the case of reality TV programs (Lewis and Weaver 2015). As unrealistic optimism reduces when people compare themselves to those with whom potential contact is likely to occur (Alicke et al. 1995), future studies should extend the scope to other genres.

Concluding remarks

This study is the first to empirically test Smith's (2000) four social comparison domains as they relate to morality in a narrative context. In sum, the present research theoretically supports the vital roles of morality salience and character type in the conditions in which individuals engage in comparisons with media characters. Specifically, our findings corroborate the contrastive-based emotions elicited by morally threatened individuals. Whereas downward contrastive comparisons (reflective of contempt) with immoral characters resulted in a desirable affective outcome, upward contrastive comparisons (reflective of envy) with moral characters resulted in an undesirable affective outcome.

Contributing to extant research on media entertainment and social psychology, these findings theoretically elucidate our understanding of not only how morality serves as an important and relevant comparison domain, but also how narratives featuring moral and immoral characters provide distinct affective experiences depending on one's moral self-image.

Appendix A

Items assessing perceptions of the character's moral nature

The main character does some immoral things[a]

The main character makes some right decisions

The main character has some moral attributes

The main character does mean things at times[a]

The main character has some negative attributes[a]

The main character does some nice things

The main character has some immoral attributes[a]

The main character makes some wrong decisions[a]

The main character has some positive attributes

The main character behaves in a moral way some of the time

The main character is an ethical person

[a]Reverse-coded items

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