
The impact of perceived character similarity and identification on moral disengagement

Mina Tsay*

Department of Mass Communication,
Advertising and Public Relations,
Boston University,
640 Commonwealth Avenue,
Boston, MA 02215, USA
E-mail: minatsay@bu.edu
*Corresponding author

K. Maja Krakowiak

Department of Communication,
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs,
1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway,
Colorado Springs, CO 80918, USA
E-mail: mkrakow2@uccs.edu

Abstract: Enjoyment of entertainment media has often been conceptualised as a function of viewers' dispositions towards characters and the gratification sought from witnessing the justification of character actions. Motivated by disposition theory and third-person effect's social distance corollary, this study examines how character similarity and identification predict the degree to which viewers morally disengage, or accept antisocial behaviours of characters as morally acceptable. Findings suggest that perceived similarity between the viewer and character mediates the relationship between identification and moral disengagement, which in turn leads to greater affective enjoyment of a narrative. Implications for the nature of the moral disengagement process and its effects are discussed.

Keywords: moral disengagement; enjoyment; similarity; identification; character disposition.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Tsay, M. and Krakowiak, K.M. (2011) 'The impact of perceived character similarity and identification on moral disengagement', *Int. J. Arts and Technology*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp.102–110.

Biographical notes: Mina Tsay is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication, Advertising and Public Relations at Boston University. Her research interests include the psychological and social effects of media, with a focus on the enjoyment of entertainment media and engagement with social media.

K. Maja Krakowiak is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. Her research interests include the psychological and social effects of media, with a focus on

entertainment media and morally ambiguous characters. Her work has appeared in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* and *Ethics and Entertainment: Essays on Media Culture and Media Morality*.

1 Introduction

The psychological and social mechanisms underlying media enjoyment continue to be a rich area of investigation by entertainment scholars. In particular, enjoyment has often been conceptualised as a function of viewers' dispositions towards characters and the gratifications sought from witnessing the justification of character actions (Raney and Bryant, 2002). Predicated under the assumption that moral evaluations of characters play a vital role in one's involvement with media, studies have pointed to moral disengagement, or the evaluation of antisocial behaviours of characters to be 'morally acceptable', as a means for individuals to more fully enjoy their entertainment experiences (Klimmt et al., 2006; Raney, 2004, 2006).

In light of enjoyment as a potential mechanism driving viewers to morally disengage, it is imperative to consider factors that influence the degree to which moral disengagement occurs. Specifically, if character disposition is an important component of guiding moral evaluations, it is expected that characters that are perceived to be more similar to viewers based on particular traits are more likely to be excused for their immoral behaviours. In such a case, individuals would perhaps have a greater tendency to morally disengage based on self-enhancement motivations (since the character is perceived to be just like the viewer). Davison's (1983) third-person effects (TPE) hypothesis provides insight to the ways individuals underestimate the impact of media on themselves, as compared to that on others, based on self-serving and attribution biases. An extension of TPE proposes that such effects are weaker when individuals assess the influence of media on close and proximate others, as compared to distant others, also known as the social distance corollary (see Cohen et al., 1988; David and Johnson, 1998; Gunther, 1991). Hence, TPE serves as a valuable theoretical framework for this study, as we apply the concept of 'close others' to characters that are perceived to be similar to the viewer, in the context of moral disengagement in entertainment media.

The present research suggests that perceived similarity between the viewer and character facilitates identification, and in turn encourages individuals to more readily morally disengage. Similarity has often been noted as a primary predictor of identification, impacting both liking of and sympathy towards characters (e.g. Konijn and Hoorn, 2005). Scholars have also argued that identification is a way in which viewers develop favourable character dispositions, and through understanding characters' feelings and motivations, enjoyment is heightened (e.g. Hoffmann, 1987; Zillmann, 1991, 1994). Thus, taking into account viewers' self-enhancement motivations and the importance of perceived closeness with others (in this case characters) as posited by TPE's social distance corollary, this study examines how similarity and identification may impact moral disengagement, and ultimately the enjoyment of a narrative.

2 Role of character disposition in moral disengagement

Moral standards ‘serve as guides and deterrents for conduct’ (Bandura, 1990, p.161). Bandura argues that an individual’s moral standards are not fixed, but rather the mechanisms which operate them are activated and disengaged depending on situational contexts. Prior research has shown that the enjoyment of dramatic media can be explained in part by the events that occur to favourable and unfavourable characters. Disposition theory uses this logic as a framework for understanding how audience members experience different levels of enjoyment while watching entertainment programmes with varying plot formats (Raney, 2003; Zillmann and Bryant, 1986). The theory suggests that enjoyment is a function of viewers’ affective dispositions towards characters and the outcomes that these characters experience during the course of a dramatic presentation (Zillmann and Bryant, 1975). Namely, enjoyment is thought to be maximised when liked characters experience positive outcomes and/or when disliked characters suffer from negative outcomes. In contrast, enjoyment is expected to decrease when liked characters experience negative consequences and/or when disliked characters attain positive rewards. Raney (2003) suggests that one of the ways in which we ensure that we remain liking our favourite characters and optimising the enjoyment of our media experiences is through disengaging our moral standards.

A primary assumption of moral disengagement is that the process entails one’s conscious effort to justify a particular character’s behaviours. It is unlikely that people will perceive an action as irreprehensible if they themselves have not justified it as being personally, socially or morally acceptable. Undergoing moral cognitive restructuring and convincing the self that the behaviour is defensible are critical in evaluating the action in a favourable or in the very least, not in a negative light. Another indicator of moral disengagement lies in the *displacement of responsibility* (Bandura, 1990). Rather than viewing the action as a product of the character, one may attribute it to external causes, such as the environment or others. Furthermore, while an individual morally disengages, he or she is likely to minimise or distort the consequences of the character’s actions. This leads the viewer to perceive an immoral action as being less severe than it actually is. In any case, the extent to which one excuses immoral actions is suggested to be a result of both character disposition and the motivation for sustained enjoyment (Raney, 2003).

2.1 Application of TPE’s social distance corollary

Given that moral disengagement is both a conscious process based largely on the dispositional valence of the character, it is expected that when perceived similarity with the character is strong, moral disengagement is more likely to occur. Such a prediction can be explained by self-enhancement motivations, a basis for TPE that assumes that people are fundamentally driven by the preservation of their self-esteem and the maintenance of a positive self-concept (Davison, 1983). The self-enhancement perspective may explain why an individual is more likely to pardon a character that is viewed as highly similar to himself or herself based on perceived social distance. TPE’s social distance corollary suggests that the magnitude of TPE increases as the social distance between the self and the comparison other increases. Applying the social distance phenomenon to the process of moral disengagement, it is likely that viewers may be less critical of close others, as compared to distant others, when immoral actions are committed as a result of self-serving biases. In other words, viewers of entertainment

media may have a greater tendency to morally disengage with characters deemed more similar than different from themselves.

In light of the important role of perceived character similarity on moral disengagement, it is also expected that identification would have an impact on the moral judgement of characters. Cohen (2001) conceptualises identification as a process in which “an audience member imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text” (p.251). In such a case, one loses awareness of his or her role as a viewer of text, but instead, psychologically assumes the identity of the character. Konijn and Hoorn (2005) suggest that similarity is a primary predictor of identification, influencing both the favourability and sympathy towards characters. Furthermore, identification has often been discussed as a means through which positive dispositions towards characters are formed through the emotional understanding of their feelings (empathy) and cognitive understanding of their decisions and actions, leading to greater enjoyment (Hoffmann, 1987; Zillmann, 1991, 1994).

In the case that identification with characters is particularly strong, based on initial perceptions of character similarity, this could lead viewers to more easily alter their moral standards when they witness characters committing immoral actions. Thus, considering the motive for self-enhancement, perceived closeness with characters as proposed by TPE’s social distance corollary, and the mediating role of identification in facilitating moral disengagement and ultimately, enjoyment, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1: Identification mediates the relationship between character similarity and moral disengagement.

H1a: Character similarity is positively associated with identification.

H1b: Identification is positively associated with moral disengagement.

H2: Moral disengagement is positively associated with enjoyment of narrative.

3 Method

3.1 Participants and procedure

An online survey was administered to a total of 312 undergraduate students (28.2% males and 71.8% females) from two universities in the USA. The sample consisted of 76.6% Caucasians, 4.5% African Americans, 8.3% Latinos, 11.5% Asians, 1.3% Pacific Islanders, 1.0% Native Americans and 7.7% with no indication of race. Participants ranged between 17 and 49 years of age ($M = 19.28$, $SD = 3.55$) and provided implied consent prior to the start of the study.

All participants were asked to read a narrative (approximately 1,700 words) featuring a main character whose goal is to climb to the top of Mount Everest with two companions. While the narrative progresses, information is revealed about immoral acts that the main character commits to make his journey possible (e.g. compromising the safety of his friends, embezzling his company’s money, etc.). Two instantiations were included in the study to account for the authentic nature of the narrative (one as a true account and the other as a fictional account). After reading the story, participants were asked to respond to a series of items measuring the following variables: character

similarity, identification, moral disengagement and enjoyment. The subsequent section details the measures included in the study's analysis.

3.2 Measures

All assessments of character similarity, identification, moral disengagement and enjoyment were measured on Likert-type scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.2.1 Character similarity

Character similarity was evaluated as the degree to which the participant perceived himself or herself as similar to the main character in the story. Five items measured perceived similarity with the character. Example items included: *The main character and I have similar perspectives on issues*, *I am like the main character in many ways*, and *The main character and I are similar in how we think* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$).

3.2.2 Identification

Identification was conceptualised as the immersion of the participant into the role of the main character both affectively and cognitively. About 13 items measured dimensions of identification, such as empathy, understanding and motivation adapted from Cohen (2001). Example items included: *While reading the story, I imagined myself in the main character's place*, *I shared the main character's perspective*, *I was able to understand the events in the story in a manner similar to that in which the main character understood them* and *I could feel the emotions the main character portrayed* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

3.2.3 Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement was assessed by the extent to which antisocial behaviours of the main character were evaluated as 'morally acceptable'. About 13 items measured the participant's moral disengagement. Example items included: *It was all right for the main character to not share his food with his friend because he knew he would need all the energy he could get to make it up the mountain*, *The main character should not be blamed for leaving his friend behind since he and his other friend made the decision together*, *The main character was morally justified in his actions* and *I believe that in general, the main character is an ethical person* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$).

3.2.4 Enjoyment

Enjoyment of the narrative was measured by 18 items, adapted from Krcmar and Renfro (2005) and Raney and Bryant (2002). A principal component factor analysis using varimax rotation indicated two dimensions of enjoyment, labelled *affective enjoyment* and *cognitive enjoyment*. Nine items loaded on the affective enjoyment factor (e.g. *I had a good time reading this story*, *This story was exciting*, *It made me happy to read this story* and *This story was entertaining*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). Six items loaded on the cognitive enjoyment factor (e.g. *I would like to analyse this story*, *I really thought about the story when I read it*, *This story made me think* and *I would like to seek out additional information about this story*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

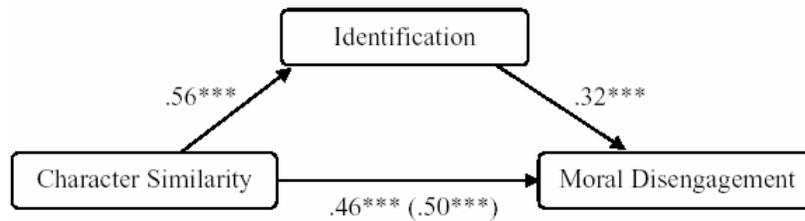
4 Results

H1 predicted that the effect of character similarity on moral disengagement would be mediated by identification. Employing Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for supporting mediation (see Figure 1), a set of simple linear regressions indicated that:

- 1 character similarity predicted identification ($\beta = 0.56, t = 11.78, p < 0.001$)
- 2 identification predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = 0.32, t = 5.87, p < 0.001$)
- 3 character similarity predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = 0.50, t = 10.07, p < 0.001$).

The final mediation criterion showed that although character similarity predicted moral disengagement even after controlling for identification ($\beta = 0.46, t = 7.83, p < 0.001$), Sobel's test revealed that the reduction in beta weight for character similarity in the relationship was significant ($z = 5.82, p < 0.001$). Notably, the multiple regression analysis indicated that the effect of identification on moral disengagement was not significant after controlling for character similarity ($\beta = 0.06, t = 0.98, p = 0.33$), and this reduction in beta weight for identification was even more significant ($z = 8.14, p < 0.001$; see Figure 2). Thus, findings point to character similarity as potentially a stronger mediating variable in the relationship between identification and moral disengagement, as compared to the expected mediating effect of identification on the relationship between character similarity and moral disengagement. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

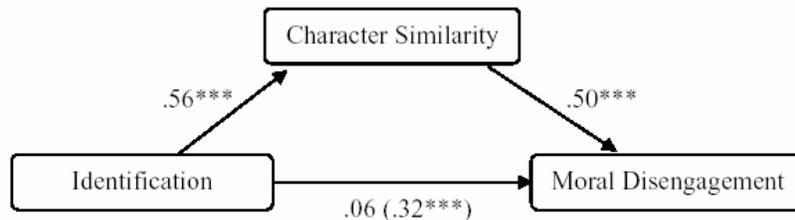
Figure 1 Identification mediating the effect of character similarity on moral disengagement



*** $p < 0.001$.

Note: Number inside parenthesis is the standardised β coefficient when moral disengagement is regressed on character similarity alone, without including identification in the equation.

Figure 2 Character similarity mediating the effect of identification on moral disengagement



*** $p < 0.001$.

Note: Number inside parenthesis is the standardised β coefficient when moral disengagement is regressed on identification alone, without including character similarity in the equation.

H2 predicted that moral disengagement would facilitate an individual's enjoyment of the narrative. Simple linear regressions revealed that moral disengagement predicted affective enjoyment ($\beta = 0.17, t = 3.10, p < 0.01$), however, it did not predict cognitive enjoyment ($\beta = 0.09, t = 1.60, p = 0.11$). Thus, H2 was partially supported.

5 Discussion

In general, findings from this research support the vital roles of character similarity and identification on the degree to which viewers morally disengage. In particular, the greater the perceived similarity between the viewer and character, the more likely one is to justify the immoral actions of the character. This relationship was originally explained by applying TPE's social distance corollary to the context of entertainment media, suggesting that self-enhancement motivations could account for why audiences who share similar qualities to those of characters may be less strict with their moral codes. If viewers are driven by protective mechanisms to maintain their self-concepts, they may be more inclined to give these characters the 'benefit of the doubt' when they commit antisocial behaviours. Findings suggest that when audiences feel psychologically similar to characters, not only are weaker moral standards used for the judgement of character actions, but also there is a greater likelihood for immoral actions to be deemed less severe.

Analogous to the effect of perceived character similarity on moral disengagement, identification also increased one's tendency to justify immoral character behaviours. Specifically, the more the viewer empathised with the character and shared mutual understanding for the character's actions in the narrative, the less blame was attributed to the character for wrongdoings. Surprisingly, character similarity appeared to be the more potent mediating variable in the relationship between identification and moral disengagement, as compared to the mediating role of identification in the relationship between character similarity and moral disengagement. In the former case, when one identified or immersed himself or herself in the role of the character, it produced stronger perceptions of character similarity, in turn facilitating moral disengagement. While some scholars suggest that similarity predicts identification (see Konijn and Hoorn, 2005), it is possible that when audiences first absorb into a character's role, this psychological immersive process leads them to project such character traits on themselves. Consequently, this projection could induce more magnified perceptions of similarity. This explanation counters the prediction that a viewer's perceived similarity with a character initially guides one to become absorbed in the character's role, due to perspective taking. While this study provides mixed results, future research may consider more clearly parsing out the theoretical underpinnings of these concepts to determine the nature and direction of causality.

In addition, findings indicate that moral disengagement plays a pivotal role in predicting affective enjoyment, but not cognitive enjoyment. Individuals who were more likely to justify the main character's immoral behaviours had a greater tendency to report feeling happy and having a good time while reading the story, and perceive the story as exciting and entertaining. However, such individuals did not report feeling a greater desire to analyse the story or felt that the story made them think. Such findings suggest that moral disengagement is perhaps a more emotionally driven than mentally driven process. Although moral evaluations are clearly cognitive in nature, based on the

judgement of actions as being ethical, we need to consider the impact of character disposition in influencing the nature of the process. Due to the strength of the favourable disposition one may feel towards a particular character, moral disengagement may be governed heavily by feelings attached to the character based on empathy, and thus elicits more affective forms of enjoyment and pleasure. Therefore, it is important to consider the construct of enjoyment as multidimensional, especially since results in this study point to the effect of moral disengagement on only affective enjoyment. Such findings have implications on the prominent role of affective character disposition on one's tendency to morally excuse antisocial behaviours.

Overall, findings from the present research elucidate our understanding of moral disengagement by investigating the extent to which perceptions of character similarity and identification facilitate individuals to more readily accept harmful actions of characters as morally justified. Motivated by the theory of disposition and the application of TPE in the context of entertainment media, this study sheds light on the potential mechanisms influencing moral disengagement, such as character disposition and self-enhancement motivations via the social distance corollary. Future research may consider other variables, such as transportation and an individual's propensity to morally disengage, to determine other variations of moral judgement and evaluation that can be experienced on the part of viewers. Such avenues could invaluablely help to conceptually refine the process of moral disengagement and its effects on the enjoyment of entertainment media.

References

- Bandura, A. (1990) 'Mechanisms of moral disengagement', in W. Reich (Ed.), *Origins of Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.161–191.
- Baron, R.M. and Kenny, D.A. (1986) 'The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 51, pp.1173–1182.
- Cohen, J. (2001) 'Defining identification: a theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters', *Mass Communication and Society*, Vol. 4, pp.245–264.
- Cohen, J., Mutz, D., Price, V. and Gunther, A. (1988) 'Perceived impact of defamation: an experiment on third-person effects', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 52, pp.161–173.
- David, P. and Johnson, M.A. (1998) 'The role of self in third-person effects about body image', *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 48, No. 4, pp.37–58.
- Davison, W.P. (1983) 'The third-person effect in communication', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp.1–15.
- Gunther, A.C. (1991) 'What we think others think: cause and consequence in the third-person effect', *Communication Research*, Vol. 18, pp.355–372.
- Hoffmann, M.L. (1987) 'The contribution of empathy to justice and moral judgment', in N. Eisenberg and J. Strayer (Eds.), *Empathy and its Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.47–80.
- Klimmt, C., Schmid, H., Nosper, A., Hartmann, T. and Vorderer, P. (2006) 'How players manage moral concerns to make video game violence enjoyable', *Communications*, Vol. 31, pp.309–328.
- Konijn, E.A. and Hoorn, J.F. (2005) 'Some like it bad: testing a model for perceiving and experiencing fictional characters', *Media Psychology*, Vol. 7, pp.107–144.
- Krcmar, M. and Renfro, S. (2005) 'Developing a scale to assess media enjoyment', Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, New York.

- Raney, A.A. (2003) 'Disposition-based theories of enjoyment', in J. Bryant, D. Roskos-Ewoldsen and J. Cantor (Eds.), *Communication and Emotion*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.61–84.
- Raney, A.A. (2004) 'Expanding disposition theory: reconsidering character liking, moral evaluations, and enjoyment', *Communication Theory*, Vol. 14, pp.348–369.
- Raney, A.A. (2006) 'The psychology of disposition-based theories of media enjoyment', in J. Bryant and P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of Entertainment*. Mahwah: Erlbaum, pp.137–150.
- Raney, A.A. and Bryant, J. (2002) 'Moral judgment and crime drama: an integrated theory of enjoyment', *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 52, pp.402–415.
- Zillmann, D. (1991) 'Empathy: affect from bearing witness to the emotion of others', in J. Bryant and D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum, pp.135–167.
- Zillmann, D. (1994) 'Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama', *Poetics*, Vol. 23, pp.33–51.
- Zillmann, D. and Bryant, J. (1975) 'Viewer's moral sanction of retribution in the appreciation of dramatic presentations', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 11, pp.572–582.
- Zillmann, D. and Bryant, J. (1986) 'Exploring the entertainment experience', in J. Bryant and D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on Media Effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.303–324.