Affective Disposition Theory in Suspense: Elucidating the Roles of Morality and Character Liking in Creating Suspenseful Affect

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

According to affective disposition theory, our enjoyment of narratives is a function of our feelings toward characters and perceived justness of the outcomes they encounter. Research on suspense has demonstrated that liking characters leads to greater suspense, and that morally just outcomes are associated with greater enjoyment of the narrative. However, additional factors may be relevant in this context. More specifically, perceived threat may act as a complement to character liking, and timing of narrative events may alter the impact of morality. Two studies were conducted in an effort to both complement and challenge affective disposition theory. Study 1 revealed that greater character liking, self-threat, and character-threat are all associated with more suspense and, through excitation transfer, more enjoyment. The first study also found threat to be positively associated with identification, liking, and transportation. Study 2 demonstrated that valence of a midpoint narrative outcome does not necessarily matter for suspense, in that a protagonist’s extreme success and extreme failure in the middle of the narrative were associated with roughly the same amount of suspense. Implications for affective disposition theory are discussed.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgment ......................................................................................................... iii

Vita................................................................................................................................ iv

List of Tables .................................................................................................................. vii

List of Figures ................................................................................................................ viii

Chapter 1: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Study 1 ......................................................................................................... 13

  Method ......................................................................................................................... 23

  Results ........................................................................................................................... 35

  Discussion ..................................................................................................................... 43

Chapter 3: Study 2 ......................................................................................................... 59

  Method ......................................................................................................................... 65

  Results ........................................................................................................................... 69

  Discussion ..................................................................................................................... 77

Chapter 4: General Discussion ....................................................................................... 89

References ..................................................................................................................... 96

Appendix A: Study 1 Tables and Figures ....................................................................... 105

Appendix B: Study 2 Tables and Figures ....................................................................... 118
List of Tables

Table A.1. Descriptive Statistics
Table A.2. Correlation Matrix
Table A.3. OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Character Liking
Table A.4. OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Perceived Self-Threat
Table A.5. OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Perceived Character-Threat
Table A.6. OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Character Liking, Perceived Self-Threat, and Perceived Character-Threat
Table A.7. OLS Regression Analysis of Identification, Liking, and Transportation as a Function of Perceived Self-Threat
Table A.8. OLS Regression Analysis of Identification, Liking, and Transportation as a Function of Perceived Character-Threat
Table B.1. OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Protagonist Success
List of Figures

Figure A.1. Indirect relationship between character liking and enjoyment.......................114

Figure A.2. Indirect relationship between self-threat and enjoyment ..............................114

Figure A.3. Indirect relationship between character-threat and enjoyment ............................115

Figure A.4. Interaction between measured character liking and perceived self-threat...115

Figure A.5. Distribution of perceived self-threat..........................................................116

Figure A.5. Distribution of perceived character-threat.....................................................116

Figure B.1. Visual representation of the quadratic regression between perceived
protagonist success and suspense.................................................................................119

Figure B.2. Visual representation of the quadratic regression between perceived
protagonist success and suspense at the stop-point...................................................120
Chapter 1: Literature Review

Though suspense has been conceptualized differently over the years, most theorists have agreed that character liking is an essential component of the suspense experience (e.g., Zillmann, 1996). Our concern for liked characters that seem to be in peril leads us to the state of anxiety known as suspense. Hope and fear are experienced because, though audience members care for protagonists and wish them only positive outcomes, they worry that they will meet negative ends (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Affective disposition theory (ADT) is often cited as the main explanation for this emotional experience. As applied to suspense, ADT indicates that media users want positive outcomes for protagonists and negative outcomes for antagonists, and that our enjoyment of suspense-evoking narratives is a direct result of the characters achieving these desired outcomes. Research on suspense has seemed to support these notions.

More suspense is experienced when the main characters are liked than when they are disliked (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Vorderer, Knobloch, & Schramm, 2001), and just endings for liked characters do indeed lead to greater enjoyment of suspense-evoking narratives (Madrigal, Bee, Chen, & LaBarge, 2011).

Though originally applied to humor (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), ADT has since been expanded to a number of different genres, including drama and suspense. Raney (2006) has offered six principles that are common across all incarnations of ADT,
regardless of genre. These disposition-based theories: 1) focus on enjoyment of media content 2) are concerned with emotional responses to media content; 3) contend that enjoyment is greatly impacted by media users’ feelings about characters; 4) assert that dispositions toward characters can fall anywhere on a continuum from extremely positive to extremely negative; 5) note that justice is a necessary component; and 6) point to the importance of considering individual differences (such as past experiences and emotional tendencies). In the context of suspense, these propositions mean that our disposition toward characters (on a continuum from extremely positive to extremely negative) impacts our enjoyment of and emotional response to the narrative, and that, in particular, our enjoyment of the narrative overall is greatly impacted by the perceived justice of the outcome. Thus, ADT suggests that feelings toward a character and the perceived justice of their consequences are essential for enjoyment of the suspense experience.

But might there be situations in which a liked protagonist’s well-being is not of primary importance for suspense? Might our experience of suspense and its resulting enjoyment be derived from a different source? Could there even be situations in which we root against protagonists, or at least obtain enjoyment from their failure? Despite the principles laid forth by affective disposition theory concerning the importance of characters and justice for enjoyment (principles 3 and 5 above), it seems likely that the answer to all three of these questions is yes. Two studies will be conducted in an attempt to demonstrate two main ideas: first, that suspense results at least partially from a perceived threat to self as well as a threat to the character; and second, that media users will experience more suspense and enjoyment when a liked protagonist fails and a
disliked antagonist succeeds toward the beginning of a suspenseful narrative (thus suggesting that justice for the protagonist is not always preferred). Theoretical and empirical evidence for these assertions will be provided.

**Suspense**

Before delving into a deeper discussion of affective disposition theory and these possible challenges to it, a basic conceptualization of suspense and an understanding of its enjoyment should be established. One of the earliest conceptualizations of suspense is that developed by Zillmann (1980). He defines suspense as the ambivalent emotional experience that arises when we encounter narrative situations with unknown outcomes that threaten liked protagonists. Thus, we can refer to suspense as an emotional experience, and to the suspense genre as a classification of those narratives that evoke a feeling of suspense. Suspenseful narratives and suspenseful situations within larger narratives are characterized by narrative structures designed to evoke feelings of suspense. According to Zillmann’s view, narratives must meet three criteria in order to evoke suspenseful emotions: 1) the focus must be on potential negative outcomes to narrative situations, rather than positive outcomes; 2) liked protagonists must be vulnerable to these negative outcomes so that the outcomes are feared; and 3) the suspenseful narrative consumer must be relatively certain that the negative outcomes will occur. This conceptualization provides an excellent starting point for a discussion of suspense, because it addresses some of the most central components: liking for the protagonist and relative certainty regarding the likelihood of negative outcomes for that protagonist. These criteria are discussed in more detail below.
Criterion one: Focus must be on negative outcomes. In most suspense-evoking narrative situations, the action is centered on avoiding potentially negative consequences (Zillmann, 1980). The hero must pull himself back over the edge of the cliff to avoid falling to his death; the young woman must escape the clutches of her attacker to avoid injury; the police officer must make it to the train station in time so that a murderer cannot escape. In all of these cases, the focus is on the avoidance of potential negative outcomes. Rarely is suspense created around potentially positive outcomes. That is not to say that this cannot occur. For example, one may feel suspense about who will win the ultimate prize on a game show. The viewer may identify or empathize with the contestant to some extent, leading them to root for that individual’s success. However, this is not common with most media that is considered suspense-evoking. And, it may be argued, hoping for achievement of positive outcomes (as opposed to avoidance of negative outcomes) may not be as suspenseful. Though losing a positive outcome is not desirable, the protagonist still ends up fine. Yes, she may not be one-hundred thousand dollars richer, but she still has her life and her health. A focus on potential negative outcomes for the protagonist likely leads to greater fear and anxiety. If the protagonist is not successful in such a case, he may lose life and limb. So, although we may experience suspense in situations that feature positive potential outcomes, a focus on negative outcomes is far more common and likely leads to greater suspense.

Criterion two: Liked protagonists must be vulnerable. A focus on negative outcomes alone is not enough to evoke suspenseful emotions. If we know nothing about the characters and have no opinion of them one way or another, it is unlikely that we will
care what happens to them. However, if we develop a liking for the main protagonist in a story, we will experience suspense regarding any negative outcomes that might befall him. Affective disposition theory maintains that we derive enjoyment of narratives from our dispositions toward the main characters (Raney, 2011). Research has demonstrated that having a positive affective disposition toward a protagonist leads to greater suspense than a negative affective disposition (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Vorderer et al., 2001), thus supporting the notion that liking a character is important for the experience of suspense.

The question arises as to why liking of characters leads to these feelings of suspense. Why do we hope for positive outcomes and fear negative outcomes for them? Is it because we empathize with them? Or is it because we identify with them? A study by José & Brewer (1984) tested their propositions that: (a) readers will identify more with characters when they perceive greater similarity between themselves and the characters; (b) greater identification leads to more suspense; (c) liking of outcome is a combination of character valence (good or bad character) and outcome valence (positive or negative outcome); and (d) overall liking of story increases with greater identification, greater suspense, and greater liking of outcome. Results of an experiment with children supported these premises, particularly in regard to the older children (approximately 12-years old). These results would indicate that identification with characters leads to feelings of suspense.

However, logically speaking, identification does not seem to be the best explanation for the suspense experienced by media consumers. Zillmann (1980) points
out a central flaw in conceptualizing experience of suspense as identification with the protagonist: if viewers are really feeling the emotions of the protagonist, why would they enjoy such a distressing experience? He refers to this as the paradox of empathy in suspense, and insists that our experience of suspense arises from feeling for the protagonist rather than feeling with the protagonist. While experiencing emotions as though one were the protagonist would be far too distressing for most individuals, having a somewhat more distanced understanding of how they feel would likely produce a level of arousal that is enjoyable without being too aversive. Moderate levels of arousal (even if negative) can be inherently enjoyable, according to the arousal boost theory of suspense enjoyment (Brewer, 1996). Considering research demonstrating that suspense is enjoyable prior to the resolution of a distressing event (e.g., Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975), this is likely the case. This would also explain narrative situations in which the protagonist is unaware of a particular danger, but we feel distress on his/her behalf.

Perhaps the seeming contradiction between Zillmann’s (1980) view and the research cited above (José & Brewer, 1984) stems from participants’ inability to distinguish between feeling with and feeling for a protagonist. The study relied on self-report measures, which means that the researchers were measuring participants’ own conceptualizations of identification to some extent. Participants may have thought they were experiencing emotions as the character, when in reality they were experiencing emotions on behalf of the character. Again, as already mentioned, experiencing emotions as the character would likely lead to unpleasantly high levels of arousal, while
empathizing with the character should allow sufficient distance to enjoy the negatively valenced arousal at a more appropriate level.

An alternative explanation may be that viewers oscillate between identification and a more distanced experience of emotion, so they are experiencing emotions directly at times and more indirectly at others. This seems likely, given research that has examined brain activation while reading about and/or watching the emotional reaction of a character (Zaki, Hennigan, Weber, & Ochsner, 2010). When strong visual cues are present, viewers tend to mirror the character’s emotions. That is, the same regions of the brain involved in one’s own direct emotional experience are activated, leading to a vicarious emotional experience. When these cues are not present, however, brain activity occurs in those regions that research has linked to imagining oneself in hypothetical situations and considering the mental states of others. This means that media users are projecting themselves onto the character and imagining their emotional responses. Suspense-evoking narratives likely provide opportunities for both mirroring and self-projection, meaning an oscillation between direct and indirect experiences of emotion.

**Criterion three: Relative certainty.** Though many suspense researchers believe that uncertainty is essential for suspense (e.g., Carroll, 1996), Zillman (1980) points to the importance of relative certainty regarding negative outcomes to suspense-evoking narrative situations. This is not to say that uncertainty is not necessary; a slight element of uncertainty is indeed essential for suspense. If suspense consumers are 100% certain of the outcome to a narrative situation, they cannot experience suspense. The most
suspense is experienced, however, when a suspense consumer is almost entirely certain of the protagonist’s doom.

Over time, media consumers develop schemas for particular genres, such as suspense. Suspense, as a genre, refers to those narrative structures designed to evoke feelings of suspense. Our suspense schema should tell us that the protagonist in any suspenseful film, television show, or book should ultimately be fine (Mikos, 1996). The character should survive and achieve important goals. A study by Nabi and Clark (2008) supports this notion, finding that viewers expect main characters to survive, despite any adversities they face. However, the suspense creator will do everything possible to chip away at that certainty, making it seem as though the character is in great danger of encountering negative outcomes. So, although we may approach a suspenseful narrative with relative certainty that a protagonist should survive and be triumphant, the events in the narrative should lead us to believe that the protagonist is more likely to meet eventual doom. This means 99% certainty of failure, but the suspense schema helps us cling to that 1% hope that everything will turn out fine. This is also true of situations in which media consumers have experienced a narrative before (Brewer, 1996) or somehow know for certain that a character will survive (such as the main character in a series appearing in future films/seasons/books; Carroll, 1996). In these contexts, the media user might know that the main character will be fine, but the events in the narrative reduce that certainty by imperiling the character whenever possible.

Research has supported this notion of relative certainty in suspense. A study by Comisky and Bryant (1982) found that participants experienced more suspense in a
reading condition when the protagonist’s chances of survival were 1/100 than in the other conditions (0/100, 25/100, 50/100, 100/100), and that suspense was minimal when the outcome was completely certain (i.e., 0/100 and 100/100). This clearly points to the importance of relative (but not complete) certainty. Additionally, Gerrig and Bernardo (1994) found that eliminating possible solutions to a suspenseful situation within a narrative lead to heightened suspense. With each solution that is eliminated, readers should be more certain of the protagonist’s doom and experience more suspense. Both of these studies lend support to the notion that relative certainty of a negative outcome is important in suspense.

**Enjoyment**

Though an understanding of the factors that lead to suspense is important, perhaps the most critical question in regard to suspense is that of enjoyment. After all, despite the discomfort they create, people do consume suspense-evoking narratives for the pleasure they provide. Most broadly, we can define enjoyment as a pleasurable affective response to a stimulus (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). However, the positive evaluations of the narrative leading to that affective response must also be considered. In order to enjoy a narrative, we must respond positively on both cognitive and affective levels (Raney, 2002). On a cognitive level, we must assess the characters and themes within the narrative positively; on an affective level, we must have a positive emotional experience while reading or viewing the narrative. These two elements combined create an entertaining experience.
Suspense-evoking narratives most certainly provide opportunities for enjoyment in terms of both affective response and cognitive assessment. In regard to cognition, enjoyment would result from hypothesizing about what might occur later in the narrative. We generally like to feel that we are intelligent enough to imagine outcomes to the narrative and guess the correct one. Everyone likely remembers a time when they boasted to a friend that they “know” what will occur in a movie before it actually occurs. This exercise alone should be enjoyable. Also, assessing the protagonist as a good and trustworthy individual might be enjoyable as well, separate from any emotional attachment that might be formed. Thus, the cognitive components of the suspense experience should be enjoyable in and of themselves.

Identifying reasons for enjoyment of the emotional component is less straightforward. It might seem paradoxical to enjoy the mixture of positive and negative affect elicited by suspenseful narratives, considering that such an ambivalent emotion creates some discomfort. However, some theorists believe that mild forms of arousal can be intrinsically enjoyable, a view sometimes referred to as the arousal boost hypothesis (Brewer, 1996). Indeed, some have noted the “delicious agony” (Bartholomew, 1977, p. 23) and “sweet pain of anxiety” (Esenwein, 1924, p. 202) elicited by suspenseful narratives. Those supporting the arousal boost hypothesis (e.g., Berlyne, 1971; Hebb, 1955) believe that negative affect can be enjoyable as a mild form of arousal. Viewers expect that dangerous suspense-evoking situations will eventually pass with the protagonist relatively unscathed, so they are able to enjoy the fear as they experience it (Mikos, 1996). Research supports this, in that viewers of suspense do report enjoyment
prior to event resolution (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Zillmann, et al., 1975). This would indicate that the resolution itself is not the only source of enjoyment in suspenseful narratives. However, it should be noted that negatively-valenced arousal can be enjoyable only as long as one is not excessively distressed (Brewer, 1996). For those who do not enjoy suspense, the cause is likely unpleasantly high levels of arousal. At appropriate levels, however, negatively-valenced arousal can be enjoyed.

That, of course, only accounts for the enjoyment of suspense before the resolution of a suspenseful event. Much of the enjoyment of suspense is likely derived from the outcome. Another approach to the enjoyment of suspense (in contrast to the arousal boost hypothesis mentioned above) is the arousal jag hypothesis. This approach suggests that suspense is enjoyed due to the relief experienced after an uncertain event is resolved (Brewer, 1996). As Woodworth (1921) wrote: “The joy of escape more than pays for the momentary unpleasantness of fear” (p. 489). Research regarding the effect of suspenseful situation resolution on enjoyment supports this perspective (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Zillmann et al., 1975). Zillmann (1980) has applied excitation transfer to explain the boost of enjoyment that is experienced post-resolution. According to excitation transfer, the residual negative arousal created during the experience of suspense carries over to the resolution, intensifying emotional reactions to it. The enjoyment of the resolution is therefore increased because of the negative experience preceding it. It seems likely that enjoyment of suspenseful narratives is a
combination of both main explanations; negative arousal in itself can be enjoyable, but the experience of that negative arousal also makes its relief all the more satisfying.

Aside from excitation transfer, another important factor impacts enjoyment of a suspenseful episode’s resolution: morality of the outcome. According to affective disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), we enjoy stories when the characters meet a moral end. That is, we enjoy a narrative most when liked characters meet a positive end and disliked characters meet a negative end, and we enjoy a narrative the least when liked characters meet a negative end and disliked characters meet a positive end. In other words, the perceived justness of the outcome impacts enjoyment. A study with children by José and Brewer (1984) offers some support for this, in that older children (in sixth grade) only enjoyed positive endings for good characters and negative endings for bad characters. Younger children (in second and fourth grade) enjoyed positive endings regardless of character valence, though this is likely attributable to the development of morality in children. Another study by Madrigal et al. (2011) conducted with adults also found support for the preference of just endings. So, although the negative arousal pre-resolution can boost enjoyment post-resolution, this can only occur if the ending is assessed positively. Affective disposition theory provides an explanation regarding how we arrive at such an assessment.
Chapter 2: Study 1

As mentioned in the literature review, threat to liked characters may not be the only factor that impacts suspense. Yes, the formation of emotional dispositions toward characters is an important principle of ADT, but another factor may act as a complement to character threat. Perhaps viewers of suspense might also be concerned about perceived threats to themselves. A study by de Wied, Hoffman, and Roskos-Ewoldsen (1997) provides some support for this notion. Though previous research suggests that we experience suspense due to concern for liked characters, the de Wied et al. study implies that suspense may result at least in part from concern for self. In that study, the researchers either told participants that they were about to view a film clip that contained a high degree of very graphic violence, or a film clip from which all violence had been removed. Though two film clips were used to increase generalizability, the amount of violence in the clips was not actually manipulated. Results showed that simply being warned of graphic violence lead to more distress and fear, in addition to greater suspense for the men. The manipulation did not, however, impact concern for the main protagonist. The findings of this study suggest that a perceived threat to self does play a role in the experience of suspense. Of course, that is not to say that threats to the character are not as important, or that they are even less important than previously thought. Rather, it is likely that both types of threat have an impact on the experience of
suspense and its resulting enjoyment. In this context, we have character-threat (defined as the endangerment of liked protagonists) and self-threat (defined as fear of seeing graphic violence).

Though de Wied et al. (1997) only addressed one type of self-threat, it is likely the concept has more than once facet. For example, one may feel threatened when a similar other is endangered in a narrative. If you can see yourself in a protagonist due to similarity of background, ethnicity, gender, personality, etc., it may be all the more disturbing to you when that character is threatened. Because you feel so similar to them, you may in fact feel threatened yourself. Another type of self-threat might arise from fear of losing a beloved character. If you are particularly attached to a character, either because of a long-term relationship via an ongoing series or simply because you find them to be an attractive character, the idea of losing that bond might be perceived as a threat to self. You may experience this as a sense of threat to your emotional well-being. These are only some of the types of self-threat that might be experienced as a result of narrative events.

The type of self-threat induced by de Wied et al. (1997) can be referred to as personally-disturbing; the manipulation used in the study was intended to elicit anxiety concerning graphic images and extreme violence. The manipulation certainly focused on the creation of anxiety, but through language suggesting that only those who dislike graphic violence would become anxious. Thus, the fear of violence was certainly placed on a more personal level. Even a manipulation such as the one they used, however, might also elicit another type of self-threat: reactance. Though not directly relevant to
the experience of suspense, self-threat from reactance is certainly an important type of self-threat to address in this context. Those who are warned that they could see personally disturbing violence might react against that, feeling anger or frustration at being told how they might feel. They might also react against the notion that they are being forced to watch a film that might be so disturbing to them. In essence, this type of self-threat has much to do with a threat to freedom. In studies that use such a manipulation (as the present study does), reactance against the manipulation should be measured in order to control for that type of threat.

Apart from self-threat, another type of threat can be created through violence forewarning: character-threat. If participants are told that the main character is likely to become involved with violent situations in a film, this should create concern about seeing a liked protagonist in peril. This should not impact their liking of a character, but would increase the amount of worry they experience concerning the character. Thus, it should elevate the level of emotional intensity they experience. This certainly fits in with most conceptualizations of suspense, which point to character-threat as evoking suspenseful emotions (Ortony et al., 1988). Thus, it seems likely that suspense would result from two types of threat: self-threat and character-threat.

To an extent, it may seem difficult to separate self-threat from character-threat. It can be argued that the self-threat described above results from empathy for the character, that the violence is only personally disturbing because we feel for the individuals in a narrative. However, self-threat is not necessarily tied to the characters. We can imagine situations that may be personally disturbing and suspenseful, but that do not really impact
individual characters. For example, a viewer may fear witnessing the destruction of a historical landmark, not because of worry about characters (when the landmark is vacant), but because the viewer has great respect for history. Such a person would experience suspense due to the fear of seeing something personally upsetting, but this event would not impact perceived character-threat. This is not to say that self-threat and character-threat are mutually exclusive; they are likely highly correlated and interrelated. There are many situations in which a greater threat to character can increase perceived threat to self as well. For example, if a beloved character is nearly killed, a viewer may feel threatened at the prospective loss of the character. It is important to consider self-threat and character-threat as individual contributors to threat, however, because they may each be experienced differently according to the narrative and the individual.

It is likely that these two types of threat would impact suspense in the same way. Greater perceived threat, whether to self or character, should increase suspense. In the aforementioned study by de Wied et al. (1997), men reported more suspense when they were forewarned of graphic violence than when they were told that the violence had been removed. Women did not exhibit any differences in suspense across conditions. However, women found the two clips to be generally more suspenseful than men did, suggesting that women’s level of suspense was high enough that the manipulation could not affect it. Most other studies have not uncovered any significant gender differences in experience of suspense (e.g., Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Hoeken & van Vliet, 2000; Vorderer, et al., 2001), so the findings in the de Wied et al. study may have been an artifact of the stimulus or procedures used. Thus, in addition to the expectation that
suspense would be increased by greater character liking, suspense is hypothesized to be higher when participants are forewarned of violence to self and character. It seems probable that threat (both to self and character) and liking will have their own main effect on suspense, due to previous research that has found such effects (liking: Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Vorderer, et al., 2001; violence forewarning: de Wied et al., 1997). The first two hypotheses address these potential effects:

**H1:** Those who like the main protagonist in a suspenseful narrative will experience more suspense than those who do not like the main protagonist in a suspenseful narrative.

**H2:** Those who receive self-threatening or character-threatening information before viewing a suspenseful narrative will experience more suspense than those who do not receive such information.

Additionally, because greater suspense is generally associated with more enjoyment via excitation transfer, suspense is proposed as a mediator of the relationship between character liking and enjoyment, as well as the relationship between violence forewarning and enjoyment.

**H3:** Those who like the main protagonist in a suspenseful narrative will experience more suspense than those who do not like the main protagonist in a suspenseful narrative, which in turn will result in greater enjoyment.

**H4:** Those who receive self-threatening or character-threatening information before viewing a suspenseful narrative will experience more suspense than those...
who do not receive such information, which in turn will result in greater enjoyment.

Because these two types of threat have never been explored in relation to one another, it is important to examine how they might impact concern for the character. As mentioned above, two of the most commonly cited ways of relating to a character are through identification and liking. Past research has demonstrated the importance of these two elements for suspense (e.g., José & Brewer, 1984; Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006), supporting the notion that greater amounts of each lead to more suspense. But how might perceived threat to self and threat to character affect experience of these two factors? Self-threatening violence should not have much impact on identification or character liking, because that type of threat does not specifically reference the main character. Viewers may rightly assume that violence in the film will involve the main character, but this is not guaranteed by the self-threat. Thus, if self-threat had such an impact on perception of the main character, it should not be as strong as the impact of character-threatening violence.

The impact of character-threat, though, is a little more complicated. It seems possible that character-threat could reduce identification and liking, due to self-preservation motivations. If a viewer is warned about danger to a character in a film (thus creating a sense of fear), they may try to distance themselves from the character in an effort to avoid greater distress when the character meets violence. In this sense, they are trying to protect themselves from greater distress than necessary. Research has shown that receiving information about a character prior to consuming a narrative can
impact viewers’ identification with that character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), suggesting that online experiences like identification and liking can indeed be influenced by manipulations. Though they used positive and negative character information (rather than threat of violence) to either increase or decrease identification with the main character, it still serves an illustrative purpose.

That being said, it also seems possible that character-threatening violence might not affect identification or character liking. Though viewers might want to like a character less or identify less in order to protect themselves from greater distress, these types of relationships with the character should be fairly automatic and uncontrollable. You cannot force yourself to dislike characters or not understand their viewpoint simply because you do not want to do so. Given these two competing explanations, the impact of character-threat on identification and character liking is represented by two research questions:

**RQ 1:** Will those who receive character-threatening information before viewing a suspenseful narrative experience less identification with the main protagonist than those who do not receive character-threatening information?

**RQ 2:** Will those who receive character-threatening information before viewing a suspenseful narrative experience less liking of the main protagonist than those who do not receive character-threatening information?

Another interesting narrative engagement factor to explore is transportation. Transportation, a term originally coined by Gerrig (1993), has been defined as absorption into a story. It is called transportation because we “leave” our world and are transported
to that of the story. As developed by Green and Brock (2000), transportation consists of three components: attention, mental imagery, and emotional response. The first component entails a loss of access to the real world. When we are fully focused on a narrative, we do not notice any occurrences in our surrounding environment (the physical level of attention) and no extraneous thoughts enter our mind (the psychological level of attention). Mental imagery, the second component, involves the extent to which the viewer is able to imagine the events in the narrative actually taking place. Finally, emotional response to the narrative can mean empathy with characters or just general emotional response to the message themes.

Suspenseful narratives have the power to invoke all three dimensions of transportation. One can focus all of their attention on, imagine narrative events in, and respond emotionally to suspenseful narratives. In fact, because suspense pulls in readers through empathy with characters in perilous situations (Zillmann, 1991), it seems uniquely suited to transport readers. The question remains, however, about how self-threat might impact transportation into the narrative. Arguments can be made for graphic violence forewarning both increasing and decreasing transportation. The self-threat created by such forewarning may cause a greater focus on the film, due to the worry and hypothesizing about moments of violence. This greater focus should increase transportation, due to the concentration of mental energy on the narrative. However, the same self-preservation argument made above for identification (in regard to self-threat) might also apply to transportation. If we fear viewing violent occurrences in a film (whether character-directed or not), we might intentionally try to pull ourselves away in
hopes of reducing our distress. Because both of these explanations appear to be comparable, the effect of self-threat on transportation will be explored via a research question:

**RQ3:** How will forewarning of graphic violence (whether self-threatening or character-threatening) affect transportation into a suspenseful narrative?

Finally, the notion of threat as a factor in suspense will be explored in relation to character liking. The different contributions that threat and character liking might make to the suspense experience are important to explore, in order to further clarify threat as a potential complement to the principles of ADT. Because the manipulation in the de Wied et al. (1997) study only focused on creating selfish concerns, we do not know how graphic violence forewarning might add to or interact with character liking to produce suspense and enjoyment.

Considering previous research on these two factors (self-threat and character liking), main effects seem quite likely. However, might they also interact with one another? When viewers are not informed of violence in a suspenseful film, old patterns should hold true. That is, more suspense will be experienced when the main protagonist is liked than when not liked. But, if viewers are warned of personally-disturbing violence (as they were in the de Wied et al. study), it seems likely that their concern for self would override their concern for that character. This could have much to do with limitations on the fictional bond. Though we may care deeply for a character, we recognize that they are not real. Our concern for character should not be as strong as the concern we feel for ourselves. When we are threatened by both danger to self and danger to character, it is
likely that fear for self should be more important. This is true of personally-disturbing violence threat (as will be addressed in this study), as well as the other types of self-threat mentioned above (i.e., endangerment of similar others, fear of losing a beloved character, and reactance). Any element that creates a sense of threat to self (a real, meaningful person) should be greater than those elements creating a sense of threat to fictional characters. Thus, we would encounter a significant difference in levels of suspense between the liked and disliked conditions when participants are not warned of violence, but a forewarning of personally-disturbing violence should produce roughly the same high levels of suspense regardless of character liking. In other words, the threat to self generated by the violence forewarning should override the impact of character liking on suspense. Thus, this moderating effect of personally-disturbing violence forewarning is proposed:

**H5:** Self-threat will moderate the relationship between character liking and experience of suspense, such that those who like the main protagonist and receive self-threatenining information before viewing a suspenseful narrative will experience the most suspense.

As for the other type of threat, character-threat (i.e., danger that impacts a liked protagonist), this moderating effect seems unlikely. Whereas the threat of personally-disturbing violence should increase suspense to the same level regardless of character liking (because that type of violence is not necessarily relevant to the character), character-threat should serve to increase suspense even more when the main protagonist
is liked. Thus, character-threat and character liking should have more of an additive effect on suspense.

**Method**

A 3 x 3 experiment (violence forewarning x character liking) was conducted to examine the impact of violence forewarning and character liking on experience with a narrative. Before viewing a film clip, participants completed a pretest with a number of potential covariates and were provided with information about the film clip. This information included a violence forewarning and details about the main character. In regard to the violence forewarning, participants were either forewarned of self-threatening violence, character-threatening violence, or they did not receive any violence forewarning. To manipulate character liking, participants received positive information about the main character, negative information about the main character, or neutral information about the main character. Crossing these variables resulted in a total of nine different instruction sets. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these nine instructions sets before viewing one of three randomly-assigned 20-minute film clips. Participants then completed a posttest that included all scales of interest (identification, liking, transportation, suspense, and enjoyment).

**Participants.** A total of 343 communication undergraduates completed the study (gender: 50.1% female; age: $M = 20.14$, $SD = 2.33$). Participants were evenly distributed among the nine conditions and three different films.

**Stimuli.** Three 20-minute suspenseful film segments were utilized for the experiment. All three films matched the following criteria: they were suspenseful,
contained a moderate amount of violence, and had somewhat ambiguous main characters. If they were completely non-violent, participants who were forewarned of violence might have felt cheated and exhibited a reactance effect. The main characters were somewhat ambiguous so that the positive and negative character information was believable. If the character seemed like a truly good person, then any negative information provided would likely not have seemed credible. Also, the films were fairly obscure. The manipulations would not have the intended effect if participants already knew whether or not the film they watched is actually violent, or if they were already familiar with the characters.

The first of the three films is a murder mystery called *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. In this film, a private eye, a thief posing as an actor, and a struggling actress work together to solve the murder of a young girl. The film contains scenes of violence and action, as well as slower moments of character development and case discussion. The clip contained a balance of these elements in order to maintain a coherent storyline in the 20-minute clip.

The second film, *Brick*, is also somewhat of a murder mystery. In *Brick*, a high school student named Brendan discovers that his girlfriend has been killed. Rather than reporting her death to the police, he decides to hide her body and investigate her murder on his own. As was the case with the first film, this clip contained a balance of violent and non-violent elements in order to maintain a coherent storyline in the 20-minute clip.

Finally, the third film is a thriller called *Witness*. In this film, a Philadelphia police officer must protect a young Amish boy who has witnessed a murder. When the officer learns that the murder was committed by corrupt cops who are now after himself
and the boy, they go into hiding in the Amish family’s home. Participants viewed some introductory narrative to gain background knowledge and familiarity with the characters, and then they watched the suspenseful ending of the film.

**Manipulations.** Before viewing one of the three film clips, participants were provided with one of nine randomly-assigned instruction sets. These nine instruction sets were formed by crossing three types of violence forewarning (personally-threatening violence, character-threatening violence, or no violence) with three types of character information (positive information, negative information, or neutral information).

In terms of violence, all participants were told that the film they were to watch was rated ‘R’. In the no violence forewarning conditions, participants only received a few general facts about the film that did not pertain to the level or type of violence. For those in the self-threat violence conditions, participants were told that the film clip contained a high amount of graphic violence that may be personally disturbing to them. They were also told that others have found the violence upsetting enough to discontinue viewing. Those in the character-threat conditions received a warning that the main character was to be endangered and potentially harmed often throughout the film clip. They were also informed that this threat to character may be upsetting. These instruction sets were the same for all three film clips.

Character liking was manipulated through the provision of positive, negative, or neutral information about the main character in the film. This information took the form of details about the character’s personality and general morality. To use the film *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* as an example, participants in all conditions were provided with the
following information: “The film clip you will watch is about a man named Harry Lockhart. While in Los Angeles to audition for a detective film, he stumbles onto a real life murder. With the help of an old friend and a private detective, he works toward solving the murder.” This is the only information provided to those in the neutral information condition. They are basic facts about the narrative, and should not have made the character seem positive or negative in nature. In addition to this information, those in the positive information condition were told that “Harry is intelligent, driven, and loyal to his friends. He is the type of person who will stop at nothing to help his friends when they need him.” Those in the negative information will be told that “Harry is dishonest, selfish, and rude. He is the type of person who will take advantage of others, even his friends, for his own personal gain.” The character information provided for the other two films is similar, but tailored to the specific content of their narratives.

In order to cement these instructions in the minds of participants, they were presented on the computer screen and read to participants (via a voiceover) just prior to viewing the film clip. Manipulation checks given after the film clip served as a test of their effectiveness.

**Procedure.** Upon arrival at the lab, participants were seated at individual computers to complete the experiment using Qualtrics, an online survey site. Qualtrics randomly assigned participants to receive one of the nine instruction sets and one of the three films described above. The experiment included three phases: a pretest, the 20-minute film clip, and a posttest. For the pretest, participants completed a number of control measures (such as transportability and need for affect). They then received their
instructions and viewed one of three randomly-assigned film clips, which were stopped three times during suspenseful scenes so that participants could quickly rate their current levels of hope, fear, suspense, and enjoyment on single 7-point items. The stop-points were determined based on events in the film clip, so that suspense was measured at moments when their level of arousal should have been quite high (e.g., just prior to suspenseful event resolution) or quite low (e.g., just after suspenseful event resolution). This allowed us to examine how the violence and character liking manipulations might have impacted suspense at these points. Finally, after viewing the clip, participants completed a posttest measuring identification, character liking, transportation, suspense, enjoyment, experience with the film they viewed, and a manipulation check.

**Measurements.**

**Demographics.** In order to control for age, gender, and race as potential covariates, items on the questionnaire assessed these variables.

**Trait transportability.** An established, 20-item trait transportability scale from Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong (2004) was administered to measure how easily and regularly participants are transported into stories \((M = 4.90, SD = .65, \alpha = .85)\). This trait transportability scale has been supported as a reliable predictor of transportive experiences (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). Controlling for trait transportability should eliminate any differences that might arise between participants who are not usually absorbed into narratives and those who are. Items include “When watching movies for pleasure, I find myself accepting events that I might have otherwise considered unrealistic” and “When watching movies for pleasure, I can easily envision myself in the
events described in a story.” Responses to all items were indicated on 7-point scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

**Need for affect.** It is possible that those who have a tendency to approach and enjoy emotions would react differently to the violence forewarning and character liking manipulation than those who do have such tendencies. Those who are high in need for affect should be more likely to focus on the narrative and enjoy it when they are warned of violence and have a higher concern for self. Additionally, those who enjoy experiencing emotions may have a greater tendency to connect emotionally with liked characters in a narrative. Therefore, Maio and Esses’ (2001) 26-item need for affect scale was administered prior to film viewing in order to control for it as a covariate. The scale includes two subscales: those items measuring tendency to approach emotions (e.g., “I think that it is important to explore my feelings”; \( M = 3.33, SD = .58, \alpha = .87 \)) and those items measuring tendency to avoid emotions (e.g., “I find strong emotions overwhelming and therefore try to avoid them”; \( M = 2.60, SD = .64, \alpha = .88 \)). Responses to all items were indicated on 7-point scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

**Trait empathy.** The tendency to empathize with others was measured via the 7-item empathic concern scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980; \( M = 5.03, SD = .84, \alpha = .78 \)). Trait empathy could likely prove useful as a covariate, given that those higher in tendency to empathize might put others over self. This scale is intended to tap individuals’ propensity to feel sympathy and compassion for others. Items include “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than I am” and “When someone gets hurt in my presence, I feel sad and want to help them.”
Responses were provided on 7-point scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

**Familiarity with/preference for suspense.** The last set of items on the pretest measured familiarity with and preference for various genres, with suspense being the particular genre of interest. For a list of ten genres, participants were asked to indicate (on seven-point scales from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) how familiar they are with each genre (i.e., “I am familiar with genre X”) and how much they like each genre (i.e., “I enjoy genre X”). Overall, participants reported that they were familiar with \((M = 5.57, SD = 1.28)\) and enjoy \((M = 5.65, SD = 1.25)\) suspense.

**Suspense.** After viewing the film, suspense was measured using a six-item scale developed by Knobloch, Patzig, Mende, and Hastall (2004). Participants were asked to rate how exciting, thrilling, and gripping the film was, in addition to how expectant, excited, and in suspense they felt while viewing it \((M = 4.88, SD = 1.18, \alpha = .90)\). All items were measured on seven-point scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

Additionally, a few items were included in order to examine how the manipulations might have impacted other components of the suspense process. To be more specific, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on seven-point scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7) for the following statements: “I found myself trying to guess what would happen later in the story,” “At various points in the film, I felt certain that the protagonist would fail in the end,” and “I felt emotional discomfort while viewing.” These questions allowed exploration of suspense from
different angles than those addressed in the scale from Knobloch et al. (2004). Because these items did not hang together well with the items in the suspense scale, they were analyzed separately.

Finally, suspense was measured via a single item at three points throughout the film in order to examine fluctuations in suspense that might have resulted from narrative changes. The film was stopped briefly, and participants quickly indicated their suspense on a 7-point scale before continuing. The film was stopped first toward the beginning, just after the characters were introduced (stop-point 1), just before resolution of the main conflict in the film (stop-point 2), and finally at the end of the film (stop-point 3). Suspense at these points followed a fairly predictable pattern, with the highest suspense level reported just before resolution of the main conflict in each film ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.41$), the second highest toward the beginning of the film ($M = 5.00, SD = 1.43$), and the lowest reported after the end of the film ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.78$).

Additionally, to capture the two dominant emotions typically associated with suspense, participants were asked to report their current level of hope and fear on 7-point scales at each of the three stop-points. These two items did not hang together well for any of the points of measurement. On the contrary, there was a significant difference between hope and fear at two of the three stop-points. These differences fall into an interesting pattern. There was no significant difference in hope and fear at the first stop point (hope: $M = 3.51, SD = 1.49$; fear: $M = 3.65, SD = 1.56$; $t (339) = -1.21$, ns; $r = .05$, $p = .32$), but there was significantly more fear than hope just before resolution of the main conflict (hope: $M = 3.80, SD = 1.71$; fear: $M = 4.16, SD = 1.76$; $t (342) = -2.87$, $p < .01$).
.01; \( r = .12, p < .05 \) and significantly more hope than fear at the end of the film (hope: \( M = 4.34, SD = 1.78 \); fear: \( M = 3.23, SD = 1.64 \); \( t \)(340) = 8.07, \( p < .001 \); \( r = -.11, p < .05 \)).

Given what is known about suspense, this pattern is not altogether surprising.

**Transportation.** Transportation was measured using 11 adapted general items from Green and Brock’s (2000) 15-item transportation scale (\( M = 3.88, SD = .76, \alpha = .72 \)). These questions included, “The narrative affected me emotionally,” and “I was mentally involved in the narrative while watching the film.” Responses were indicated on seven-point scales, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

**Enjoyment.** Enjoyment was measured after exposure using Bowman and Tamborini’s (2008) nine-item enjoyment scale, with responses indicated on seven-point Likert-type scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). Items included “I enjoyed watching this film” and “I would recommend this film to a friend” (\( M = 4.37, SD = 1.41, \alpha = .95 \)).

Additionally, enjoyment was measured via a single item at three different points throughout the film in order to examine fluctuations in enjoyment that might have resulted from narrative changes. The film was stopped briefly, and participants quickly indicated their enjoyment on a 7-point Likert scale before continuing. Enjoyment was higher just before the main conflict resolution (i.e., the second stop-point) than it was toward the beginning of the film clip (i.e., the first stop-point) (first stop-point: \( M = 4.46, SD = 1.54 \); second stop-point: \( M = 4.87, SD = 1.63 \); \( t \)(339) = -6.51, \( p < .001 \)), but there was no significant difference between the second and third stop-points (second stop-point: \( M = 4.89, SD = 1.62 \); third stop-point: \( M = 4.85, SD = 1.71 \); \( t \)(340) = .86, \( ns \)).
third stop-point (i.e., the end of the film clip) was rated as more enjoyable than the first stop-point (first stop-point: $M = 4.46, SD = 1.54$; third stop-point: $M = 4.83, SD = 1.72$; $t(337) = -5.30, p < .001$).

Identification. Identification was measured using 8 of the 10 items from Cohen’s (2001) identification scale ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.15$, $\alpha = .91$). The two items measuring absorption were not used, as they overlap too substantially with the concept of transportation. Questions included “While viewing the film, I wanted the main character to succeed in achieving his goals” and “I was able to understand the events in the story in a manner similar to that in which the main character understood them.” Seven-point scales were used, with responses ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

Character liking. To examine whether the violence forewarning manipulation had any impact on perception of the main character, a few items assessed character liking. Other studies on character liking in suspense (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2007) have measured it with a single item (i.e., “How likeable was the main character?”). This question was rephrased as a statement (i.e., “The main character was likeable”) with which participants indicated their level of agreement on a scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). Additionally, participants were asked to rate their agreement (on seven-point scales) with two additional statements: “I was concerned about the character while viewing,” and “I wished that good things would happen to the main character.” Due to an error in experiment programming, the third one
of these items had to be thrown out, leaving a two-item measurement of character liking 
\( (M = 4.95, SD = 1.23, \alpha = .72) \).

**Frustration/anger.** It is possible that participants could have experienced 
frustration or anger when they realized they had been deceived about the level of violence 
in the film clip. In order to measure and control for this, participants were asked to 
indicate their agreement with three items on seven-point scales: “I was frustrated when I 
saw more/less violence than I expected,” “I was upset because I felt deceived about the 
amount of violence in the film,” and “The presence of more/less violence than anticipated 
throughout the film made me mad” \( (M = 2.92, SD = 1.40, \alpha = .93) \).

**State anxiety.** In order to assess the degree to which participants experienced 
anxiety while viewing the film clip, eight items from Turner, Rimal, Morrison, and 
Hyojin (2006) were administered \( (M = 3.69, SD = 1.42, \alpha = .95) \). These items asked 
participants to report on 7-point scales the extent to which they felt worried, anxious, 
nervous, terrified, panicked, scared, fearful, and frightened while viewing the film clip.

**Reactance.** It is possible that informing participants of potential violence in the 
film could have created a reactance effect, particularly if they were warned of personally 
disturbing violence. Some of those who enjoy violence may even have taken such a 
warning as a challenge, thus inducing them to become defensive. In order to control for 
this possible difference, participants responded to three items adapted from Moyer-Gusé 
and Nabi (2010). The items used in that study focused on possible reactance in regard to 
a television show, so the items were altered to apply to the manipulations used in this 
study \( (M = 3.18, SD = 1.56, \alpha = .95) \). Items in this scale include “The instructions given
before the film clip tried to manipulate me,” “The instructions given before the film clip tried to pressure me to think a certain way,” and “The instructions given before the film clip tried to force an opinion on me,” and were answered on 7-point Likert scales from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

**Experience with film.** In order to control for impact of prior exposure to the film, participants were asked whether they had ever seen the film before, how many times they had seen it, and when they last saw it. Out of all participants, only six individuals had seen the film to which they were randomly assigned. These participants’ responses were excluded from analyses.

**Manipulation checks.** Participants were asked about their perceived threat to self and perceived threat to the character while viewing in order to assess whether the violence forewarnings had the intended effect. They were asked to rate their perceived threat on a total of four items: two items for self-threat ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.73$, $\alpha = .88$) and two items for character-threat ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.68$, $\alpha = .86$). To assess self-threat, the manipulation check included an item similar to that used by de Wied et al. (1997), which asked participants “Were you scared that you might see something that you did not want to see?” Rather than asking it as a yes or no question, participants were provided with the statement “I was worried that I might see something I did not want to see” and asked to indicate their level of agreement using a 7-point scale. Asking the question in this way allowed for any shades of gray that might exist. Additionally, participants also indicated their agreement (on a 7-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) with the following statement: “I was concerned that the violence in the film might be personally
disturbing to me.” To tap into character-threat, participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements “I was worried that the main character would meet a negative end” and “I was concerned that the main character would be in a lot of danger throughout the film.” Responses to these questions helped evaluate whether graphic violence forewarning did indeed increase perceived threat to self while viewing. In order to check the effectiveness of the character liking manipulation, the liking scale mentioned above was used.

Results

In this study, a 3 x 3 experiment with three different stimuli was conducted in order to explore the impact of self-threat, character-threat, and character liking on experience of suspense. Before testing any hypotheses or research questions, ANCOVAs were performed to analyze whether the manipulations were successful. The character liking manipulation was tested using an ANCOVA with three covariates: empathy, tendency to approach emotions, and enjoyment of the film. Empathy was included as a covariate in order to control for those with a propensity to feel sympathy and compassion for others, which would likely lead them to empathize more with the main character. Similarly, tendency to approach emotions was included to explore whether those who enjoy experiencing emotions in general may have a greater tendency to connect emotionally with liked characters in a narrative. Finally, enjoyment was included to ensure that liking of the film was not confounded with liking of the character. The ANCOVA revealed that those in the positive ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.29$) information conditions did like the main character more than those in the negative ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.29$) conditions.
1.14) information conditions, $F(1, 252) = 6.36, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .025$, though there was no significant difference in liking between the negative ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.13$) and neutral ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.28$) information conditions, $F(1, 251) = 2.97, p = .09$ or the neutral ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.28$) and positive ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.29$) information conditions, $F(1, 252) = 1.21, p = .27$. Because we are interested in less liking vs. more liking, this indicates that the liking manipulation was successful in this regard.

A series of ANCOVAs were conducted to test the threat manipulations’ impact on both self-threat and character-threat perceptions. Preference for suspense and frustration/anger were included as covariates in each analysis. Preference for suspense was included as a covariate to control for those who might enjoy the threat produced by the manipulation, while frustration/anger was included to control for those who may have been upset by the manipulation’s violence deception. Unfortunately, none of these tests were significant. The average reported self-threat was relatively similar across groups (self-threat: $M = 3.57, SD = 1.66$; character-threat: $M = 3.58, SD = 1.79$; no threat: $M = 3.33, SD = 1.75$) and did not prove to be significantly different between groups, $F(2, 335) = .89, p = .41$. In regard to character threat, the reported concern for characters was roughly the same across character-threat conditions (self-threat: $M = 3.97, SD = 1.64$; character-threat: $M = 4.00, SD = 1.75$; no threat: $M = 3.77, SD = 1.66$) and was not significantly different between conditions, $F(2, 335) = .61, p = .54$.

Despite the limitations of the manipulations, the hypotheses and research questions were tested as planned. ANCOVAs were conducted to test the two hypotheses that predicted experience of suspense (i.e., H1 and H2), as well as the three research
questions examining identification, liking, and transportation (i.e., RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3). For the two mediation hypotheses (i.e., H3 and H4) and one moderation hypothesis (i.e., H5), Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macro was used. The same covariates from the manipulation checks above were used in the following relevant analyses. In other words, empathy, tendency to approach emotions, and enjoyment were used as covariates in tests involving character liking, and preference for suspense and frustration/anger were used in all tests involving threat. For all analyses involving suspense, we used both the six-item suspense scale from Knobloch et al. (2004) (administered after the film clip) and the single-item suspense measures (administered three times throughout the film clip). The effects on the stop-points mirrored the effects found on the suspense scale, so these stop-point results are not reported in-text. Instead, they are available in Appendix A (Tables A.3, A.4, and A.5). Results for each hypothesis and research question are detailed below.

Hypothesis 1 posited that those who liked the main protagonist in the film would experience more suspense than those who did not like the main protagonist in the film. ANCOVAs were conducted with empathy, tendency to approach emotions, and film enjoyment as covariates. The ANCOVA with character information condition (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral information provided prior to viewing the film clip) as a predictor did not yield significant results, $F(2, 337) = 1.78, p = .17$, nor did the comparison between only the positive information versus negative information conditions, $F(1, 254) = .80, p = .37$. Because manipulated character liking did not affect suspense as predicted, measured character liking (originally included as a manipulation check) was used as a predictor to explore whether it might be significantly associated
with suspense. When performing this regression with the same covariates and self-reported character liking as predictors, greater liking of character did indeed significantly predict greater suspense ($b = .16, p < .001$; Table A.3). This would indicate that the character information manipulation was not strong enough to produce the intended results, though it still provides support for the notion that greater liking is associated with more suspense.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that those who received self-threatening or character-threatening information before viewing the film clip would experience more suspense than those who did not receive any threatening information. An ANCOVA with suspense preference and frustration/anger as covariates was conducted. The ANCOVA did not reveal any significant difference between the two threat conditions ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.11$) and the no threat condition ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.31$) on suspense, $F(1, 337) = 2.83, p = .09$. Because the manipulations did not have the expected affect on suspense, measured self-threat and character-threat (originally intended as manipulation checks) were used as predictors in two regressions in the hopes of uncovering significant relationships. Self-threat and character-threat were each used as predictors of the six-item suspense scale, as well as the single-item measures of suspense at the three different stop-points (Tables A.4 and A.5). Self-threat perception ($b = .16, p < .001$) and character-threat perception ($b = .19, p < .001$) had significant positive effects on the suspense scale. In other words, greater self-threat and character-threat were associated with more suspense. As with hypothesis 1, measured experience of the manipulations tended to serve as better
predictors than the manipulations themselves. Also in this case, the data provide support for our prediction that greater threat is associated with more suspense.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that suspense would mediate the relationship between character liking and enjoyment, such that those who liked the main protagonist in the film would experience more suspense than those who did not like the main character in the film, which in turn would result in greater enjoyment. This notion was tested with the aforementioned PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012). Using a 5000 sample bootstrap estimate, the indirect effect of liking on enjoyment is considered significant if the 95% confidence interval does not include zero (Hayes, 2009). Once again, empathy and tendency to approach emotions were used as covariates. The character liking manipulation’s lack of success in hypothesis 1 makes it clear that it would be an ineffective predictor in this mediation. Indeed, that was the case when the test was conducted (95% CI: -.16 to .15). Though suspense was significantly associated with enjoyment \( (b = .98, p < .001) \), character liking did not significantly predict suspense \( (b = -.002, p = .98) \). Using self-reported liking as the predictor, however, led to significant results (95% CI: .40 to .60; Figure A.1). Self-reported liking significantly predicted suspense \( (b = .61, p < .001) \), and suspense in turn predicted enjoyment \( (b = .83, p < .001) \). Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported with the self-report measure of liking.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that suspense would mediate the relationship between threat and enjoyment, such that the provision of threat information (both self- and character-threatening) would lead to greater suspense, which in turn would result in greater enjoyment. The same method from hypothesis 3 was used to test the relationship
between threat and enjoyment with suspense as a mediator. Preference for suspense and frustration/anger were used as covariates. The threat manipulation’s lack of success suggests that it would not be an effective predictor in this mediation. Once again, analyses demonstrated this to be true (95% CI: -.05 to .48). Suspense significantly predicted enjoyment ($b = .97, p < .001$), but the threat manipulation did not predict suspense ($b = .22, p = .09$). However, the results were consistent with the proposed mediation when using perceived threat rather than experimental condition. The 5000 sample bootstrap estimated confidence interval did not include zero when using self-threat as a predictor (95% CI: .06 to .23; Figure A.2) or when using character-threat as a predictor (95% CI: .10 to .27; Figure A.3), indicating that their indirect effect on enjoyment is significant. Additionally, self-threat ($b = .16, p < .001$) and character-threat ($b = .19, p < .001$) predicted suspense, which in turn predicted enjoyment for both cases ($b = .97, p < .001$ and $b = .96, p < .001$, respectively). This supports the notion that greater perceived threat indirectly increases enjoyment through suspense.

Character liking, self-threat, and character-threat were all included as predictors in a single regression to explore how each contributes to suspense (Table A.6). All covariates from the previous tests (i.e., preference for suspense, frustration/anger, empathy, NFA approach, and enjoyment) were included in this analysis as well. Results demonstrated that, when analyzed together, only character liking served as a significant predictor of suspense ($b = .15, p < .001$). Self-threat ($b = .02, p = .61$) and character-threat ($b = .02, p = .45$) were still positively associated with suspense, but these
relationships were not significant. This suggests that character liking is a much stronger predictor of suspense than either self-threat or character-threat.

Research question 1 asked whether those who received character-threatening information would experience less identification with the main character than those who did not receive such information. An ANCOVA was conducted with preference for suspense and frustration/anger as covariates. When comparing those who received character-threatening information to those who received self-threatening information or no threatening information via an ANCOVA, there is no significant difference on identification, $F(2, 336) = .14, p = .87$. However, when using measured character-threat as a predictor in a regression, there is a significant increase in identification ($b = .20, p < .001$; Table A.8). Self-threat perception was also associated with more identification ($b = .14, p < .001$; Table A.7). Thus, the more participants felt they or the main character was threatened, the more they tended to identify with the main character.

Research question 2 asked whether those who received character-threatening information would experience less liking of the main character than those who did not receive such information. We conducted an ANCOVA preference for suspense and frustration/anger as covariates. Once again, the character-threat manipulation was unsuccessful, $F(2, 336) = 1.20, p = .30$. However, as with research question 1, measured character-threat was a significant regression predictor ($b = .28, p < .001$; Table A.8), indicating that greater perceived threat to character is associated with more liking of that character. Also, self-threat perception ($b = .24, p < .001$) significantly predicted liking of
the main character as well. Thus, both types of threat were positively associated with liking of the main character.

Research question 3 asked how threatening information (both self-threatening and character-threatening) might affect transportation into the narrative. We performed an ANCOVA with preference for suspense, frustration/anger, and transportability as covariates. Transportability was added to eliminate any differences that might arise between participants who are not usually absorbed into narratives and those who are. Because this is the only analysis involving transportation, transportability is only relevant in this context. The manipulations themselves were ineffective at predicting transportation, $F(2, 335) = .14, p = .87$. In individual regressions, however, greater transportation was predicted by self-threat perception ($b = .13, p < .001$; Table A.7) and character-threat perception ($b = .16, p < .001$; Table A.8). This indicates that those who perceived a greater threat to themselves and the main character tended to be more absorbed in the narrative.

Finally, hypothesis 5 posited that self-threat would moderate the relationship between character liking and experience of suspense, such that those who liked the main protagonist and received self-threatening information before viewing the narrative would experience the most suspense. A number of covariates were included in the analyses: tendency to approach emotions, empathy, enjoyment, frustration/anger, and preference for suspense. Given the ineffectiveness of the manipulations, it is no surprise that they produced insignificant results in the moderation (Figure A.4). Liking ($b = -.01, p = .90$), threat ($b = .03, p = .68$), and the interaction between the two ($b = -.01, p = .83$) failed to
predict suspense. Additionally, self-reported character liking and measured threat to self and character did not interact significantly. Liking significantly predicted suspense ($b = .20, p < .01$), but measured threat ($b = .11, p = .22$) and the interaction between liking and threat ($b = -.01, p = .41$) did not. Thus, hypothesis 5 was clearly unsupported.

**Discussion**

In order to examine how they impact the suspense experience, character liking and perceived threat to self and character were manipulated before participants viewed a suspenseful film clip. Though the manipulations themselves were unsuccessful, self-reported character liking and perceived threat were positively associated with suspense. Additionally, suspense mediated enjoyment for both liking and threat. Results also indicate that greater perceived threat to character actually increases identification with and liking of that character. Threat to self and a combination of self- and character-threat also significantly increased character liking. Contrary to expectations, however, threat and character liking did not interact to produce higher levels of suspense. Overall, support for the five hypotheses and three research questions is somewhat mixed. A detailed discussion of these results follows.

To some extent, the manipulation of character liking was successful. Those who received positive character information liked the main character more than those who received negative character information. The lack of significant difference between negative and neutral information is less important, given that primary interest was in the suspense experience for those who liked the protagonist more and those who liked him less. Still, it demonstrates that negative information did not have a greater impact on
character liking than neutral information in this case. This might indicate the difficulty of manipulating dislike for a character with such a brief manipulation script. To create stronger manipulations, it may have been helpful to include more positive or negative details about the main character. However, this may have created a longer description in the positive and negative conditions than in the neutral conditions. Additionally, conveying the information interpersonally might have been more effective than the text with voiceover delivery method. Comisky and Bryant (1982) successfully manipulated liking through the provision of character information, but the film clip they used was only about seven minutes long. This indicates that this study might have benefitted from shorter video clips. Despite these limitations, the takeaway point is that liking was affected to some extent by supplying positive or negative details about the main characters in the films.

Although the liking manipulation appears to have worked in this regard, there were no significant differences in suspense between those who received positive information and those who received negative information. It is likely the manipulations were not strong enough; a few sentences before the beginning of a film were not enough to securely form participants’ opinions of the main character, which would have been influenced throughout the 20-minute film clip. This film clip influence created degrees of liking, not simply “positive” or “negative” opinions. As stated previously, ADT focuses on disposition toward characters on a continuum from extremely positive to extremely negative (Raney, 2006). Separating participants into groups of those who were manipulated to like the protagonist more and those who were manipulated to like him less
may have revealed significant differences in measured liking, but there was great variation on liking within these groups (positive information $SD = 1.29$, negative information $SD = 1.14$). Thus, when using the groups as a predictor of suspense, the differences in liking between individuals in the groups created too much noise to reveal a significant result. When, however, the more sensitive predictor of measured liking was used, this noise was eliminated. Each individual did not have to be grouped with others who may have been in the same manipulation condition but did not necessarily feel the exact same way about the protagonist. Thus, measured liking was able to reveal a positive effect of liking on suspense.

Though the hypotheses and research questions focus on discrete predictors, all of the significant results reported include continuous predictors. This is due to the seeming failure of the manipulations; when the manipulation conditions did not significantly predict suspense, identification, liking, or transportation, it seemed logical to explore whether the more sensitive continuous measures (in the form of self-reported character liking and perceived threat) could be significantly associated with the outcome variables. This proved to be true in all cases. Self-reported character liking significantly predicted suspense, while perceived self-threat and character-threat significantly predicted suspense, identification, liking, and transportation. Using measured predictors such as these raises issues of directionality (which will be addressed for each individual hypothesis and research question in the following paragraphs). However, in studies such as these, the use of manipulation checks as predictors has been suggested as stronger and more reliable than using the manipulations themselves. O’Keefe (2003) argued that
studies examining a psychological state’s effect on an outcome variable should use a self-report measure of that psychological state as a predictor rather than the message manipulation conditions used to produce that psychological state. In this case, the psychological states of interest were self-threat, character-threat, and character liking. The manipulations were intended to create relatively static perceptions of threat and liking, but both the information provided before the film clips and the film clips themselves were likely responsible for producing varying levels of these psychological states. According to O’Keefe, the important issue here is that the intended psychological states were created; it is less important that each information set produced exactly the amount of threat or liking intended. In fact, he states that the manipulations should only be viewed as a device to create variance in psychological states. Without these manipulations, there may have been far less variation in perceived threat and liking among participants. Though effective manipulations would have allowed greater confidence in directionality, the use of perceived threat and liking as predictors still produced significant and interesting results. The sensitivity of the continuous manipulation check measures allows revelation of effects that might have otherwise gone undiscovered. Thus, it was logical and useful to explore them in this context.

Support was found for the hypothesis that character liking increases suspense when looking at self-reports of character liking. Those who self-reported greater liking of the main character experienced more suspense than those who reported less liking. This greater suspense, in turn, was associated with more enjoyment of the film clip as a whole. This positive association between character liking and suspense is consistent with
previous research on suspense (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Vorderer, et al., 2001). Media consumers tend to experience greater hope and fear when a liked other is endangered. And, due to excitation transfer, that suspense translates into greater enjoyment of the narrative as a whole (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Zillmann et al., 1975). Whatever participants’ reason for liking the main character (e.g., similarity, agreement with actions), this liking appears to positively influence their level of suspense.

Questions of directionality need to be addressed here. Because measured liking was used in these analyses rather than manipulated liking, the possibility must be considered that participants’ enjoyable suspense experience led them to report more liking for the protagonist. The results above demonstrate that there is a significant positive association between suspense and enjoyment; there is also a significant positive relationship between enjoyment and liking ($b = .56$, $p < .001$). It is possible that participants’ overall enjoyable experience led them to report higher scores on other variables, such as liking. Similarly, the emotionally suspenseful journey participants took with the protagonist may have led to a greater affinity for the character. Fearing for the character’s safety and seeing that he made it through the experience unharmed may have forged a bond between viewer and character. Though this is a valid concern, it seems less likely than the alternative. Overall enjoyment of the film was included as a predictor during analysis, so it should have controlled for any effect of enjoyment generally. Most importantly, other studies have found that manipulated liking increases suspense (e.g., Comisky & Bryant, 1982), which supports both the a priori hypothesis and current
interpretation of the results. Thus, it does make sense to conclude that liking increased suspense, and not the other way around.

Attempts to manipulate threat were less successful than those for liking. Though every effort was made to influence participants’ perceived threat to self and character, the manipulation appears not to have worked. It is possible that the warnings of violence and danger were not severe enough to convince participants. As with character liking, a few sentences before participants viewed the film might not have been sufficient to influence their perception of it. It is common to be warned of violence before viewing a mature film or television program, so the warnings may have even gone unnoticed. Or, perhaps participants unlearned the information while viewing. Participants may have initially felt concerned for self or character, but changed their attitudes once they realized the film was not as violent as advertised. Given the length of the film clips, perhaps any influence of the brief manipulation was overshadowed by participants’ own interpretations of the violence throughout the 20-minute film clip. Future research that explores the impact of threat on suspense would benefit from a stronger manipulation. Such a manipulation should include more detailed threats of violence. Perhaps these more detailed threat manipulations could include descriptions of the violence participants will witness or specific (invented) stories of past viewers who were disturbed by the violence. It may also be more beneficial to deliver the threat manipulations in person with an appropriately serious tone of voice, as was done in the previously cited study (de Wied et al, 1997). The power of eye contact and a threatening tone could go a long way toward encouraging participants to take the threat more seriously.
As expected, measured threat did significantly predict suspense. Both self-threat and character-threat seemed to enhance the suspense experience. These results are in line with previous findings (de Wied et al., 1997). However, as with the effect of character liking on suspense, directionality must be considered. It is possible that the fear associated with the suspense experience led participants to report a greater sense of self-threat after viewing the film clip. In other words, the uncertainty component of suspenseful narratives that gives rise to fear for characters and self could have induced participants to provide higher threat ratings. This does make some sense on an intuitive level. However, the items on the suspense scale would not really capture these feelings of fear. The items on that scale mostly ask whether the film was exciting, thrilling, or gripping. Not everyone would associate fear with these emotions, particularly if they are fond of the suspense experience. Therefore, suspense is not likely confounded with its fear component. It makes more sense that greater worry about self, due to sense of threat, caused participants to experience greater suspense. Feeling as though one’s self is endangered while viewing creates more of the uncertainty that produces suspense. Most importantly, previous research that has successfully manipulated self-threat (i.e., de Wied et al., 1997) demonstrated that threat predicts suspense, thus supporting the current interpretation of the regression’s direction.

Despite this evidence that perceived threat increases suspense, a regression that analyzed character liking, self-threat, and character-threat together as predictors found that only character liking was significantly associated with suspense. In other words, the significant effects of self-threat and character-threat went away when controlling for
character liking. This suggests that character liking is the most important determinant of suspense experience. Such a finding is unsurprising, given the great disparity in threat perception among participants. Looking at the distributions of self-threat (Figure A.5) and character-threat (Figure A.6), it is clear that participants differed greatly in their perceptions of threat. Each distribution has a large number of participants on the lower end of the scales (i.e., ≤ 2) and quite a few around the middle as well (i.e., around 4). These deviations create a lot of noise, decreasing the strength of the linear relationship between perceived threat and suspense. Perceived threat would likely have a stronger association with suspense if the distribution of perceived threat responses was more normal. Character liking had a somewhat lower standard deviation and more normal distribution than self-threat and character-threat (see Table A.1 and Figure A.7), lending greater power to predict suspense.

The question arises as to what might cause such distributions for self-threat and character-threat. Perhaps there are some unforeseen moderators of perceived threat. For example, individuals’ aversion to violence (or affinity for it) may have greatly impacted the extent to which they reported threat. If participants enjoy violence, they are likely less threatened by it. Conversely, if participants do not really like violence, then they might find it highly threatening (to both self and character). The differences in reports of threat may also be attributable to something as simple as media use. Those who do not often watch television or films might find the content more arousing than those who frequently view these types of media, thus leading them to react more strongly to any perceived threats of viewing. There are a number of such potential moderators that
would have been valuable to explore, but that are not available in the current research. Future studies in this vein should include media use, preference for violence, and other potential moderators in their research.

In terms of variables that are available, preference for suspense is an important item to consider in regard to perceived threat. Overall, perceived threat was rather low. Analyses demonstrate that the majority of participants were significantly below the midpoint of the self-threat perception scale \((M = 3.50, SD = 1.73; t (342) = -5.42, p < .001)\). For those in the self-threat conditions, perceived self-threat was also significantly below the midpoint \((M = 3.57, SD = 1.66; t (114) = 2.78, p < .01)\). The overall mean for character-threat was below the midpoint, but not significantly so \((M = 3.91, SD = 1.68; t (342) = -0.98, p = .33)\). Those in the character-threat conditions reported average character-threat right on the midpoint \((M = 4.00, SD = 1.75; t (112) = -0.03, p = .98)\).

These results are indicative of the manipulation’s weakness. It also begs the question as to what may have caused participants to perceive more or less threat, given that the manipulations seemed to fail. Preference for suspense would likely impact perceived threat, in that those who do not enjoy suspense would perceive more threat. It seems probable that any dislike for suspense could be caused by an aversion to the uncertainty and fear that suspense creates. As noted earlier, excessive distress evoked through suspense is generally not enjoyable (Brewer, 1996). These individuals who do not prefer suspense may have a stronger fear reaction than those who do prefer it. Given this, it is possible that those who do not like suspense would perceive a greater threat than those who do like suspense. Indeed, those who liked suspense less tended to report greater
combined threat \((b = -0.31, p < .001)\). It was therefore essential that suspense preference was controlled for in all analyses involving measured threat. In that way, any results should have been chiefly influenced by violence and events in the narrative, rather than by personal preference.

Threat also has interesting implications for involvement with characters and the narrative. Quite interestingly, those who reported greater perceived character-threat also reported greater identification with and liking of the protagonist. This would mean that the earlier supposition (that character-threat might decrease identification and liking in the interest of self-preservation) is not supported. Of course, given that measured character-threat was used as a predictor in these significant regressions, the possibility that greater identification and liking actually led to greater perceived character-threat must be considered. Directionality in this case cannot be demonstrated. When considering the items in the scale (i.e., “I was worried that the main character would meet a violent end” and “I was concerned that the main character would be involved in violence”), they seem as though they could easily be influenced by attitudes toward the character. If one already identifies with and likes a character, he or she probably worries about them more than those who identify with and like them less. Thus, such individuals would tend to report more worry about threats to the character after viewing the film. This seems particularly likely given that the threat manipulations did not significantly predict threat perception. Though participants who received character-threatening information had a lower mean on identification \((M = 4.41, SD = 1.11)\) than those who received self-threatening \((M = 4.50, SD = 1.13)\) or no threatening information \((M = 4.46,\)
$SD = 1.21$), these differences were not significant. Therefore, it seems quite feasible that liking and identification influenced perceived character-threat, and not the other way around.

In regard to transportation, each type of threat (self, character, and a combination of the two) significantly increased absorption into the narrative. This would seem to align with the earlier argument, that the greater worry and hypothesizing created by threat increases narrative concentration. The more participants felt concerned for self and character, the more they felt compelled to focus on the storyline. Once again, though, the directionality of this relationship must be questioned. It is possible that deeper involvement with the narrative could make threats to self and the character seem more real. If individuals feel as though they are part of the action, they would probably feel threatened and endangered to some extent. If they are transported into the story world and feel as though the violent narrative events are authentic, they would likely feel more concern for the character. The automatic nature of transportation would seem to suggest support for this latter interpretation of the regression. An interesting item to note, however, is that transportability does not significantly predict threat ($b = .16, p = .23$). That is, those who are regularly transported into narratives did not perceive more threat than those who are not regularly transported. This insignificant relationship between trait transportability and threat suggests that the essence of entering a narrative world is not necessarily tied to threat, but rather that the perception of threat caused viewers to become more deeply involved in the film world. In combination with the a priori
rationalization, this fact provides more support for the notion that threat does indeed increase transportation.

Finally, the hypothesis that self-threat would moderate the relationship between character liking and experience of suspense was unsupported. It was believed that those who liked the main protagonist more and perceived greater self-threat would experience the most suspense. However, it appears that these two factors have a similar impact on suspense (Figure A.3). The only significant relationship in the moderation was between character liking and suspense. The effect of self-threat on suspense is similar, but it is not significant. Still, the graph of this insignificant interaction provides some understanding of how liking and threat act in relation to one another for the suspense experience. Though both serve to increase suspense, it appears that character liking has a greater impact on the experience of suspense than concern for self.

This finding is nearly opposite to what was predicted. The argument was made that the effect of self-threat should override the effect of character liking on suspense because our concern for character should not be as strong as the concern we feel for ourselves. When a threat to self was cultivated, it was expected that the fictional nature of film characters would render them less important than the real selves of those viewing the film. Instead, the results seem to indicate that character liking is paramount in regard to creating suspense. Upon reconsideration, this does make some sense. No matter what concerns a viewer may have about violence or disturbing images in a film, he or she knows that it is only a movie. Viewers can easily look away or leave the room if they choose. They can also simply remind themselves that the film is only fictional.
entertainment. The characters, however, are stuck in that world. They must endure whatever trials and dangers await them, regardless of whether the audience is actually watching. It was believed that the fictional nature of the characters would make these dangers seem less important, but that does not appear to be the case. Because previous research has demonstrated that viewers often react to fictional characters as though they are real (e.g., Gardner & Knowles, 2008), it makes sense that this knowledge of imminent danger for the characters would have such an impact. Thus, these results may be explained by the relative freedom from threat that viewers and characters can choose. Additionally, character liking served to override the effects of self-threat and character-threat on suspense when all three were entered into a single regression, which further supports the notion that character liking is paramount in regard to suspense.

Overall, the results of this study provide much insight regarding the factors that contribute to suspense. Though the manipulations did not function as expected, measurements revealed that greater character liking and perceived threat are associated with more suspense. And, through excitation transfer, this increased suspense is associated with greater enjoyment of the film as a whole. The results also illuminated how perceived threat can impact involvement with the characters and overall narrative in a suspense film, specifically demonstrating that perceived threat is positively associated with greater character identification, character liking, and transportation into the narrative. Previous research had already demonstrated character liking to be an important determinant of the suspense experience (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Vorderer, et al., 2001), but the present research has added to this by exploring threat and
how it operates in relation to character liking. Though self-threat seems to enhance the suspense experience on its own, it does not appear to have as great an impact as character liking.

This study has a number of limitations, particularly in regard to the manipulations. Most of these have already been mentioned (e.g., length and delivery method of manipulations, length of video clips). There are, however, a few other factors that may have impacted the manipulations’ success. One such factor is the use of stop-points to measure suspense. Though they provided interesting insight regarding the variations in narrative suspense, these stop-points also interrupted the flow of the storyline. Those brief moments presented an opportunity for participants to consider their level of suspense, lose momentum, and possibly question the information that was given to them before viewing. Participants would have already seen part of the film clip, thus supplying them with a comparison point for the manipulation. Perhaps that negatively impacted the effectiveness of the manipulations.

Also, the environment in which participants completed the experiment might have influenced the manipulations’ success. The study was completed on computers, which meant that the viewing screen was smaller than would typically be used in real life. Generally, research has found that participants experience greater physiological arousal with larger screen size (Detenber & Reeves, 1996) and higher quality images (Bracken, 2005). This indicates that threat could have been intensified by presenting the film clips on large screens in high-definition. However, doing so would have meant not measuring suspense at stop-points, forgoing individual randomization, and recording responses via
paper and pencil. The potential threat increase that larger screens may have afforded is likely negligible when compared with the benefits that computer experiments allow.

Another limitation has to do with the film clips. In an effort to save time, three full-length films were condensed into 20-minute clips for this study. This condensing resulted in the removal of large narrative sections and entire characters for each film. Though every effort was made to maintain narrative cohesion and consistency, participants may have had some difficulty comprehending parts of the story. For example, there may have been a line or two that referenced a character or event that had been eliminated from the story entirely. The confusion created by such instances may have disrupted their experience of suspense, identification, transportation, etc. However, the likelihood that these inconsistencies significantly impacted participants’ experience is minimal. Other similar studies have found comparable means on these variables of interest (e.g., suspense: this study, $M = 4.88$; Madrigal et al., 2011, $M = 4.52$; identification: this study, $M = 4.46$; Brookes, Cohen, Ewoldsen, & Velez, 2012, $M = 4.04$; transportation: this study, $M = 3.88$; Brookes et al, 2012, $M = 3.88$), which would indicate that any inconsistencies in the present stimuli likely did not have much effect. In the future, however, similar research might benefit from the use of television programs rather than films, which would require less editing to reach the required length.

Future research should explore how similarity fits into and perhaps connects self and character threat. Maybe the extent to which one feels similar to a character helps determine how much that individual feels threatened. In other words, the more alike viewer and character are, the more likely the viewer is to feel threatened when the
character is threatened. If the viewer shares a job, gender, location, sense of morality, etc., with the protagonist, any endangerment of that character might seem like a threat to the viewer. Greater similarity should lead to greater threat. To be clear, this is a different type of self-threat than that addressed thus far. The use of self-threat throughout the preceding study referred to fear of seeing something violent or disturbing in general. The type of self-threat that would arise from similarity is on a much more individual level. The character may be seen as a reflection of the viewer, providing a glimpse into a world in which the viewer could endure dangerous situations that were previously not experienced. A measure of similarity might reveal a three-way interaction between self-threat, character-threat, and similarity. Thus, we would learn a great deal more about what creates the hope and fear associated with suspense.
Chapter 3: Study 2

The study above is only offering a complement to ADT, in that it suggests high self-threat as a potential neutralizer of character liking effects. With this second study, the main tenets of ADT are directly challenged. Specifically, it suggests that there are situations for which morally just endings are not preferred. Consumers of suspense would probably enjoy a narrative more if a liked protagonist fails early on in the story than if s/he succeeds at that same point, due to the hope it inspires. In this sense, temporal placement of the episode within the larger narrative matters.

Recall that, in the context of ADT, morally just endings are those in which liked characters succeed and disliked characters fail. Media users interpret characters as being good or bad, and then evaluate a story’s ending based on the perceived justness of outcomes for those characters. In addition to making fairly automatic liking judgments of characters, media users also form moral judgments of characters within a narrative. Though ADT has traditionally suggested that media users choose to like or dislike media characters based on their own moral judgments of the characters, it is also possible that we judge characters’ behavior as moral or immoral because we like or dislike them, respectively (Raney, 2004). If we generally believe a character is good and righteous, we tend to like that character based on that perceived morality. Vice versa, if we like a character, we will subsequently judge their actions as being good and moral. This is even
true if a liked character engages in seemingly inappropriate or immoral behavior. This liking bias allows the media user to interpret a character’s bad behavior as justified, thus reconciling the character’s behavior with the user’s own positive disposition. Similarly, if a character is judged as immoral, media users will dislike that character; if a character is disliked, then his/her actions will be judged as immoral. Liking and morality judgments are separate from each other, but are intrinsically linked. Protagonists in narratives are typically judged as liked and moral, while antagonists are judged as disliked and immoral.

ADT would therefore predict that protagonist success and antagonist failure should create the most enjoyment. However, this may not be true for narrative events that occur earlier in a narrative. In fact, it may be more enjoyable for a protagonist to fail and an antagonist to succeed in the middle of a story. This proposition is based on research and theory concerning counterfactuals, which are non-factual alternatives to reality. When individuals are thinking counterfactually, they imagine how a situation may have turned out differently, whether for better (an upward counterfactual) or worse (a downward counterfactual). Often, when a desired outcome is not achieved, individuals focus on how the result could have been improved (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993; Roese, 1994; Sanna, Turley-Ames, & Meier, 1999). These situations typically evoke a contrast effect, in which judgments are focused on the disparity between the actual outcome and the counterfactual comparison standard. Such upward contrast effects typically result in negative affect. On the other hand, those who are successful in their goals can contrast the achievement of their desired outcomes with a
negative counterfactual, thus increasing their positive emotions. Generally, research has found that downward counterfactuals lead to positive affect, while upward counterfactuals result in negative affect (e.g., Markman et al., 1993; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen 1995; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995). Of course, this is only the case when individuals contrast reality with counterfactual standards.

Assimilation effects occur when actual outcomes are pulled toward the counterfactual comparison standard. Individuals can focus on the near achievement of a goal and feel uplifted (an upward counterfactual), or focus on the near failure of a goal and experience negative emotion (a downward counterfactual). McMullen and Markman (2002) proposed that the perceived finality of an outcome impacts whether an upward counterfactual will be assimilated or contrasted with reality. More specifically, they suggested that an upward counterfactual will evoke contrast effects when the outcome is viewed as final, but an assimilation effect when future possibilities exist. Thus, when no opportunities for redemption are available, they focus on the difference between success and failure and feel upset. But, if they believe they will have later opportunities to succeed, they focus on how close the current outcome is to goal achievement and experience hope.

McMullen and Markman (2002) conducted a study to test this proposition, which revealed that those who read descriptions of a basketball game felt better when their team was down by one point at halftime than those whose team was ahead by one point. In other words, the game was more enjoyable when the liked team was losing (at the midpoint). The authors explain this via assimilation effects. When the team was winning
by one point, they could only focus on how close they were to losing. For those whose team was losing by one point, they focused on how close they were to victory. Thus, the future possibility of winning or losing affected enjoyment of earlier events in the game. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon would be hope. Whenever a goal is barely missed or barely achieved, we cannot help but imagine what might have happened. The counterfactuals we visualize can allow us to feel even more suspenseful about the ultimate outcome. When our basketball team is losing at halftime, we can imagine what it will be like when our team eventually overcomes the other team and wins.

In terms of suspenseful narratives, this translates to greater enjoyment of an early narrative event if the protagonist just barely misses a goal than if it is narrowly attained. Such a small setback should only serve to increase hope and suspense for later events within the narrative. If the protagonist is already winning at that point, there is less to fear in the future. Thus, less suspense would likely be experienced. However, if the protagonist is losing, it provides the reader with a taste of what failure would be like and induces a sense of hope.

Research on the evaluation of experience provides another interesting angle from which to view the impact of earlier narrative events. Much literature in psychology suggests that we do not create simple summaries or averages of our experiences; rather, we focus on a few important features of the experience when forming evaluations. In particular, the pattern of hedonic change (Ariely, 1998), the rate of hedonic change (Hsee & Abelson, 1991), moments of peak intensity, and the ultimate outcome of an experience (Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Bedelmeier, 1993) can greatly influence our
overall evaluation of the experience. Generally, these studies have found that greater hedonic variation and an ultimate positive outcome are related to more experience satisfaction.

In terms of suspense, faster changes between positive and negative narrative events, greater intensity of peak suspense moments, and a positive final outcome of the narrative likely contribute to a more positive overall story evaluation. Previous research on experience evaluation would seem to support the notion that a protagonist’s failure earlier in a narrative would indeed lead to a more positive overall evaluation of the narrative. When a protagonist fails earlier in a narrative, it tends to be an intense and unpredicted turn of events. Because viewers expect the hero to succeed, his or her sudden loss quickly turns the narrative from something pleasant into something unpleasant, and this counterintuitive outcome results in an intense peak of emotion. Thus, this sudden change in hedonic value and its emotional intensity should lead to greater satisfaction with the narrative. This should be particularly true when the protagonist ultimately triumphs in the end, because research has found that experiences tend to be evaluated more positively overall when the last segment or final event is positive in nature (Ariely & Carmon, 2000). Overall, suspenseful narratives that include an intense, hedonically negative event earlier in a narrative, followed by a positive ending, should be more satisfying than those with consistently positive events.

Considering the research on counterfactuals and experience evaluations just discussed, we could expect emotional reactions to an antagonist’s success and failure that challenge ADT’s predictions. Though ADT would tell us that we should root against a disliked
antagonist (due to our negative moral evaluation of the character), we might actually enjoy the narrative more if that character succeeds earlier in the narrative. It would certainly make the story more interesting and serve to increase suspense for the remainder of the narrative. And, because an antagonist succeeding and protagonist failing earlier in a narrative should lead to more suspense, they should also lead to more enjoyment through excitation transfer.

**H1:** A protagonist’s failure in the middle of a suspenseful narrative will be associated with more suspense than that protagonist’s success in the middle of a suspenseful narrative.

**H2:** An antagonist’s success in the middle of a suspenseful narrative will be associated with more suspense than that antagonist’s failure in the middle of a suspenseful narrative.

**H3:** The relationship between the protagonist’s success/failure and enjoyment will be mediated by suspense.

**H4:** The relationship between the antagonist’s success/failure and enjoyment will be mediated by suspense.

Finally, success of the protagonist and of the antagonist should interact, in that success of the protagonist and failure of the antagonist should produce the least suspense earlier in the narrative, while failure of the protagonist and success of the antagonist should create the most suspense. This makes sense, because the latter combination should lead to the most fear and doubt that the protagonist will not ultimately triumph.
And, as we know from the Comisky and Bryant (1982) study, greater certainty of failure (short of 100% certainty) leads to the most suspense.

**H5:** Character liking will moderate the relationship between success/failure early in a narrative and experience of suspense, such that a narrative in which the liked protagonist fails and the disliked antagonist succeeds will be associated with the most suspense.

**Method**

A 2 x 2 experiment (success x protagonist/antagonist) was conducted to test the impact of character success/failure in the middle of a suspenseful narrative. We commissioned four short suspenseful stories from a professional fiction writer. All four versions had the same ultimate ending, but each had a different outcome to an event that was recounted in the middle of the narrative. This earlier event resulted in: 1) protagonist success/antagonist failure, 2) protagonist success/antagonist success, 3) protagonist failure/antagonist failure, or 4) protagonist failure/antagonist success.

The experiment had three total phases. Participants 1) completed a pretest measuring a number of potential covariates, 2) read one of the four short suspenseful story versions, and 3) rated their experience of the story on a number of measures. The pretest included a few control variables (trait empathy and need for affect), and the posttest measures included suspense, enjoyment, and manipulation checks.

**Participants.** A total of 157 undergraduates completed the study (gender: 64.3% female; age: $M = 20.83, SD = 3.03$). Participants were evenly distributed among the four different versions of the story.
Stimuli. For this study, we used a short story called *A Plague of Days* by Brian Fatah Steele. The author was commissioned to write four versions of a story that involved some kind of conflict between two main individuals – a “good guy” (the protagonist) and a “bad guy” (the antagonist). The story was to depict these two individuals engaged in a conflict that the protagonist would ultimately win. In this case, the protagonist was an FBI agent named Adam Gibson. The story begins with Agent Gibson on the trail of a domestic terrorist named Isaac Hawthorne. Gibson is determined to catch Hawthorne, who has bombed several buildings in the past. After presenting some basic background information about these two main characters, Gibson flashes back to his last encounter with Hawthorne (i.e., the last time Hawthorne tried to bomb a building). This flashback contains our manipulations of success and failure between the antagonist and protagonist. Once the flashback has concluded, the story returns to the present time and the final showdown between Gibson and Hawthorne. Agent Gibson finds Hawthorne hiding in an old barn and confronts him. When Hawthorne attempts to blow up the barn with himself and Gibson in it, Agent Gibson shoots Hawthorne, effectively ending his spree of terror.

Manipulations. During the flashback toward the beginning of the story, one of four versions of the same event is recounted. This event centers on Hawthorne’s last attempted bombing, which took place in the food court at a shopping mall. In the protagonist success/antagonist failure version, FBI agents find the hidden bomb before it can detonate and cause any damage. The protagonist succeeds unequivocally, and the antagonist fails miserably. In the protagonist success/antagonist success version, the
bomb detonates and causes a great deal of property damage, but no one is injured or killed. The protagonist considers it a victory because he was able to protect the civilians in the mall. However, the antagonist destroys a large part of the mall, which inflicts the kind of blow to consumerism that he had intended. In the protagonist failure/antagonist failure version, the bomb detonates and kills two of the FBI’s bomb technicians. Before the bomb went off, however, the protagonist was able to evacuate the mall and save hundreds of lives. So the protagonist failed because he lost two of his friends in the blast, and the antagonist failed because he did not cause nearly as much devastation as he intended. Finally, in the protagonist failure/antagonist success version, the bomb detonates and kills hundreds of people. The antagonist succeeded because he had caused the extreme devastation he had intended, and the protagonist failed because he had been unable to stop it.

At the end of each flashback, there is a brief paragraph that summarizes the respective success and failure of the two main characters. This paragraph is written as though it is part of the story. For example, the protagonist failure/antagonist failure version ended with: “The loss of their bomb techs was a devastating blow to the bureau. However, their efforts had saved hundreds of lives, so Hawthorne had also lost that day. Though he did manage to wound them deeply, he had not inflicted the high degree of devastation he had intended. It was a classic lose-lose situation.” It is our hope that these brief summaries drive home the events that occurred and solidify perception of the two main characters’ success and/or failure. Additionally, the story ends with a similar paragraph to emphasize the protagonist’s ultimate triumph over the antagonist: “It was
finally over. Hawthorne couldn’t hurt anyone anymore. Gibson had finally beaten him and could move on with his life.” These brief summaries highlight the important points in the story without betraying the purpose of the study.

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of these four story versions, and were then seated at individual computers to complete the experiment using Qualtrics. Much like study 1, the experiment included three phases: a pretest, stimulus exposure, and a posttest. For the pretest, participants completed a number of control measures, including demographic information and trait empathy. They were stopped once in the middle of the story, just after the flashbacks, to quickly rate their suspense and enjoyment levels on a single 7-point item each. Finally, after reading the entire story, participants completed a posttest measuring suspense, enjoyment, and a manipulation check.

**Measurements.**

**Pretest.** The same demographic variables, trait empathy ($M = 5.19, SD = .83, \alpha = .77$), and need for affect scales (approach: $M = 3.43, SD = .55, \alpha = .84$; avoid: $M = 2.58, SD = .67, \alpha = .88$) used in the first study were also applied in this experiment, as well as the measures of suspense familiarity ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.30$) and suspense preference ($M = 5.81, SD = 1.17$). Each of them was considered as a potential covariate during analysis.

**Posttest.** After stimulus exposure, participants rated their experience of suspense ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.20, \alpha = .94$) and enjoyment of the narrative ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.24, \alpha = .94$) using the same scales from study 1. They also rated their suspense ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.49$) and enjoyment ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.42$) on single-item measures halfway through the
story. Finally, they completed two manipulation checks. The same liking scale from study 1 was administered for both main characters to ensure that the protagonist was viewed as likable \((M = 5.08, SD = 1.04, \alpha = .81)\) and the antagonist was viewed as unlikable \((M = 2.11, SD = 1.09, \alpha = .75)\). To assess whether the success/failure manipulations were successful, participants were asked to what extent each main character was successful during the flashback. They responded to one item for each character (i.e., “During the bombing at the mall, Adam Gibson (Isaac Hawthorne) succeeded in achieving his goals”) on a 7-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7) (protagonist success: \(M = 4.16, SD = 1.68\); antagonist success: \(M = 3.65, SD = 2.06\)).

**Results**

A 2 x 2 experiment (success x character liking) was conducted in order to explore the impact that character success and failure in the middle of a suspenseful narrative might have on suspense. Before testing the hypotheses, ANCOVAs were performed to analyze whether the manipulations were successful. First, it was confirmed that the protagonist \((M = 5.08, SD = 1.04)\) was liked significantly more than the antagonist \((M = 2.11, SD = 1.09)\) with a simple t-test, \(t(156) = 22.36, p < .001\). Second, ANCOVAs were performed to check whether participants were interpreting the characters’ successes and failures as intended. As planned, those in the protagonist success conditions \((M = 4.99, SD = 1.31)\) expressed more belief that the hero achieved his goal in the middle of the narrative than those in the protagonist failure conditions \((M = 3.28, SD = 1.59)\), \(F(1, 130) = 45.44, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26\). When comparing all four conditions, those in the protagonist
success/antagonist failure condition reported the most protagonist success ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.43$), followed by the protagonist success/antagonist success condition ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.16$), the protagonist failure/antagonist failure condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.53$), and the protagonist failure/antagonist success condition ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.47$), $F(3, 128) = 20.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$. As for the antagonist’s perceived success, those in the antagonist success conditions ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 2.03$) expressed more belief that the villain achieved his goal in the middle of the narrative than those in the antagonist failure conditions ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.73$), $F(1, 131) = 27.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$. When comparing the effect of all four conditions on perceived antagonist success, those in the protagonist failure/antagonist success condition reported the most perceived success ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.98$), followed by the protagonist success/antagonist success condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.85$), the protagonist failure/antagonist failure condition ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.69$), and the protagonist success/antagonist failure condition ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(3, 129) = 22.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$. Thus, the manipulations appear to have been successful.

**ANCOVAs were conducted to test the first two hypotheses that predicted experience of suspense (i.e., H1 and H2) and the last hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of liking (i.e., H5). For the two mediation hypotheses (i.e., H3 and H4), Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macro was used once again. Because those who like suspense may be more likely to appreciate the greater uncertainty created by a protagonist’s failure and/or an antagonist’s success, preference for suspense was used as a covariate in all analyses. Both the six-item suspense scale (administered after the story) and the single-item**
suspense measure (administered halfway through the story) were used for all analyses involving suspense. Results for each hypothesis are detailed below.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that a protagonist’s failure in the middle of a suspenseful narrative would be associated with more suspense than the protagonist’s success at that same point. Preference for suspense was included as a covariate in an ANCOVA. The ANCOVA did not reveal any significant difference between protagonist success ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.18$) and protagonist failure ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.23$) on suspense, $F(1, 153) = 1.26, p = .26$. This is also true when examining suspense at the stop-point (success: $M = 4.57, SD = 1.49$; failure: $M = 4.79, SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 131) = 1.09, p = .30$. Therefore, it appears the manipulations of protagonist success did not significantly predict suspense.

Looking at a simple scatterplot of the measured protagonist success variable, a curvilinear pattern was observed. It appeared that ratings of suspense were much higher for those at the extremes of measured protagonist success. The data were explored to analyze whether these peaks in suspense were significant. A series of regressions was conducted to examine whether perceived protagonist success might serve as a better predictor of suspense than manipulated protagonist success. Using perceived protagonist success as a linear regression predictor (with preference for suspense as a covariate) did not yield significant results for the six-item scale ($b = .02, p = .77$) or stop-point ($b = .01, p = .89$) suspense. However, there was a significant curvilinear relationship between perceived protagonist success and suspense (Table B.1 and Figure B.1). Preference for suspense, protagonist success, and squared protagonist success were included as predictors in a hierarchical quadratic regression. Preference for suspense and protagonist success...
success were entered in the first step, then squared protagonist success was entered in the second step. This allowed us to assess whether squared protagonist success explained a significant amount of variance beyond that explained by the other two variables. Indeed, the addition of squared protagonist success to preference for suspense and protagonist success was significant, $F(3, 127) = 5.31, p < .01, R^2 = .11, \Delta R^2 = .04$. Preference for suspense ($b = .27, p < .01$), perceived protagonist success ($b = -.64, p < .05$), and squared protagonist success ($b = .08, p < .05$) all significantly predicted suspense.

In order to reveal the points at which the quadratic curve became significant, t-values were computed for each value of protagonist success (from 1-7, at intervals of 1). To do this, the slope at each value of protagonist success was calculated, and then it was divided by the standard error of protagonist success. The only significant values of protagonist success were those at 1, $t(127) = -1.73, p < .05$, and 7, $t(127) = -1.67, p < .05$. In other words, only those at the very extremes of the item reported greater suspense.

Those at 7 on protagonist success ($M = 5.38, SD = .90$) reported more suspense than those at 1 on the item ($M = 5.02, SD = .98$), but not significantly so, $t(16) = -.80, p = .44$. The small number of people at these extremes (7: $n = 8$; 1: $n = 10$) may account for the lack of significant difference. To ensure that extreme outliers were not skewing the analysis, the only two outliers on suspense were excluded from the dataset and the regression was run again. Removing these individuals from analysis did not significantly impact the results, in that all significant relationships remained significant with approximately the same amount of power. Thus, this quadratic regression has revealed that only extreme perceptions of protagonist success/failure seem to impact suspense.
A hierarchical regression conducted with stop-point suspense as the dependent variable yielded similar results (Table B.1 and Figure B.2). Once again, preference for suspense and protagonist success were entered in the first step, then squared protagonist success was entered in the second step. Adding squared protagonist success to preference for suspense and protagonist success explained significantly more variance than the first two items alone, $F(3, 126) = 4.19, p < .01, R^2 = .09, \Delta R^2 = .07$. Perceived protagonist success ($b = -1.10, p < .01$) and squared protagonist success ($b = .14, p < .01$) significantly predicted suspense, but preference for suspense did not ($b = .13, p = .24$). In this case, those at 1, $t(127) = -2.47, p < .05$, and 2, $t(127) = -1.69, p < .05$ on the item and those at 7, $t(127) = 2.25, p < .05$, reported significantly greater suspense. Comparing those at the lower end of perceived antagonist success (i.e., those who responded with 1 or 2) to those at the higher end (i.e., those who responded with a 7), it was found that those who felt the antagonist was more successful did report more suspense ($M = 5.88, SD = .64$) than those who thought he was less successful ($M = 5.19, SD = 1.30$), but not significantly so, $t(33) = -1.44, p = .16$. Again, though, this provides support for the notion that those high or low in perceived protagonist success experience more suspense that those who perceived a more moderate amount of success.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that that an antagonist’s success in the middle of a suspenseful narrative would be associated with more suspense than the antagonist’s failure at that same point. Again, preference for suspense was used as a covariate in an ANCOVA. Those in the antagonist success conditions ($M = 4.86, SD = 1.18$) did not report significantly more suspense than those in the antagonist failure conditions ($M =$
4.73, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 153) = .57, p = .45$. There was no significant difference in suspense at the stop-point either (success: $M = 4.72, SD = 1.47$; failure: $M = 4.61, SD = 1.54$), $F(1, 131) = .12, p = .73$. Perceived antagonist success (with preference for suspense as a covariate) did not significantly predict either the six-item scale ($b = .04, p = .47$) or stop-point suspense ($b = .05, p = .45$). Unlike perceived protagonist success, antagonist success did not have a significant curvilinear effect on suspense. The quadratic regression did not reveal significant results for the six-item scale, $F(3, 128) = 4.35, p < .01, R^2 = .09, \Delta R^2 = .01$, or the stop-point, $F(3, 127) = 1.77, p = .16, R^2 = .04, \Delta R^2 = .02$. Thus, for events in the middle of the story, the success or failure of the antagonist appears to have little effect on suspense.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the relationship between the protagonist’s success and enjoyment would be mediated by suspense, such that failure would increase suspense, which in turn would increase enjoyment. As in study 1, Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macro was used with preference for suspense as a covariate. The indirect effect of liking on enjoyment was considered significant if the 5000 sample bootstrap estimated 95% confidence interval did not include zero (Hayes, 2009). In this case, the indirect relationship was not significant (95% CI: -.45 to .12). Suspense significantly increased enjoyment ($b = .80, p < .001$), but protagonist success was not related to suspense ($b = -.21, p = .26$). Suspense at the stop-point did not significantly mediate the relationship between protagonist success and enjoyment either (95% CI: -.43 to .11). Again, suspense was significantly related to enjoyment ($b = .52, p < .001$), but protagonist success did not significantly predict suspense ($b = -.27, p = .30$). These results are expected, given the
manipulations’ lack of significant effect on suspense in the earlier analyses. Also as would be expected based on earlier analyses, perceived protagonist success did not have a significant indirect relationship on enjoyment either (95% CI: -.07 to .11). Thus, the mediating effect of suspense was would appear to be unsupported.

However, assuming a curvilinear relationship between measured protagonist success and suspense in the mediation yielded a significant result. Hayes and Preacher’s (2010) MEDCURVE macro was used to examine whether the mediation between measured protagonist success and enjoyment was significant when assuming a curvilinear relationship between protagonist success and suspense and a linear relationship between suspense and enjoyment. Similar to the PROCESS macro, the indirect relationship is considered significant is the 5000 sample bootstrap estimated 95% confidence interval does not include zero. The MEDCURVE macro differs in that it provides confidence intervals for three different values of the predictor: the mean, one standard deviation above the mean, and one standard deviation below the mean. MEDCURVE was used to examine the indirect relationship between measured protagonist success and enjoyment with preference for suspense as a covariate. The results show that both measured protagonist success ($b = -.64, p < .05$) and the square of measured protagonist success ($b = .08, p < .05$) significantly predict suspense. Suspense, as would be expected, significantly predicts enjoyment as well ($b = .80, p < .001$). However, the only value of the predictor at which the indirect relationship is significant is one standard deviation above the mean (95% CI: .05 to .50). In other words, suspense only mediated the relationship between measured protagonist success and enjoyment for those who
perceived a relatively high degree of protagonist success. It is important to note that this macro does not allow for the computation of confidence intervals at any values of the predictor other than the mean and one standard deviation above and below. Thus, it does not provide a test of those at the greatest extremes of the measured protagonist success item (i.e., those at 1 and 7), which were found to have experienced the most suspense in a regression. This suggests that these results should be interpreted cautiously.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the relationship between the antagonist’s success and enjoyment would also be mediated by suspense, such that success would increase suspense, which would in turn increase enjoyment. The PROCESS macro was used to test the indirect relationship between antagonist success and enjoyment, including preference for suspense as a covariate. The indirect effect was insignificant (95% CI: -.18 to .40), and antagonist success failed to predict suspense ($b = .14, p = .45$). Of course, suspense was still significantly associated with enjoyment ($b = .79, p < .001$). Suspense at the stop-point did not serve as a significant mediator either (95% CI: -.23 to .31). Analysis showed the same pattern, with suspense predicting enjoyment ($b = .52, p < .001$), but antagonist success not predicting suspense ($b = .09, p = .73$). Using perceived antagonist success in place of manipulated antagonist success did not reveal a significant indirect relationship with enjoyment either (95% CI: -.05 to .11). Again, these results are not surprising given the earlier findings. Antagonist success, whether measured or manipulated, appears to have no impact on suspense. Therefore, this mediation was unsupported as well.
Finally, hypothesis 5 proposed that character liking would moderate the relationship between success/failure early in a narrative and experience of suspense, such that a narrative in which the liked protagonist fails and the disliked antagonist succeeds would be associated with the most suspense. Two ANCOVAs were conducted with the four separate conditions predicting suspense, including preference for suspense as a covariate. The results were not significant; the manipulations did not significantly predict the six-item suspense scale (protagonist success/antagonist failure: $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.13$; protagonist failure/antagonist success: $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.11$; protagonist success/antagonist success: $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.25$; protagonist failure/antagonist failure: $M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.34$), $F(3, 151) = .65$, $p = .58$, or suspense at the stop-point (protagonist success/antagonist failure: $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.46$; protagonist failure/antagonist success: $M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.52$; protagonist failure/antagonist failure: $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.62$), $F(3, 129) = 1.09$, $p = .36$.

Thus, this hypothesis appears to be unsupported.

**Discussion**

To examine how narrative event timing might affect preference for moral outcomes, the success and failure of the protagonist and antagonist were manipulated in an early narrative event. Participants read a short suspense story with one of four event outcomes in the middle: protagonist success/antagonist failure, protagonist failure/antagonist success, protagonist success/antagonist success, or protagonist failure/antagonist failure. All of the manipulations appeared to be successful; the protagonist was liked significantly more than the antagonist, and each character’s
successes and failures were interpreted as intended. Thus, these four conditions were
used as predictors of suspense and enjoyment in the analyses.

Nevertheless, the manipulations did not function as expected. They did not
significantly affect suspense or its subsequent enjoyment, nor was there any moderating
effect of liking on success. In this regard, all five hypotheses were unsupported.
However, one interesting and significant result was found. When using measured
protagonist success as a predictor (rather than manipulated protagonist success), it was
revealed that those at the most extreme ends of success perception did experience more
suspense. In other words, those who thought the protagonist succeeded or failed
significantly reported greater suspense. It was hypothesized that protagonist failure
would be associated with more suspense than protagonist success; those who reported the
most protagonist failure did indeed report slightly greater suspense than those who
reported the most protagonist success, but this difference was not significant. This would
suggest that the valence of earlier narrative outcomes is not the most important factor for
suspense; rather, the intensity of those outcomes appears to have greater influence on the
suspense experience.

It is important that this result be interpreted with caution. Protagonist failure was
expected to be associated with more suspense than protagonist success, but it was the
observation of a seemingly curvilinear relationship in a simple scatterplot that led to the
quadratic regression analysis. This lack of significant difference between success and
failure for the protagonist was not predicted, and may even be caused by a third variable.
For example, certain individuals may be generally more excitable, and were thus
compelled to report extremes on both protagonist success and suspense (either positive or negative on both). It is also possible that these participants simply treated the one-to-seven scales as yes or no metrics, using 1 for “no” and 7 for “yes.” However, analyses suggest that neither of these possibilities is likely. The 18 individuals who reported a 1 or 7 on the protagonist success measure were compared to two random samples of 18 other participants on a number of items. Analyses showed no significant differences between these groups of individuals on any of the predictor variables, outcome variables, or covariates used in previous analyses. If those 18 participants at the extremes on protagonist success were generally excitable or using the scales as yes/no measures, similar distributions would likely have been observed on other similar variables (such as enjoyment). As this was not the case, it is logical to postulate that their extreme responses were a result of the stimulus rather than individual differences.

In regard to the mediating role of suspense, neither manipulated nor measured protagonist success indirectly predicted enjoyment. This is not surprising, considering that neither of these variables significantly predicted suspense in earlier analyses. Suspense did significantly predict enjoyment in each of these analyses, which supports the excitation transfer portion of the argument. More interesting to note is that the indirect effect of measured protagonist success on enjoyment was significant when assuming a curvilinear relationship between success and suspense, but only for those who were relatively high on measured protagonist success (i.e., those who were one standard deviation above the mean). As stated in the results section, the lack of significant effect for those relatively low on measured protagonist success (i.e., those who were one
standard deviation below the mean) does not necessarily mean that lower perception of success is not indirectly predictive of enjoyment. Rather, because the macro only allowed for confidence interval estimation at three different values of the predictor, it is not known whether the lowest value of success (i.e., a value of one on that item) would indirectly predict enjoyment. Therefore, though this result provides some support for the notion that measured protagonist success indirectly predicts enjoyment, it should be interpreted cautiously.

Considering the experience literature discussed previously, this result is not all that surprising. Recall that the pattern of hedonic change (Ariely, 1998), the rate of hedonic change (Hsee & Abelson, 1991), moments of peak intensity, and the ultimate outcome (Kahneman et al., 1993) can greatly influence overall evaluation of an experience. In regard to suspense, faster changes between positive and negative narrative events, greater intensity of peak suspense moments, and a positive final outcome of the narrative likely contribute to a more positive overall story evaluation. All participants read about the same positive final outcome, so that should not have impacted their experiences differently. In terms of peak intensity, those participants at the far ends of the protagonist success spectrum (i.e., those who strongly agreed or strongly disagreed that the protagonist was successful at the midpoint of the story) experienced the greatest emotional intensity at that peak suspense moment. This association between peak intensity (i.e., peak protagonist success or failure) and suspense seems to be in line with what the experience literature would suggest. Therefore, the only aspect of the
experience literature to account for in regard to this study is the rate of change between positive and negative narrative events.

   Earlier, the argument was made that protagonist failure and antagonist success should lead to the greatest suspense, due to the disparity in valence between that midpoint experience and the protagonist’s ultimate triumph. However, it is possible that smaller peaks within the story might have a greater impact than originally considered. Just before resolution of the midpoint event, it should have been unclear to the reader whether the protagonist/antagonist would succeed or fail. The FBI agents were rushing to find and disarm the bomb, but the readers could not have known whether or not they would succeed until the last moment. The suspense created by this uncertainty should have resulted in a mix of positive emotion (hope) and negative emotion (fear) for the reader. Thus, when the situation was resolved, the reader moved from ambivalent emotion to either positive emotion (if the protagonist succeeded) or negative emotion (if the protagonist failed). Perhaps this sudden change from ambivalent to non-ambivalent emotion is responsible for the increased suspense. For those participants who were less clear about the protagonist’s success, the degree of change in emotion at that point would not have been as great, which could account for their insignificant suspense experience. This might help explain why there was not a significant difference between protagonist success and protagonist failure at the midpoint for those individuals.

   Still, these results are at odds with the counterfactuals research conducted by McMullen and Markman (2002). As discussed in the literature review, McMullen and Markman’s findings seemed to suggest that film viewers should enjoy suspense more
when the protagonist is losing at the midpoint rather than winning. If the protagonist is
winning at the midpoint, there should be more hope and less fear for the future.
Conversely, if the protagonist is losing at that point, it should increase certainty that the
protagonist will ultimately fail, thus boosting suspense. However, results indicate that
valence of the outcome does not really seem to impact suspense. Perhaps this finding can
be explained to some extent by genre schemas. As mentioned earlier, media consumers’
suspense schema tells them that the protagonist in any suspenseful film, television show,
or book should ultimately be fine (Mikos, 1996). It is also likely, however, that this
schema includes knowledge of the challenges and dangers that await the protagonist prior
to final resolution of the narrative. Despite the protagonist’s success or failure at the
midpoint, media consumers know that he will once again be back at the bottom before
eventually coming out on top. The protagonist will be put in peril and risk defeat before
ultimately winning. Thus, readers know that any success experienced by the protagonist
is only a small peak before once again hitting a valley. In effect, this genre schema
becomes the great equalizer of midpoint outcome valence. It is not success or failure that
matters at the midpoint, but rather the intensity experienced at that midpoint.

It is interesting to note that antagonist success appeared to have no effect on
experience of suspense, though the curvilinear relationship was close to significant. This
is not completely unexpected, given that attitude toward the protagonist is often more
predictive of suspense than attitude toward the antagonist (e.g., Hartmann, Stuke, &
Daschmann, 2008). Readers may dislike the antagonist greatly and not want him to
succeed, but ultimately it is the fate of the protagonist that concerns them most. If given
a simple dichotomous choice between the protagonist succeeding and the antagonist failing, readers’ liking for the protagonist would probably drive them to choose the former. In other words, their like for the protagonist outweighs their dislike for the antagonist. That appears to have been borne out in the present results. Though the protagonist’s degree of success significantly influenced suspense, the antagonist’s success does not appear to have made much difference. This is supportive of the notion that attitude toward protagonist is paramount.

All of the discussion thus far helps to explain the manipulations’ lack of predictive power. For antagonist success, the argument immediately above should suffice as an explanation. If attitude toward the antagonist is not very important for suspense in general, then manipulating the antagonist’s success and failure would not have much impact on the variables of interest. Whether measured or manipulated, antagonist success was not a significant predictor. In regard to protagonist success, however, the manipulations likely did not work because of those participants toward the midpoint on measured protagonist success. Their responses probably created some noise, obscuring the significant suspense experience of those at the extremes on measured protagonist success. When using the more sensitive predictor of measured protagonist success in a regression, these significant data points were revealed. Directionality is not a concern in this case, as it is extremely unlikely that participants’ experience of suspense influenced their reports of protagonist success/failure. Experiencing suspense should not affect participants’ view of the story’s facts. This is further supported by the manipulation checks, which showed that participants interpreted the two main characters’
success and failures as intended. Measured protagonist success thus seemed to serve as a significant and useful predictor of suspense in this study. Because none of the manipulations were able to predict suspense individually, it is no surprise that they did not significantly moderate one another either. The justification above for the manipulations’ failure should also provide some explanation as to why the moderation failed. Antagonist success did not appear to matter for suspense in general, and protagonist success was likely unable to uncover significant results due to the amount of response variation within groups. Thus, the manipulations’ lack of predictive power led to a failed hypothesis in this case.

Though the hypotheses were largely unsupported, the present study revealed that more extreme outcomes for the protagonist at the midpoint of the story led to more suspense. And, unexpectedly, valence of those outcomes does not appear to be of much importance. It was anticipated that a protagonist loss would increase suspense due to assimilation of a potential win, but it appears that an exciting outcome, whether positive or negative, is the true determinant of suspense created at the midpoint. This provides a challenge to affective disposition theory, in that it reveals a situation in which morally just outcomes are not necessarily preferred.

One of the present study’s main limitations may reside in story length. In the interest of brevity, the commissioned story was kept to five pages. This was done in an effort to reduce participant fatigue and maintain their interest. There was some concern that participants would not be motivated to read more than five pages for a research study, but there was also some concern about telling a detailed and compelling story that
generates appropriate feelings toward the characters with such a page length constraint. However, other studies that have used short stories to examine suspense have employed much shorter stories and still found significant effects. The average length among the four story versions in this study was approximately 2,736 words; Gerrig and Bernardo (1994) used short text passages that were only an average of 280 words long, and they were still able to find significant differences in suspense between conditions. This evidence suggests that page length may not have been an issue in this study.

Still, the use of a longer story may have been beneficial for the study. The author did an excellent job with the page allowance he was given (as demonstrated by the successful manipulation checks), but it is likely that more significant effects could have been found with further character development and a more involved storyline. If he could have written more, the author might have delved deeper into the backgrounds and personalities of the two main characters, creating a deeper bond with the protagonist and a stronger animosity toward the antagonist. Suspenseful events in the middle of the story could also be drawn out longer, perhaps generating greater suspense and increasing the impact of those middle events on overall appreciation of the narrative. Though the condensed version appears to have been understood as intended, an extended version of the story might garner the results this study was unable to achieve. Perhaps future iterations and expansions of this study could utilize a longer story in order to explore this possibility.

The study may have also been limited by story presentation format. Participants read the stories on computer screens, which is a rather atypical medium for short fiction
stories. It is much more common to read fiction in a physical book or on an e-reader. When it comes to reading on computers, the content tends to be news, recipes, instructions, or other types of brief and/or bulleted information. Participants may not have been accustomed to fiction being presented in this way, and it is possible that reading the stories on the computer may have impacted participants’ experience. However, it seems unlikely that presentation format had any great effect on experience of the stories. The stories were only five pages each, and thus did not require an extended period of eyes-on-screen. Also, the amount of time that participants likely spend with computers should have made them quite comfortable with that medium. Given this reasoning, it is unlikely that presentation format greatly affected experience of threat, transportation, or other important variables. Any potential limitations of using computers were also outweighed by the benefits of convenience. Presenting the stories on computers allowed the use of a survey generator that backed up information online and automatically randomized story presentation. Also, it easily inserted a break in the middle of the story to gauge participants’ suspense and enjoyment at that point, a task that would have been more complicated if the participants had been given paper copies of the story. It would not have been feasible to secure the number of e-readers necessary to complete data collection in a timely fashion. Therefore, presenting the stories on computers seemed to be the best choice for this study.

Future research in this vein should explore other situations for which morally just endings might not be preferred. Additionally, a future study could involve manipulating the degree of protagonist success and antagonist failure at the end of the narrative.
Ultimate outcome was not manipulated in this study because there was no question that media consumers prefer morally just narrative endings. However, the extent to which the protagonist succeeds in the end might interact with protagonist/antagonist success in the middle of the narrative. In the McMullen and Markman (2002) counterfactuals study, the authors found that fans of the winning basketball team enjoyed the game more if they won by a narrow margin, while fans of the losing team enjoyed the game more if it was a blowout. These results are due to a contrast effect: if the losing team was close to winning, their fans would be plagued by what-ifs; if the winning team was close to losing, their fans would imagine what might have been and feel better about their victory. However, the authors of this study did not actually test the interaction between success and failure at the middle and margin of success at the end. If a certain team had been losing at the midpoint, perhaps that team’s fans might have preferred a wider margin of victory at the end in order to alleviate their sense of anxiety. On the other hand, if their team was winning at the midpoint, fans would probably prefer a close win at the end to make the game more interesting. It is easy to see how this logic would also apply to suspense. If the protagonist loses in the middle, participants may prefer a wider margin of success at the end. If the protagonist wins in the middle, the story would likely be more enjoyable if he nearly loses at the conclusion. A study such as this would be simple to conduct and would provide further insight regarding preference for morally just endings in suspense.
Chapter 4: General Discussion

Two studies were conducted to explore some of affective disposition theory’s basic tenets, specifically as they apply to suspense. ADT maintains that narrative enjoyment is a function of our feelings toward characters and perceived justness of the outcomes they encounter. Research on suspense has demonstrated that liking characters leads to greater suspense, and that morally just outcomes are associated with greater enjoyment of the narrative. Study 1 offered a complement to the first of these tenets, while study 2 directly challenged the second. Study 1 found perceptions of self- and character-threat to predict suspense and enjoyment, which offers an addition to the suspense and enjoyment that arise from character liking. Study 2 revealed that timing of narrative events alters the impact of morality on suspense, such that morally just outcomes are not necessarily preferred before the end of the narrative. More specifically, extreme success and extreme failure of the protagonist at the midpoint each produced a comparable amount of suspense. Additionally, protagonist success was not enjoyed significantly more than protagonist failure at the midpoint. This is counter to what ADT would predict, in that it assumes morally just outcomes (i.e., the success of the protagonist) are always preferred. These two studies have interesting implications for the future of research on suspense and ADT, in terms of both analyzing them together and in combination with other genres and theories.
Combined, both studies have addressed all six principles of ADT (Raney, 2006) to some extent: they noted the importance of 1) enjoyment of media content 2) emotional responses to that media content; 3) media users’ feelings about characters; 4) dispositions toward characters falling on a continuum from extremely positive to extremely negative; 5) considering justice as a necessary component; and 6) exploring individual differences. For the most part, these basic principles were upheld. Enjoyment (principle 1) and emotional response (principle 2) were the main outcome variables of interest. Media users’ feelings about characters (principle 3) proved to be important indicators of suspense, particularly when viewed as a continuum (principle 4) rather than as bipolar groups. Individual differences, such as trait empathy and preference for suspense, were important in all analyses (principle 6). The only principle that was not completely supported was the fifth: justice as a necessary component. Previous research on suspense has typically found morally just ultimate outcomes to be associated with more suspense and enjoyment (e.g., Madrigal et al., 2011). However, study 2 found that this is not necessarily the case in regard to earlier narrative events. That is, although morally just outcomes may still be preferred for the ultimate narrative resolution, earlier events do not necessarily need to end in protagonist success to be more suspenseful and enjoyable. This result is not at odds with previous findings, but it does add a new understanding to the preference for morally just outcomes. Perhaps the fifth principle should be revised to reflect such a caveat. Justice does not appear to be a necessary component for enjoyment, but it should still be explored and considered in the context of suspense and other entertainment genres. Thus, the first principle would change from “justice is a
necessary component” to “justice is a necessary component for consideration.” Perhaps future research might uncover other situations for which morally just outcomes are not necessarily preferred, though these situations are not immediately apparent.

In addition to these six basic principles, study 1 offered a complement to ADT in the context of suspense: self-threat. The results from study 1 lend further support to the research of de Wied et al. (1997), which originally found self-threat to increase suspense. Though the manipulations in study 1 were ineffective, it was found that perceived threat was associated with more suspense. Thus, in addition to concern for characters impacting the suspense experience, concern for self appears to enhance one’s suspense and enjoyment while viewing films as well. Results are also suggestive of how character liking and self-threat impact suspense in relation to one another. When included in a moderation analysis, character liking appeared to have a greater effect on suspense than self-threat. So, although self-threat seems to increase suspense, it does not have as strong an effect as character liking. This indicates that ADT is perhaps still the strongest predictor of suspense experience and enjoyment, but that self-threat has its own role to play in this experience.

Study 1 also provided insight regarding how threat influences involvement with the narrative and its characters. Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, both self- and character-threat were positively associated with character identification, character liking, and transportation into the narrative. This would seem to suggest that threat has the power to increase multiple experiences that are viewed as pleasurable in entertainment media. Thus, suspense creators might benefit from making media consumers feel
personally threatened by their viewing or reading experience. Again, it must be noted that distress is only acceptable to a certain degree before it ceases to be pleasurable (Brewer, 1996). Suspense creators and promoters would not want to threaten potential consumers so much that they are deterred from consuming the suspenseful media. Potential consumers’ preference for suspense is also an important consideration in this regard. As revealed in the results, threat to both self and character was most suspenseful and enjoyable when participants already enjoyed suspense in general. So, for those who are fans of suspenseful films and books, some perceived threat to self can be a useful boost to a pleasurable media experience.

This useful self-threat can be induced in a number of ways. As discussed earlier, the type of self-threat manipulated in study 1 is not the only type possible. Self-threat can be created through warnings of personally disturbing violence (as used in the present research), threats to similar others in a narrative, or fear of losing a beloved character. The second of these threat types is likely somewhat difficult to manipulate, given the vast differences that exist between individuals. It would be impractical to provide personalized character information for each participant to induce a sense of close similarity between character and viewer. However, one broad characteristic might be manipulated to produce a general effect. For example, if working with a college student sample, participants in a similarity condition might be informed before viewing a suspenseful film that the main character is also a current college student, while those in another condition are told that the main character is not currently attending school. Perhaps this one identity characteristic, central as it may be to a student’s identity, would
be enough to create a greater perceived threat to one’s self. Research on suspense and threat would benefit greatly from such an experiment.

In regard to the third type of self-threat, fear of losing a beloved character, research may be even more complicated to conduct. Forming emotional attachments to a fictional character may not be difficult, but creating real fear of losing that character likely is. Becoming attached to a fictional character can create an emotional vulnerability for any media consumer. To understand this, one need only turn to research on parasocial breakups. Though parasocial relationships are not typically explored in the context of suspense, research on parasocial breakups has power to illuminate this type of self-threat when applied to suspense more generally. Research on parasocial breakups has demonstrated that losing a beloved character can have the same emotional impact as a real life breakup (Cohen, 2003). It seems likely that a mere threat of loss could have an effect as well. Indeed, when individuals are asked how they expect to feel when losing a beloved character, they express emotions such as loneliness and vulnerability (Cohen, 2004). However, convincing media consumers that a threat of loss is real involves much difficulty. Characters typically become beloved objects of a parasocial relationship as a result of ongoing exposure (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Readers or viewers develop this seeming relationship by “interacting” with the character on a somewhat regular basis. And, because these characters are typically the stars of their series, audiences know that they will survive. Media consumers have developed schemas that assure main characters will always endure, despite whatever dangers they may face (Nabi & Clark, 2008). An exception to this rule is when series come to an end. Thus, much of the parasocial
breakup research has been conducted when particular television series are cancelled (e.g., Eyal & Cohen, 2006). This is indicative of how difficult it may be to convince research participants that a particular character they love will meet their doom. One of the few ways to achieve such an aim would be to select a show that has recently been cancelled, but has yet to finish airing all episodes. Or, perhaps researchers can convince participants that they have exclusive information about a currently airing show that will be cancelled in the near future. The main difficulty with either of these approaches would be finding participants who both watch a show regularly (and thus have a relationship with the main character), but have not yet seen the episode that will be used in the experiment. A final possibility would be to expose participants to a particular program repeatedly to induce a parasocial relationship, and then conclude the longitudinal study by showing them the final episode of the series. This would also allow researchers to observe how a doomed parasocial relationship evolves over time. Given the new trend of binge-watching entire series online (Stelter, 2013), such ill-fated parasocial relationships are likely to become of more interest to researchers. Viewers know that the series, and thereby the relationship, will ultimately end. Yet they are likely to form the same type of parasocial relationships as individuals who view the show live with no knowledge of when the series will end. This certainly presents an interesting opportunity for future research. Though it may be a difficult and lengthy task, it would provide useful insight regarding threat to one’s emotional self in suspense.

Overall, these two studies offer greater understanding of ADT’s application to suspense, presenting both a complement and a challenge. Study 1 suggested self-threat
as a complement to character liking, and study 2 challenged the notion that morally just endings are always preferred. Though the results are not exactly as expected, they still support these two main ideas to some extent. The character liking associated with ADT appeared to be the stronger predictor of suspense, but self-threat was positively associated with suspense as well. Thus, ADT was complemented. In regard to morally just endings, the results seem to indicate that a protagonist’s success is not always preferred. The outcome of a midpoint narrative event produced roughly the same amount of suspense whether the protagonist succeeded or failed. And, though the relationship was not quite significant, they produced roughly the same amount of enjoyment as well. Thus, ADT was challenged. Future research should continue to explore other potential complements and challenges to ADT to further illuminate how it might operate differently in the context of suspense.
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Appendix A: Study 1 Tables and Figures

Table A.1

*Descriptive Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>All participants</th>
<th>Self-threat</th>
<th>Character-threat</th>
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<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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*a* means are not significantly different; *b* means are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level; mean comparisons are across rows
Table A.2

**Correlation Matrix**

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<th>Ident.</th>
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<th>Self-threat</th>
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<td>.15</td>
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<td>.65***</td>
<td>.71***</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.11*</td>
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<td>Identification</td>
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<td>.71***</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<td>.65***</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>.31***</td>
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<td>Transportation</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>Character-threat</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.70***</td>
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*** = \( p < .001 \), * = \( p < .05 \)
### Table A.3

**OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Character Liking**

<table>
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<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td>NFA Approach</td>
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<td>.14</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
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<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>.69***</td>
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<td>.35***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
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<td>13.99***</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R(^2)</strong></td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>1.79***</td>
<td>1.84***</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>NFA Approach</td>
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<td>.18***</td>
<td>.15**</td>
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<td>(9.85***</td>
<td>(26.36***</td>
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<td>Δ R(^2)</td>
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*Note:* All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = \( p < .001 \)
Table A.4

**OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Perceived Self-Threat**

<table>
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<td>-.01</td>
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<td>Frustration/Anger</td>
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<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
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</table>

*Note: All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$*
Table A.5

*OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Perceived Character-Threat*

<table>
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<th>Suspense</th>
<th>Stop-Point 1</th>
<th>Stop-Point 2</th>
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<tr>
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*Note:* All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = \( p < .001 \), ** = \( p < .01 \), * = \( p < .05 \)
Table A.6

*OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Character Liking, Perceived Self-Threat, and Perceived Character-Threat*

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Continued

109
Table A.6 continued

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*Note: All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = p < .001, ** = p < .01, * = p < .05*
Table A.7

*OLS Regression Analysis of Identification, Liking, and Transportation as a Function of Perceived Self-Threat*

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*Note: All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = p < .001, ** = p < .01*
Table A.8

*OLS Regression Analysis of Identification, Liking, and Transportation as a Function of Perceived Character-Threat*

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*Note:* All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = *p* < .001, ** = *p* < .01
Figure A.1. Indirect relationship between character liking and enjoyment (5000 bootstrap samples)

NOTE: All coefficients are unstandardized.

*** = p < .001, * = p < .05; 95% CI: .41 to .60

Figure A.2. Indirect relationship between self-threat and enjoyment (5000 bootstrap samples)

NOTE: All coefficients are unstandardized.

*** = p < .001; 95% CI: .06 to .23
Figure A.3. Indirect relationship between character-threat and enjoyment (5000 bootstrap samples)

NOTE: All coefficients are unstandardized.

*** = p < .001; 95% CI: .10 to .27

Figure A.4. Interaction between measured character liking and perceived self-threat
Figure A.5. Distribution of perceived self-threat

Figure A.6. Distribution of perceived character-threat
Figure A.7. Distribution of character liking

Mean = 4.95
Std. Dev. = 1.228
N = 343
## Appendix B: Study 2 Tables and Figures

### Table B.1

*OLS Regression Analysis of Suspense as a Function of Protagonist Success*

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*Note:* All coefficients are unstandardized; *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$
Figure B.1. Visual representation of the quadratic regression between perceived protagonist success and suspense
Figure B.2. Visual representation of the quadratic regression between perceived protagonist success and suspense at the stop-point
Appendix C: Study 1 Measures

Pretest Questionnaire Items

Demographics
1. How old are you? (open-ended response)
2. Race
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Hispanic or Latino
   e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   f. White
   g. Other (please specify)
3. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female

Trait transportability
("Strongly disagree" [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
When watching/reading/hearing a story:
1. I can easily envision the events in the story.
2. I find I can easily lose myself in the story.
3. I find it difficult to tune out activity around me.
4. I can easily envision myself in the events described in a story.
5. I get mentally involved in the story.
6. I can easily put stories out of my mind after I’ve finished reading them.
7. I sometimes feel as if I am part of the story.
8. I am often impatient to find out how the story ends.
9. I find that I can easily take the perspective of the character(s) in the story.
10. I am often emotionally affected by what I’ve read.
11. I have vivid images of the characters.
12. I find myself accepting events that I might have otherwise considered unrealistic.
13. I find myself thinking what the characters may be thinking.
14. I find myself thinking of other ways the story could have ended.
15. My mind often wanders.
16. I find myself feeling what the characters may feel.
17. I find that events in the story are relevant to my everyday life.
18. I often find that reading stories has an impact on the way I see things.
19. I easily identify with characters in the story.
20. I have vivid images of the events in the story.

**Need for affect**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])

**Approach**
1. It is important for me to be in touch with my feelings.
2. I think that it is important to explore my feelings.
3. I am a very emotional person.
4. It is important for me to know how others are feeling.
5. Emotions help people get along in life.
6. Strong emotions are generally beneficial.
7. I feel that I need to experience strong emotions regularly.
8. I approach situations in which I expect to experience strong emotions.
9. I feel like I need a good cry every now and then.
10. I like to dwell on my emotions.
11. We should indulge our emotions.
12. I like decorating my home with lots of pictures of things emotionally significant to me.
13. The experience of emotions promotes human survival.

**Avoid**
1. I do not know how to handle my emotions, so I avoid them.
2. I find strong emotions overwhelming and therefore try to avoid them.
3. Emotions are dangerous – they tend to get me into situations that I would rather avoid.
4. I would prefer not to experience either the lows or highs of emotion.
5. If I reflect on my past, I see that I tend to be afraid of feeling emotions.
6. I would like to be totally logical and experience little emotion.
7. I have trouble telling the people close to me that I love them.
8. Displays of emotions are embarrassing.
9. Acting on one’s emotions is always a mistake.
10. I am sometimes afraid of how I might act if I become too emotional.
11. Avoiding emotional events helps me sleep better at night.
12. I wish I could feel less emotion.
13. People can function most effectively when they are not experiencing strong emotions.

**Trait empathy**  
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
2. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.
3. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
4. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
5. Sometimes I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems.
6. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
7. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

**Familiarity with suspense**  
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I am familiar with the suspense genre.
2. I am familiar with the comedy genre.
3. I am familiar with the drama genre.
4. I am familiar with the action genre.
5. I am familiar with the romance genre.
6. I am familiar with the science fiction genre.
7. I am familiar with the horror genre.

**Preference for suspense**  
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to strongly agree” [7])
1. I enjoy suspense.
2. I enjoy comedy.
3. I enjoy drama.
4. I enjoy action.
5. I enjoy romance.
6. I enjoy science fiction.
7. I enjoy horror.
Posttest Questionnaire Items

Suspense
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. The film I just watched was exciting.
2. The film I just watched was thrilling.
3. The film I just watched was gripping.
4. I felt expectant while watching the film.
5. I felt excited while watching the film.
6. I felt in suspense while watching the film.
7. I found myself trying to guess what would happen later in the film.
8. At various points in the film, I felt certain that the protagonist would fail in the end.
9. I felt emotional discomfort while viewing.
10. I feel in suspense right now. (administered three times throughout the film clip)
11. I feel hopeful right now. (administered three times throughout the film clip)
12. I feel fearful right now. (administered three times throughout the film clip)

Transportation
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. While I was watching the film lip, I could easily picture the events in the narrative taking place.
2. While I was watching the film, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.
3. I could picture myself in the narrative’s events.
4. I was mentally involved in the narrative while watching the film.
5. After finishing the film, I found it easy to put it out of my mind.
6. I wanted to learn how the story ended.
7. The narrative in the film affected me emotionally.
8. I found myself thinking of ways the story could have turned out differently.
9. I found my mind wandering while watching the film.
10. The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life.
11. The events in the narrative have changed my life.

Enjoyment
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. This film was fun.
2. I enjoyed watching this film.
3. I would recommend this film to a friend.
4. Overall, I would rate this film positively.
5. I would watch this film longer if I had the opportunity.
6. I felt absorbed by this film.
7. This film held my attention.
8. I felt like I was part of the film.
9. I was caught up in the film.
10. This film is enjoyable. (administered three times throughout film clip)

**Identification**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I was able to understand the events in the film in a manner similar to that in which the main character understood them.
2. I think I have a good understanding of the main character.
3. I tend to understand the reasons why the main character does what he does.
4. While watching the film, I could feel the emotions the main character portrayed.
5. While viewing, I felt I could really get inside the main character’s head.
6. At key moments in the film, I felt I knew exactly what the main character was going through.
7. While watching the film, I wanted the main character to succeed in achieving his goals.
8. When the main character succeeded I felt joy, but when he failed, I was sad.

**State anxiety**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. While viewing the film, I was worried.
2. While viewing the film, I was anxious.
3. While viewing the film, I was nervous.
4. While viewing the film, I was terrified.
5. While viewing the film, I was panicked.
6. While viewing the film, I was scared.
7. While viewing the film, I was fearful.
8. While viewing the film, I was frightened.

**Character liking**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. The main character was likable.
2. I was concerned about the character while viewing.
3. I wished that good things would happen to the main character.

**State reactance**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. The instructions given before the film clip tried to manipulate me.
2. The instructions given before the film clip tried to pressure me to think a certain way.
3. The instructions given before the film clip tried to force an opinion on me.

**Frustration/anger**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I was frustrated when I saw more/less violence than I expected.
2. I was upset because I felt deceived about the amount of violence in the film.
3. The presence of more/less violence than anticipated throughout the film made me mad.

**Experience with film**
1. Have you ever seen this film before today? (Yes/no)
2. How many times you seen it? (Open-ended response)
3. When did you last see it? (Open-ended response – year)

**Violence manipulation check**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I was worried that I might see something I did not want to see.
2. I was concerned that the violence in the film might be personally disturbing to me.
3. I was worried that the main character would meet a negative end.
4. I was concerned that the main character would be in a lot of danger throughout the film.
Appendix D: Study 2 Measures

Pretest Questionnaire Items

Demographics
1. How old are you? (open-ended response)
2. Race
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Hispanic or Latino
   e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   f. White
   g. Other (please specify)
3. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female

Need for affect
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])

Approach
1. It is important for me to be in touch with my feelings.
2. I think that it is important to explore my feelings.
3. I am a very emotional person.
4. It is important for me to know how others are feeling.
5. Emotions help people get along in life.
6. Strong emotions are generally beneficial.
7. I feel that I need to experience strong emotions regularly.
8. I approach situations in which I expect to experience strong emotions.
9. I feel like I need a good cry every now and then.
10. I like to dwell on my emotions.
11. We should indulge our emotions.
12. I like decorating my home with lots of pictures of things emotionally significant to me.
13. The experience of emotions promotes human survival.

Avoid
14. I do not know how to handle my emotions, so I avoid them.
15. I find strong emotions overwhelming and therefore try to avoid them.
16. Emotions are dangerous – they tend to get me into situations that I would rather avoid.
17. I would prefer not to experience either the lows or highs of emotion.
18. If I reflect on my past, I see that I tend to be afraid of feeling emotions.
19. I would like to be totally logical and experience little emotion.
20. I have trouble telling the people close to me that I love them.
21. Displays of emotions are embarrassing.
22. Acting on one’s emotions is always a mistake.
23. I am sometimes afraid of how I might act if I become too emotional.
24. Avoiding emotional events helps me sleep better at night.
25. I wish I could feel less emotion.
26. People can function most effectively when they are not experiencing strong emotions.

Trait empathy
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.
2. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.
3. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
4. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
5. Sometimes I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems.
6. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
7. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

Familiarity with suspense
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I am familiar with the suspense genre.
2. I am familiar with the comedy genre.
3. I am familiar with the drama genre.
4. I am familiar with the action genre.
5. I am familiar with the romance genre.
6. I am familiar with the science fiction genre.
7. I am familiar with the horror genre.

**Preference for suspense**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. I enjoy suspense.
2. I enjoy comedy.
3. I enjoy drama.
4. I enjoy action.
5. I enjoy romance.
6. I enjoy science fiction.
7. I enjoy horror.

**Posttest Questionnaire Items**

**Suspense**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. The story I just read was exciting.
2. The story I just read was thrilling.
3. The story I just read was gripping.
4. I felt expectant while reading the story.
5. I felt excited while reading the story.
6. I felt in suspense while reading the story.
7. I found myself trying to guess what would happen later in the story.
8. At various points in the story, I felt certain that the protagonist would fail in the end.
9. I felt emotional discomfort while reading.
10. I feel in suspense right now. (administered three times throughout the story)
11. I feel hopeful right now. (administered three times throughout the story)
12. I feel fearful right now. (administered three times throughout the story)

**Enjoyment**
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. This story was fun.
2. I enjoyed reading this story.
3. I would recommend this story to a friend.
4. Overall, I would rate this story positively.
5. I would read this book longer if I had the opportunity.
6. I felt absorbed by this story.
7. This story held my attention.
8. I felt like I was part of the story.
9. I was caught up in the story.
10. This story is enjoyable. (administered three times throughout story)

State anxiety
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. While reading the story, I was worried.
2. While reading the story, I was anxious.
3. While reading the story, I was nervous.
4. While reading the story, I was terrified.
5. While reading the story, I was panicked.
6. While reading the story, I was scared.
7. While reading the story, I was fearful.
8. While reading the story, I was frightened.

State reactance
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. The instructions given before the film clip tried to manipulate me.
2. The instructions given before the film clip tried to pressure me to think a certain way.
3. The instructions given before the film clip tried to force an opinion on me.

Character liking – Protagonist
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. Adam Gibson was likable.
2. I was concerned about Adam Gibson while reading.
3. I wished that good things would happen to Adam Gibson.

Character liking – Antagonist
(“Strongly disagree” [1] to “strongly agree” [7])
1. Isaac Hawthorne was likable.
2. I was concerned about Isaac Hawthorne while reading.
3. I wished that good things would happen to Isaac Hawthorne.

Manipulation check
1. During the bombing at the mall, Adam Gibson succeeded in achieving his goals.
2. During the bombing at the mall, Isaac Hawthorne succeeded in achieving his goals.