Character Perceptions: An Investigation of Morally Ambiguous Characters

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Kelsey Ann Porreca

Graduate Program in Communication

The Ohio State University

2013

Master's Examination Committee:

David Ewoldsen, Advisor

Dan McDonald
Abstract

Characters play an integral role in enjoyment of narratives as they are seen as the vehicles that propel the narrative forward. As such, viewers can develop strong feeling towards characters, as well as develop thorough evaluations of a character’s attributes, including the character’s moral compass. Moral disengagement is defined as the self-regulatory mechanisms that are used to adjust moral sanctions in order to perform or approve of morally reprehensible behavior. This study investigates the influence of viewers’ character evaluations, specifically along the dimension of morality, on moral disengagement. Participants (N = 131) watched short clips with positive, negative, and ambiguous representations of a fictional character Spike (from the show, *Cowboy Bebop*) and evaluated Spike on a number of different attributes including ethics. Moral disengagement was then measured using a proxy measure, a competitive reaction time task, which directly measures aggressive behavior. Results of the experiment showed that ethical evaluations of a character were positively correlated with the character representation. In addition, transportation moderated the effect of viewers’ evaluation of the character’s morality on the aggressive behavior they exhibited in the competitive reaction time task for those in the negative condition. More specifically, transportation enhanced the influence of the negative character representation, prompting more aggressive behavior.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Dave Ewoldsen. Without his patience, support, guidance, and sense of humor, the past two years would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Dan McDonald for his support and direction in shaping this project.

In addition, I would like to thank my wonderful peers in my program at The Ohio State University, including (but certainly not limited to) Hyunjin Song, Morgan Ellithorpe, Courtney Anderegg, and Shina Aladé. Your feedback and statistical expertise were a priceless addition to this project, and your patience and kindness during my more comical moments of panic were greatly appreciated. A special thanks also goes to Nyron Crawford, who loaned research how-to books to me in my time of need.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, who helped support me through the late nights, long phone calls, and laundry duty. Your presence and belief in me was an invaluable gift and I could not have made it through this process without you.
Vita

May 2007 ........................................ Hinsdale Central High School

2010.......................................................... B.A. Communication, University of Illinois

2011 to present ........................................ Graduate Teaching Associate, Department

of Communication, The Ohio State

University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Communication
# Table of Contents

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

Acknowledgments.......................................................................................................................... iii

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

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

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

Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 1

The Character Impression Formation (CIF) Model ................................................................. 5

Perceiving and Experiencing Fictional Characters (PEFiC) Model................................. 6

Moral Disengagement ..................................................................................................................... 8

Hypotheses ..................................................................................................................................... 11

Moderators ..................................................................................................................................... 12

Participants ..................................................................................................................................... 16

Design ............................................................................................................................................. 16

Stimuli and Materials .................................................................................................................... 17

Measures.......................................................................................................................................... 19
Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 22

Discussion ....................................................................................................................... 31

Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 36

Directions for Future Research ....................................................................................... 37

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 39

References ....................................................................................................................... 40

Appendix A: Pilot Test Descriptives ............................................................................... 43

Appendix B: Full Measures ............................................................................................. 44

Appendix C: Correlational Matrix of Scales ................................................................. 47

Appendix D: Moderating Effect of Transportation on the Interaction Between Character
Representation and Aggressive Behavior ........................................................................ 48
List of Tables

Table 1. Descriptives for PEFiC Subscales ................................................................. 20
Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for PEFiC Subscales Across Conditions .... 24
Table 3. MANOVA of PEFiC Subscales Across Conditions ......................................... 24
Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Aggressive Behavior Across Conditions .. 26
Table 5: Pilot Test Descriptives ..................................................................................... 43
Table 6. Correlational Matrix of Scales ........................................................................ 47
Table 7. Moderating Effect of Transportation on the Interaction Between Character
Representation and Aggressive Behavior .................................................................... 48
List of Figures

Figure 1. The Moderating Influence of Transportation on the Relationship Between Character Perceptions and Aggressive Behavior.......................................................... 27

Figure 2. Three-Way Interaction of Arousal and Transportation on Aggressive Behavior Across Conditions.......................................................... 29
Introduction

As many people seek out entertainment media for enjoyment purposes, the investigation of the mechanisms that enhance enjoyment are considered an important aspect of mass media research (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Characters play an integral role in enjoyment because they are seen as the vehicles that propel the narrative forward (Sanders, 2010). From this perspective, the viewers’ perceptions of dynamic interactions between characters are relevant to how viewers perceive the story (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Viewers often develop strong feelings towards fictional characters based on their evaluations of certain character attributes. Similar to the real-life impression formation process, viewers develop a coherent impression of a character from these characteristic evaluations (Sanders, 2010; Fiske, Neuberg, Beattie, & Milberg, 1987). These characteristics include personality traits, behavior, and goals, all of which are used to construct a mental representation of the characters that develops as we gather more information about them (Sanders, 2010).

This mental representation, known as a character model, is a subordinate categorization of the broader conception of mental models (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). The mental models approach explains the way in which we construct cognitive
representations of events, objects, or situations as we receive information about them (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004). Character models are constructed via online processing, and are therefore malleable and dynamic (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). As viewers observe characters, the inferred traits are organized into a mental representation that corresponds to the character. Each attribute is combined to create a coherent impression of the character, which is updated with every new piece of information. From these character models we develop judgments or predictions based on the character’s traits and goals that can be inferred from their behavior (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Morality is one of the most prominent attributes viewers attend to and a common index of evaluation when perceiving fictional characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Raney, 2004). Evaluations of morality often determine the valence of the viewer’s perception of a character (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). This is a particularly important attribute for viewers to attend to as fictional characters generally reflect more of a definitive morality. In fact, fictional characters are often presented with a polarized morality, in which characters that are initially presented in a positive light continue to be presented positively and vice versa (Eden et al., 2011). Consequently, moral considerations become paramount to understanding a character (Sanders, 2010). Character perceptions are also heavily influenced by morality as it relates to the similarity between the viewer and fictional character. When a character’s moral code is similar to a viewer’s, then the viewer perceives the character more positively (Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010).
Previous investigations of morality and fictional characters rest heavily on Zillmann’s (1994) affective disposition theory, which broadly posits that viewers’ moral judgments are a result of processing the character’s attributes and goals. The resulting mental construct reflects the characters’ perceived moral standing (Sanders, 2010; Raney, 2004). Disposition theory’s notion that viewers are moral monitors supports the argument that morality is an important attribute that contributes to the overall impression formed (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Zillmann, 2000). As morality is a salient dimension, viewers will experience more enjoyment when good characters are rewarded and bad characters are punished (Tamborini et al., 2010).

Previous research addressing the morality of fictional characters is widely in agreement with these points. However, the recent prevalence of fictional characters with a more complex moral compass has prompted a renewed interesting in character impression formation and the dimension of morality (Eden et al., 2011; Krakowiak, 2008). Morally ambiguous characters exhibit both morally positive and negative qualities through their behavior and, thus, present an interesting avenue of research (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2009). When protagonists are morally ambiguous characters, they are often deemed antiheros (Sanders, 2010).

In order to provide a clear picture of the topic of this investigation, in the television show House, Dr. Gregory House is an exemplar of this type of character. Throughout the series, he uses unorthodox methods to save countless lives. On the other hand, his rude and sardonic personality overshadows his good deeds and makes House a more complex character than the typical protagonist (Sanders, 2010).
It is important to note that although the impression formation process follows much the same format, people’s evaluations of fictional characters’ moral code differ distinctly from real world applications (Richey, Bono, Lewis, & Richey, 1982). We allow fictional characters to act differently than people in the real world with the knowledge that their actions will not affect our immediate world, and we adapt our judgments concerning the morality of their behavior accordingly (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). As the viewer is not in direct contact with the character, he or she experiences a degree of disengagement and allows him- or herself to evaluate a character less harshly than they would in real life (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). According to Raney (2004), one explanation for this phenomenon states that viewers are motivated to enjoy entertainment narratives, so viewers are motivated to excuse bad behaviors of the protagonist through moral disengagement.

Previous investigations of morally ambiguous characters have also made the connection between moral evaluations and aggression. One study looking at children’s perceptions of superheroes’ aggressive behavior examined how the moral attributions of the aggressive behavior impacted the participant’s own aggressive behavior (Liss, Reinhardt, & Fredriksen, 1983). The experiments examined three conditions: purely prosocial behavior (no aggressive behavior exhibited), prosocial and aggressive behavior (aggression used for a moral lesson), and purely aggressive behavior (aggressive behavior for no prosocial end). Those in the prosocial and aggressive condition exhibited less prosocial tendencies and more aggressive behavior than those in the purely prosocial
condition, but presented less aggressive behavior than those in the purely aggressive condition (Liss et al., 1983).

The purpose of studying narratives from this perspective is to develop an understanding as to how viewers’ perceptions of morally ambiguous characters can influence the viewer’s moral disengagement and subsequent aggressive behavior. Previous research and theories supporting this investigation will be discussed in the following section.

The Character Impression Formation (CIF) Model

Sanders’ (2010) character impression formation (CIF) model was formulated to explain the process by which viewers formulate impressions concerning fictional characters and grapple with inconsistent information when constructing a coherent representation of a fictional character. The CIF model draws directly from Fiske and Neuberg’s continuum model, which focuses on how perceivers deal with trait inconsistencies that arise when trying to formulate an impression of a person (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). According to the CIF model, a viewer will develop an initial impression when introduced to a new fictional character. This impression is formulated using category-based processes. Category-based processes involve the viewer searching through his or her available knowledge of social stereotypes in order to place the target character into one of these categories (Sanders, 2010).

The second stage is category confirmation. As a viewer gathers new information about the character, the viewer seeks to interpret incoming information to determine whether the character’s attributes are consistent or inconsistent with the initial
categorization. The first step in evaluating available information is confirmatory categorization, in which the viewer seeks to interpret incoming information in comparison to the initial categorization. If the original categorization is deemed successful (in other words, consistent with the new information presented), then that initial categorization is confirmed and the impression of the character is set. However, if the categorization is found to be unsuccessful, the viewer enters a third stage in which the viewer attempts to reconcile the conflicting information with the goal of producing a single, coherent impression of the character (Sanders, 2010).

This third stage involves effortful processing, and can take one of three different avenues in order to resolve the apparent inconsistencies. First, the viewer could utilize both consistent and inconsistent information to describe the character and make no attempt to reconcile the two sets of information. Second, the viewer could integrate the two sets of information and create a single impression. Finally, the viewer could disregard the discrepant information, which could be either the initial categorization or the new inconsistent information. Based on the viewer’s chosen path, this process will result in either an impression from the initial categorization or attribute-based recategorizations (Sanders, 2010).

**Perceiving and Experiencing Fictional Characters (PEFiC) Model**

The perceiving and experiencing fictional characters (PEFiC) model was developed by Konijn and Hoorn (2005) in an attempt to explain the complexity of viewers’ affective responses towards fictional characters. The PEFiC model describes
three stages a viewer goes through when evaluating a character: encoding, comparison, and response.

The encoding phase refers to the viewer’s evaluation of the fictional character based on non-affective, cognitive attributes. These attributes refer to three specific factors. Ethics describes the morality of the character (good or bad), which the viewer infers from the character’s behavior. Aesthetics, one of the primary characteristics that a fictional character is evaluated on, is related to a description of the characters physical attributes (beautiful or ugly). Finally, epistemics refers to the degree to which the viewer perceives the character to be realistic or not.

The comparison phase, as the name implies, encompasses the factors that involve the viewer comparing him- or herself to the fictional character they are evaluating. Similarity, relevance, and valence are affective comparisons that include cognitions about the self as they relate to the fictional character’s attributes. Relevance refers to the significance and salience of a fictional character to the viewer. Similarity means the viewer’s perception of shared qualities between him- or herself and the fictional character. From these evaluations, a positively or negatively valenced affective response towards the character is established. Valence, therefore, in this case refers to the degree to which the viewer’s affective response is positive or negative (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).

The third phase describes the parallel processes of involvement and distance. Involvement is explained as a viewer engaging in approach or avoidance practices. In this case, approach is how a viewer reaches a desired state, which is a positive viewer-character relationship or liking the character. Avoidance is the obstruction that prevents
the viewer from reaching a positive viewer-character relationship. According to this model, the valence of the viewer’s affective response towards the character is seen as unipolar because while positive valence could lead to approach tendencies, negative valence could as well. More specifically, sometimes characters that portray qualities that are usually categorized as negative could lead to the viewer liking the character, and vice versa. The same dynamic is true of avoidance tendencies (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).

**Moral Disengagement**

As it was stated earlier, fictional characters tend to be judged on a number of characteristics, not the least of which is the morality of their actions (see Zillmann, 2000). In other words, the viewer’s perception of a character’s morality can be gleaned from an evaluation of the character’s actions and what motivations the character has for behaving in such a way.

The character’s intentionality is a key component in determining the outcome of viewers’ moral evaluations (whether the character is good or bad) (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). These judgments are much simpler when the protagonist is clearly good and the antagonist is unambiguously evil (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000). Morally good characters are well liked and enjoyed more by viewers than evil characters because they are associated with more positive emotions. Viewers also experience more empathy and identification with good characters because we like to believe that we are similar to them. Morally ambiguous characters, on the other hand, are similar to evil characters in that they are less liked than good characters. When it comes to morally evil and morally ambiguous characters, viewers are less likely to experience
empathy and identification (Zillmann, 1994). However, as these characters present both good and bad qualities, Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) found that morally ambiguous characters might lead to more enjoyment based on other factors, such as transportation.

However, research suggests that in the context of fictional narratives, viewers can and do sometimes like characters who behave in morally reprehensible ways, a phenomenon that could be explained by moral disengagement (Sanders, 2010; Raney, 2004). Moral disengagement refers to the self-regulatory mechanisms by which people adapt their moral sanctions in order to justify or excuse the detrimental effects of a given morally reprehensible behavior. In essence, moral justification construes the behavior itself differently in order to excuse the behavior (Sanders, 2010; Raney, 2004; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

There are several pathways by which the process of moral disengagement can occur. *Moral justification* involves portraying the behavior in light of its altruistic outcomes, while *euphemistic language* can be used to dampen the reprehensible nature of a given behavior. Also, *advantageous comparison* refers to the comparison of one behavior with a far more deplorable act. Next, one could *displace responsibility* in order to diffuse the notion that the character was personally responsible for the behavior. The final way in which people argue for the performance of amoral behavior is through the *disregard or distortion of consequences*. More specifically, the consequences can be minimized or construed in such a way to make the reprehensible act more acceptable (Bandura et al., 1996).
Although the majority of the foundational research concerning moral disengagement has been to describe real world moral agency, it has been more recently applied to describing a phenomenon associated with character perception. As this mechanism pertains to fiction, previous research suggests that it is easier to allow fictional characters more leniency concerning morally reprehensible behavior because there are no real-world consequences of the character’s actions. This stems from an understanding that the characters are in a fictional reality (Sanders, 2010; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Factors such as the likability of the character also come into play. In this way, the viewer can make the decision to justify the character’s morally reprehensible actions, thus leading to moral disengagement (Raney, 2004).

One of the implications of engaging in the process of moral disengagement is its link to aggressive behavior. As self-sanctions translate one’s moral code into behavior, disengagement practices may be used to reconstruct the person’s view of their own actions (Raney, 2004; Bandura et al., 1996). This allows people to give harmful behaviors a more positive spin, which leads to less guilt after the behavior is performed. By comparing the person’s behavior to more objectionable behavior (advantageous comparison), such as that of a fictional character, the viewer finds himself or herself able to excuse more of his or her own behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Therefore, when a person is no longer bound by strict moral sanctions because of moral disengagement, that person is more likely to act aggressively, as it has been rationalized as more acceptable (Bandura et al., 1996).
Hypotheses

The following hypotheses rest on the aforementioned theoretical foundations, as well as previous research dealing with both viewers’ perceptions of morally ambiguous characters and moral disengagement. The first set of hypotheses will predict the implications of manipulating a valenced representation of a fictional character. The PEFiC model (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005) and the CIF model (Sanders, 2010) both suggest there is a positive relationship between the valenced representation of the character and the viewer’s response towards the character. This is reflected in the following hypotheses.

H1: Viewer’s character ratings will be positively correlated with the character representation.

The second hypothesis is in accordance with Liss et al.’s (1983) findings, in that the morally ambiguous character will be perceived more moderately than either of the polarized character representations.

H2: When the character representation is more ambiguous, the viewer’s character ratings will be more variant than when the character is presented as either clearly positive or clearly negative.

The next set of hypotheses predicts participants’ responses to those valenced representations, including ambiguous representations, in the form of aggressive behavior. Similar to Liss et al.’s (1983) research, this investigation also looks at aggressive behavior. Based on the results of the previous study, the following hypotheses were formulated.

H3: When the character representation is more positive, viewers will exhibit less
aggressive behavior.

**H4:** When the character representation is more negative, viewers will exhibit more aggressive behavior.

Finally, when faced with morally ambiguous characters, viewers will have more information to interpret, and therefore a wider range of responses towards the character to choose from. As stated earlier, the initial categorization is based on heuristics. However, the viewer’s overall impression is formulated by evaluating individual attributes of the character. As more information is amassed, the more information has to be organized to create a coherent character model (Sanders, 2010). This can differ due to the fact that certain concepts are more accessible or salient for different people (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). From a moral development perspective, this difference in interpretation is explained as a result of differing moral codes that guide moral reasoning (Raney, 2004).

**H5:** When the character representation is ambiguous, then viewers will exhibit varied degrees of aggressive behavior.

**Moderators**

With these hypotheses in mind, there are two concepts that could moderate these predicted interactions: transportation and identification. Each of these concepts influences character perceptions and enjoyment of narratives, both of which play a role in this investigation (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Transportation and identification are seen as moderators for this investigation due to the fact that both concepts can enhance the effects of impression formation and moral disengagement. In Krakowiak and Oliver’s (2012) investigation of morally ambiguous characters, they found that enjoyment of
morally ambiguous characters is dependent on several factors including transportation and identification. They determined these two concepts were by-products of viewers’ enjoyment of morally ambiguous characters, which suggests that transportation and identification are important variables in this investigation and are moderating influences.

**Transportation.** According to Green and Brock (2000), transportation can be defined as “a distinct mental process, and integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” (p. 701). Additionally, transportation can be conceptualized as a method of processing narratives (Green & Brock, 2000). From this perspective, transportation is the result of viewer’s natural tendency towards empathy and perspective taking. Transportation is also an integral part of enjoyment as well as a desirable state for the viewer, and higher transportation is associated with more character liking (Green & Brock, 2000) and enjoyment (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). By being immersed in the narrative world, the viewer is able to vicariously experience feelings and situations through the fictional character and explore his or her boundaries in a safe environment. It’s important to note here that although transportation is seen as the viewer’s process of leaving his or her reality to be immersed in the narrative world, one’s enjoyment of the narrative is not equivalent to the valence of the narrative (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). For example, we enjoy suspenseful movies even if the primary emotion the narrative evokes does not seem enjoyable.

Both character liking and moral disengagement are influenced by transportation. Character liking is enhanced through transportation, as the mechanism aids viewers in
feeling closer to fictional characters. Additionally, moral responses as a result of viewers’
moral judgments are stronger for transported viewers (Green et al., 2004).

**Identification.** Cohen’s (2001) conceptual definition of identification is one of
the most widely accepted. It states identification is “a process that consists of increasing
loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and
cognitive connections with a character” (p. 251). Classified as a psychological process by
which the user loses his or her self-identity in order to adopt the media figure’s
perspective, the distance between the user and the figure decreases due to the fact that the
viewer is experiencing a heightened emotional and cognitive connection with the
character.

Identification has been shown to influence overall narrative engagement, as well
as viewers’ character perceptions and moral disengagement. This particular aspect of
identification can increase the viewer’s empathy for the character, which could influence
his or her moral evaluations. Once again, the viewer’s own moral compass serves as a
guide for moral judgments and this is enhanced when the viewer identifies with the
character (Raney, 2004).

Although both transportation and identification have been primarily investigated
as main effects, within the context of this investigation, it would be reasonable to
postulate that these concepts may exhibit a moderating effect on the relationship between
cursor perceptions and moral disengagement. As there is a dearth of previous research
investigating these relationships, it is difficult to speculate what specific influence
transportation and identification would have. Therefore, the following research questions have been proposed:

\textit{RQ1:} Does transportation moderate the relationship between character perceptions and moral disengagement?

\textit{RQ2:} Does identification moderate the relationship between character perceptions and moral disengagement?
Methods

Participants

A total of 131 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large Midwestern university were recruited to participate in the study through a participant pool system. Students enrolled in introductory communication courses are required to participate in either research or alternative writing assignments for credit. Students enrolled in other communications courses were permitted to participate for extra credit as well, per their instructor and syllabus. In addition to recruitment through the participant pool system, participants were also recruited from other communication courses in which the instructors offered extra credit for participation in studies.

Because of the lack of previous research exploring character perceptions and moral disengagement, there was no basis for a power analysis.

Design

This study had three conditions and a control. Participants in the control condition viewed a trailer that acted as the control clip. This condition portrayed a neutral, but slightly positive image of the main character. The three conditions showed a positive, negative, and ambiguous character representation of the main character, differing by the dimension of morality. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.
**Stimuli and Materials**

Cowboy Bebop is an anime television show and movie that follows bounty hunters in a futuristic world. One of the main characters in Cowboy Bebop, Spike Spiegel, is the focus of this investigation. Spike is a former member of the Red Dragon Crime Syndicate turned bounty hunter. With his complex criminal past and sardonic personality, Spike exemplifies what it is to be an *antihero* or a morally ambiguous character. Throughout this experiment, Spike was the character participants were told to focus on, and the following clips were centered on manipulating his image as a character. There were four clips that were shown throughout the four conditions. Each of these clips was introduced by a sentence that explained the content of the clip, as well as clarified the allusions of certain actions caused by editing.

The trailer was shown first in all four conditions. The experimental trailer was adapted from the *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* trailer and follows the traditional format of a movie trailer. The control version includes added action sequences to focus more on Spike rather than other main characters of the film. This clip presented a neutral to mildly positive portrayal of Spike and was 1:57 minutes in length.

In the other three conditions, a second clip was shown. In the positive condition, the clip shows Spike as one who cares about those in need by helping a character named Rocco help his sister. In this clip, the scenes were strategically edited to create a cohesive clip to represent a more positive version of the story in the episode, “Waltz for Venus.” This clip made Spike seem altruistic, humorous, and caring. The clip was 4:26 minutes in length.
The negative condition portrayed Spike in a negative context. This clip was constructed from the same episode used for the positive clip, “Waltz for Venus.” Due to the fact that most of Spike’s negative attributes could be construed as more positive with the dark humor indicative of this series, creative editing was employed to make Spike seem more negative. In the negative condition, it appears that Spike is attempting to sell an item that does not belong to him and has the potential to help someone else. To show this, it required strategically cutting certain clips in such a way to show him acting cruelly with no explanation, leaving the viewer with no information to exonerate Spike for his malicious behavior. The clip made Spike seem violent, rude, and careless. It was 4:09 minutes in length.

Finally, the ambiguous condition portrayed Spike in both positive and negative lights through one cohesive story clip. In this clip, Spike is clearly doing something illegal (breaking into a building), but the justifications behind his actions turn out to be for positive reasons (it seems the people who work there are bad). In this way, Spike’s characterization was not as clear-cut as in the other two conditions. The clip was constructed in such a way that the viewer has room to interpret who he or she believes Spike is, whereas the previous two conditions have clear narrative cues one way or the other. The clip was 4:08 minutes in length. Each of these clips were chosen or constructed in such a way as to reduce time related discrepancies between clips. Another concern was to provide the best character representation for the condition, which required some creative editing.
These clips were pilot tested with 29 students from a large Midwestern university. The condition clips were evaluated using an 11-point scale (where 0 was ‘Negative’ and 10 was ‘Positive’). A table of means and standard deviations can be found in Appendix A. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the character representation on participants’ character evaluations in the positive, negative, and ambiguous conditions. There was a significant effect of the character representation on the character evaluation at the level for the three conditions ($F(3,115) = 6.53, p < .001$).

**Measures**

After the clips were shown, the participants took a survey using adapted measures from the PEFiC model, Cohen’s (2001) identification scale, Green and Brock’s (2000) transportation scale, as well as a few additional scales (see Appendix B). The PEFiC scales measure the eight factors represented in the model: ethics, aesthetics, epistemics, similarity, relevance, valence, involvement, and distance (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). For the purposes of this investigation, the subscales Involvement and Distance were collapsed to formulate one subscale (termed Involvement/Distance), leaving seven subscales. This was done in order to create a bipolar measure of involvement and distance similar to the six other subscales. Each of these seven factors is measured by up to three words to represent the positive and negative valence in each category, for a total of four to six words per factor. These items were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale and targeted the participants’ perception of Spike. Adjustments were made to the similarity subscale as it initially reflected a low reliability ($\alpha = .54$). Through an exploratory factor analysis, it
was determined that the items ‘contrary’ and ‘different’ should be removed. After this change, reliability for the scale increased significantly ($\alpha = .75$). Additionally, adjustments were made to the relevance subscale as it also initially showed a marginally low reliability ($\alpha = .67$). When an exploratory factor analysis was conducted, the results suggested that the items ‘indifferent’ and ‘unmoved’ should be removed. After this change, the reliability increased significantly ($\alpha = .81$). See Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemics</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement/Distance</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Descriptives for PEFiTC Subscales

Cohen’s (2001) identification scale is well-established scale. The scale’s 10 original items were adapted to target Spike and were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale has been used several times since its initial development and has exhibited high reliability (Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005). The current study also showed the scale had high reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Similarly, Green and Brock’s (2000) transportation scale, the transportation scale used in this study, had 11 general items that were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ($\alpha =$
The original transportation scale also had four story-specific items that were measured, which include the reader’s ability to develop a vivid image of the character. However, due to the fact that the narrative in this case is a video clip and includes visual representations of Spike, the addition of these four items was unnecessary.

Finally, two questions related to familiarity (“Have you seen Cowboy Bebop?” and, “How familiar are you with Cowboy Bebop?”) were on the questionnaire, as some of the clips are manipulated in such a way that does not accurately reflect the plot in order to make Spike’s actions appear more acceptable or reprehensible. The questions took into account how familiar the participants are with the show and how frequently the participant is exposed to it, measured on a 5-point Likert scale. These two items were highly correlated \( r = .78 \). A final item acted as a measure of arousal, which was taken in order to act as a control. It was measured through a single question asking participants to rate their level of arousal on a 5-point Likert scale.

In addition, the participants took part in a competitive time reaction task with reward and punishment (also known as a noise blast task) in which they had the opportunity to act as an aggressor. The noise blast task was presented under the cover of a distraction task. The researcher told the participants that it was simply a filler task for the current experiment to see how memory influences the participant’s perceptions of Spike. The participants were told that they were competing against another partner in another room to see who is faster at clicking a box in the center of the screen. Throughout the course of the game, the participants are able to either reward or punish their partner for winning or losing while they are told their partner receives the same opportunity. The
punishment comes in the form of a noise blast, in which they blast another participant with a tone, varying by intensity and duration. The reward is in the form of monetary compensation, which the participant sets along with the punishment. Although the participants were led to believe they were competing against another person, the result of each trial is pre-determined by the computer. If participants “won,” they received a reward from the computer. If participants “lost,” they were blasted with noise from the computer. Through a pair of headphones, the participants were told that if they lose, they would hear a tone, supposedly from the partner. Participants were asked to set the noise intensity of the blast for their partners (levels zero to ten), the duration of the blast (durations lasting anywhere between zero and five seconds), as well as set a reward for them (up to fifty cents). The process of racing was repeated for 25 trials. The order of the questionnaire and the noise blast task were alternated so as to avoid any order effects.

Analysis

The hypotheses were tested using SPSS version 19. The main analytic method utilized in this investigation was a series of MANOVAs, one-way ANOVAs, and regression analyses. In addition, moderation tests were employed in order to examine the possibility of transportation and identification in accordance with the aforementioned research questions.
Results

Two questions guided this research: (a) Do viewers’ evaluations of fictional characters’ morality impact their subsequent moral behavior? And (b) Do transportation and identification moderate these effects?

The first guiding question is addressed by the hypotheses. H1 predicted that the viewers’ character evaluations of Spike would be positively correlated with the condition’s representation of him. An initial multivariate ANOVA examined the evaluations of Spike’s attributes across conditions. Looking at the seven adapted subscales of the PEFiC subscales used to measure participants’ evaluations of Spike, ethics ($F(3, 127) = 6.40, p < .001$) was the only dimension that differed significantly across conditions, although the adjusted similarity ($F(3, 127) = 2.347, p = .076$) and relevance ($F(3, 127) = 1.147, p = .055$) subscales were marginally significant. Therefore, H1 was partially supported (see Table 2 and Table 3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Trailer</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Ambiguous</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valance</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement/Distance</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for PEFiC Subscales Across Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.399</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>&gt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.577</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.254</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.347</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.507</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.602</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement/Distance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.147</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. MANOVA of PEFiC Subscales Across Conditions

On the other hand, H2 predicted that character evaluations would be more varied when the character representation was ambiguous as opposed to the positive or negative
conditions. According to Levene’s Test for Homogeneity of Variances, the variance of the participants’ evaluations of the ethics dimension was not significantly different between the ambiguous and other conditions ($F(1,129) = .367, p = .546$). Therefore, H2 was not supported.

H3 and H4 referred to the relationship between the viewers’ character perceptions of Spike and their subsequent aggressive behavior in the competitive reaction time task. More specifically, H3 predicted that when the character perception was more positive, the participants would be less aggressive and H4 predicted the opposite: when the character perception was more negative, then the participants would be more aggressive. In this investigation, aggressive behavior was looked at as the participants’ average of the intensity and duration of the noise blast across 25 trials, as well as by comparing the change in the intensity and duration levels between the first two trials. To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to investigate the potential influence of character perceptions on the participants’ aggressive behavior exhibited in the competitive reaction time task. However, there was no significant effect of the participants’ evaluations of Spikes morality on their own aggressive conduct when aggression was examined in the first trial ($F(3,127) = .852, p = .85$), the second trial ($F(3,127) = .213, p = .89$), or the average across trials ($F(3,127) = .447, p = .72$).

To further examine the effect of character evaluations on aggressive behavior, regression analyses were conducted in order to determine if there were any potential moderators. RQ1 asked whether or not transportation would have a moderating effect on the relationship between character perceptions and aggressive behavior. A regression
analysis was conducted in order to investigate if transportation improved the relationship between character perceptions and aggressive behavior. In this case, aggressive behavior was operationalized as the average intensity levels multiplied by the average duration levels set across all 25 trials. See Table for means and standard deviations of aggressive behavior across conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>23.28</td>
<td>17.97</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>23.24</td>
<td>18.09</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>28.05</td>
<td>22.24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>23.52</td>
<td>20.12</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Aggressive Behavior Across Conditions

The regression analysis revealed that transportation ($M = 2.78, SD = .535$) did exhibit a moderating effect on the interaction between character perception and aggressive behavior, as well as explained a significant increase in variance ($R^2 = .075$, $F(1,125) = 4.62, p = .034$). Thus, transportation was a significant moderator of the relationship between character perception and aggressive behavior ($\beta = 20.124, p = .015$).

As the character representations of Spike became more positive, the participants who were highly transported exhibited less aggressive behavior across the 25 trials of the competitive reaction time task. See Figure 1 and Appendix D.
Figure 1. The Moderating Influence of Transportation on the Relationship Between Character Perceptions and Aggressive Behavior. This figure depicts the participants’ aggressive behavior across conditions for those participants who experience both low and high transportation.

Supplemental analyses revealed that the relationship between condition and aggressive behavior is significant at high levels of transportation, or one standard deviation above the mean ($p < .05$), and marginally significant at low levels of transportation, or one standard deviation below the mean ($p = .083$). The data suggest that the difference between high and low transportation is significant when there is a negative character portrayal, but the difference is not significant when the portrayal is positive. This interaction does not seem to be a true cross interaction, but rather exhibiting a mainstreaming effect. In this way, H3 and H4 were partially supported, and RQ1 was supported in that transportation does moderate the relationship between character evaluations and aggressive behavior.
A regression analysis was also conducted in order to probe this interaction further and discern whether or not arousal had an effect. Arousal was investigated due to the fact that the general aggression model suggests that increased arousal, such that could result from viewing violent media, could lead to an increase in aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The data show that the overall three-way interaction between arousal and transportation across condition was marginally significant ($t(9,121) = -1.829, p = .07$). Further investigation using PROCESS found that when participants were moderately aroused, or fell around the mean, the effect of arousal was significant ($t(9,121) = -2.4, p = .018$). In addition, those participants that reported being highly aroused, or one standard deviation above the mean, also showed a significant effect of arousal ($t(9,121) = -2.69, p = .008$). See Figure 2.
Figure 2. Three-Way Interaction of Arousal and Transportation on Aggressive Behavior Across Conditions. This figure depicts the participants' levels of aggressive behavior across conditions under the influence of both transportation and arousal.

H5, similar to H2, predicted that when the character representation was ambiguous, participants would exhibit more varied levels of aggressive behavior. According to Levene’s Test for Homogeneity of Variances, the variance within the ambiguous condition was not significantly different from the other conditions ($F(1, 129) = .43, p = .51$). Therefore, H5 was not supported.
Finally, RQ2 sought to investigate whether or not identification ($M = 3.03, SD = .702$) would have a moderating effect on the relationship between character perceptions and aggressive behavior exhibited in the competitive reaction time task. To investigate this, a series of regression analyses were utilized. Again, aggressive behavior was operationalized as the average intensity levels multiplied by the average duration levels set across all 25 trials. The overall, the model did not significantly improve when identification was added ($R^2 = .038, F(1,125) = 1.033, p = .312$). Furthermore, the resulting analyses showed that identification was not a significant moderator of the relationship between character perceptions and aggressive behavior ($\beta = 5.817, p = .41$). Thus, RQ2 was not supported.
Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of character perceptions, specifically along the dimension of ethics and moral judgments. Character evaluations are a crucial component of how viewers respond to narratives, so it is important to investigate the nuances in these evaluations as well as broader social implications. As moral monitors, viewers are constantly evaluating characters’ morality based on their personal standards. When these primary characters commit morally reprehensible acts in the story world, the viewer engaging in the process of moral disengagement could lead to more aggressive behavior in the real world.

As stated above, the first set of hypotheses looked at character evaluations and set out to confirm previous research related to character perceptions. Although the only dimension to differ significantly across conditions was ethics, the result is not surprising. As expected, the positive representation of yielded more positive evaluations of his ethics and the negative representation also prompted a more negative perception of his morality. One explanation for this may be that the dimension of ethics as defined and operationalized by the PEFiC model was the only dimension of Spike’s character that was truly manipulated across conditions while the other six factors remained relatively static. For instance, due to the fact that the same character was used across all conditions, it follows that a dimension such as aesthetics would remain constant. Also, as previous
research suggests, morality or ethics is one of the attributes that viewers tend to evaluate earlier and weigh more heavily when constructing a perception of a character (e.g., Zillmann, 2000). This finding also seems to support the assertion Konijn and Hoorn (2005) put forth that as communication researchers delve further into the investigation of character perceptions and affective responses towards characters, there is a need for comprehensive scales that target the nuanced dimensions represented in character attributes.

When looking at the morally ambiguous condition and participants’ evaluations of Spike, the data show that rather than presenting a broader and more varied range in perceptions of him, participants tended to evaluate Spike as moderately moral. These findings point to the possibility that when presented with morally ambiguous characters, viewers seem to develop a more moderate cumulative evaluation of the fictional character rather than polarizing the character’s behavior by weighting either the positive or negative behavior more heavily. According to Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2013), those characters considered to be morally ambiguous are often perceived to have both positive and negative characteristics, thus lending to a more ambiguous and complex moral code unlike the often clear-cut protagonist or antagonist. These conflicting characteristics may have been reconciled with each other to formulate a consistent categorization in accordance with the character impression formation process (Sanders, 2010).

An alternative explanation could be that the single measurement of Spike’s ethics after the clip was played may have limited the extent to which a more varied response towards Spike could have been captured. The CIF model, as well as the continuum model
it is based on, suggests that as viewers perceive and evaluate the incoming information concerning the character, the multiple evaluations could potentially reflect the categorization process and its fluctuations (Sanders, 2010). Therefore, multiple measures of the ethical dimension at different points in the clip could have revealed whether or not this is actually the case. However, according to a longitudinal study conducted by Eden et al. (2011), the evaluations of the morally ambiguous characters of a web series were not statistically different in terms of variance from the moral judgments concerning negative characters. This, along with the results from this investigation, suggests that perhaps morally ambiguous characters are simply evaluated more moderately and moral judgments are cumulatively constructed based on components such as intention, outcome (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013), and aesthetics (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). In this way, perhaps it would be beneficial to conceptualize moral judgments of fictional characters on a sliding scale, with ‘completely good’ on one end and ‘completely bad’ on the other. Once an initial judgment of morality is established at any given point on the continuum, the evaluation is subject to move in either direction as the viewer gains more information about the character. Eventually, the evaluation will stabilize once the viewer is no longer gathering new information about the character. Thus, the overall valence of the moral evaluation could reflect the fluid nature of these judgments concerning the characters’ morality and ethics.

The ambiguous condition also did not prompt an increased variance in the performance of aggressive behavior as was predicted. More specifically, the more moderate the evaluation of the characters’ morality, the more likely the viewer is to
exhibit more moderately aggressive behavior. This supposition is indirectly supported by previous research regarding moral disengagement and character perceptions (see Raney, 2004), but would benefit from further investigation.

One of the most interesting findings of the study was the relationship between the participants’ perceptions of Spike’s morality and their subsequent aggressive behavior in the competitive reaction time task. There are two implications of this type of relationship. First, this investigation is one of the first to have used the competitive reaction time task as a proxy measure for moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers more specifically to the cognitive processes by which we allow ourselves to perform behaviors outside the realm of our moral standards. These behaviors are simply those that go against our moral standard, an example of which could be the performance of aggressive behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Although the competitive reaction time task did target aggressive behavior, it does not provide a complete picture of the cognitive component of moral disengagement. Therefore, the claims of this relationship are somewhat limited by the measure used in this study.

Second, the influence of transportation on this relationship provides interesting implications. Although transportation is often seen as a main effect, in this case the unique attributes associated with this concept enhance the impact of the perceptions of Spike on aggressive behavior. As stated previously, transportation can be seen as a combination of several concepts, one of which is attention. Attention could provide a partial explanation as to why transportation was a significant moderator of this interaction. As previous research suggests, transportation does enhance viewers’
responses towards characters including character liking and moral responses (Green et al., 2004) and is associated with a variety of media effects, such as enjoyment (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Busselle & Biladzic, 2008). Building from this foundation, one could posit that transportation’s moderating effect could enhance the impact of the viewers’ character evaluation in accordance with the valence of the character representation when the viewer is highly transported. Further investigation would be beneficial in gaining a deeper understanding of the influence of low levels of transportation. In effect, this could then enhance the strength of the influence of these evaluations on one’s own moral appraisal of one’s own actions.

Arousal was also found to play a marginally significant role in this interaction. As a component of Bandura et al.’s (1996) conceptualization of moral disengagement, arousal was considered as a possible explanation for increased aggressive behavior (Bandura et al., 1996). Although Bandura et al. were specifically referring to anger arousal, it is important to note that arousal refers to an unspecified physiological response to something startling (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Therefore, arousal attributed as a response to the condition clips might have worked in tandem to enhance the effect of the condition clips on subsequent aggressive behavior.

Finally, identification did not have any moderating effect on the interaction between character perception and aggressive behavior. Although it was anticipated that identification could potentially have a moderating effect on the relationship between participants’ evaluations of Spike and their performance in the competitive reaction time task, there are a few potential explanations as to why this did not occur. One explanation
could be that the moral disengagement process operates outside of the influence of identification. Identification is characterized by “assuming the identity of the target of our identification” (Cohen, 2001, p. 247) for a brief moment, at which point in time the viewer would not be thinking about their own moral code in comparison to the character’s, but rather taking on the character’s morality. An alternative, but related, explanation could be that perceived similarity and affinity with the character would be a more accurate measure of this particular influence.

Limitations

One way in which this study was limited was the specific condition clip that was used in the negative condition. Although the pilot test reflected that the negative representation was in fact significantly more negative than the other representations of Spike, it perhaps was not as negative a representation as it could have been. This in turn may have restricted the degree to which the participants viewed Spike as amoral. This may have further contributed to the limited distinction between the participants’ responses to ambiguous and negative conditions. Furthermore, it might have limited the potential impact on moral disengagement. If this experiment were replicated in the future, one recommendation would be to choose a clip for the negative condition that has clearer or far more negative actions being portrayed. This would provide an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between morally ambiguous and amoral character representations and the influence on character interpretations.

Another aspect of the investigation that could have been improved upon is the measurement of the characters’ morality. Rather than having the participant evaluate
Spike’s morality at a single point after they watched a clip, it perhaps would have been more telling if these evaluations were made at different points throughout the clip. In addition, a measure of morality should also assess the character’s intentionality as well as the outcomes of the behavior, as previous research states that these are important factors that are considered in developing moral judgments (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012).

**Directions for Future Research**

As it stands, the current study begins to explore at the potential implications of character perceptions and its relationship to viewers’ own morality, thereby laying the foundation for future investigations of morally ambiguous characters and moral disengagement. Future research should seek to further establish the reliability of the competitive reaction time task with rewards and punishment as a proxy measure of moral disengagement, as it has not previously been used as such. Similarly, it would be helpful to develop a stronger and more accurate measure or scale to target the potential guilt associated with exhibiting aggressive behavior.

It would also be interesting to develop a more nuanced understanding of viewers’ evaluations of morally ambiguous characters, which could potentially manifest in two ways. First, future research should seek to develop and enhance more accurate and complete measures of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement has only recently begun to be examined in a media effects context; therefore, it is crucial that more precise measures are honed as our understanding of this phenomenon grows.
Second, there is a need for theoretical advancement when it comes to the real world implications of viewers’ moral judgments of fictional characters. As mass media researchers, we are well aware of the powerful influence the media have on daily lives, and morality is not excluded (see Raney, 2004). Developing a stronger theoretical foundation in this area will provide the necessary framework for future research to build from. Morality is a complex concept that both differs across people, as well as is a manifestation of social and familial influences. To what degree are these character evaluations individualized? What about the generalizability of findings? It seems that cultural and societal influences would have to be considered to fully gain a full understanding of moral disengagement as a media effect. Answers to these questions will become more and more necessary as entertainment media scholars delve further into this area of research.
Conclusion

As morally ambiguous characters become more popular in the media (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Eden et al., 2011), it is important to develop a more concrete understanding of the potential implications of these complex characters. Despite the fact that viewers realize fictional characters are not subject to real world moral sanctions, and thus their bad behavior is more permissible, viewers do seem to be influenced by these evaluations in the real world. The current study advanced this line of research by investigating some broad claims concerning character perceptions and moral disengagement. The results showed that there is in fact a relationship between viewers’ moral evaluations of fictional characters and subsequent aggressive behavior, and transportation moderates this relationship. As suggested previously, this study acts as a foundation for future advancement in understanding morally ambiguous characters, as well as developing a more complete understanding of moral disengagement in this context.
References


Green, M. C. (2004). Transportation into narrative worlds: The role of prior knowledge and perceived realism. Discourse Processes, 38, 247–266.

Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of


## Appendix A: Pilot Test Descriptives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$N$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Pilot Test Descriptives
Appendix B: Full Measures

Adapted Perceiving and Experiencing Fictional Characters (PEFiC) Scale (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005)

ETHICS
1. Kind
2. Reliable
3. Equitable
4. Mean
5. Liar
6. Corrupt

AESTHETICS
1. Beautiful
2. Attractive
3. Pleasant to look at
4. Dreadful
5. Deformed
6. Ugly

EPISTEMOLOGY (REALISM)
1. Lifelike
2. Real
3. Similar to real life
4. Fake
5. Artificial
6. Unauthentic

SIMILARITY
1. Recognize
2. Agreement
3. Similar
4. Contrary
5. Different

VALENCE
1. Favorable
2. Successful
3. Victorious
4. Likeminded
5. Failure
6. Incorrect
7. Antagonism

**RELEVANCE**
1. Meaningful
2. Helpful
3. Indifferent
4. Unmoved

**INvolvEMENT/DISTANCE**
1. Connected
2. Attached
3. Distant
4. Avoidance
5. Disapproving

**Adapted Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000)**
1. While I was watching the clip, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.
2. While I was watching the clip, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (R)
3. I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the clip.
4. I was mentally involved in the clip while watching it.
5. After finishing the clip, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (R)
6. I wanted to learn how the clip ended.
7. The clip affected me emotionally.
8. I found myself thinking of ways the clip could have turned out differently.
9. I found my mind wandering while watching the clip.
10. The events in the clip are relevant to my everyday life.
11. The events in the clip have changed my life.

**Adapted Identification Scale (Cohen, 2001)**
1. While viewing Cowboy Bebop, I felt as if I was part of the action.
2. While viewing Cowboy Bebop, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.
3. I was able to understand the events in the clip in a manner similar to that in which Spike understood them.
4. I think I have a good understanding of Spike.
5. I tend to understand the reasons why Spike does what he does.
6. While viewing the show I could feel the emotions Spike portrayed.
7. During viewing, I felt I could really get inside Spike’s head.
8. At key moments in the show, I felt I knew exactly what Spike was going through.
9. While viewing the program, I wanted Spike to succeed in achieving his goals.
10. When Spike succeeded I felt joy, but when he failed, I was sad.

**Noise Blast Guilt Measures**
1. How guilty do you feel about blasting your partner?
2. How wrong do you feel blasting your partner was?
3. How justified do you feel in blasting your partner?
4. Do you feel good about blasting your partner?
5. How acceptable was it to blast your partner?

**Character Guilt Measures**
1. How guilty do you think Spike felt about his actions?
2. How wrong do you feel Spike’s actions were?
3. How justified do you think Spike was in his actions?
4. Do you think Spike felt good about his actions?
5. How acceptable were Spike’s actions?

**Familiarity Scale**
1. How familiar are you with the show Cowboy Bebop?
2. How often have you seen the show Cowboy Bebop?

**Arousal Measure**
1. How aroused were you?
### Appendix C: Correlational Matrix of Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>.228**</td>
<td>.253**</td>
<td>.621**</td>
<td>.402**</td>
<td>.486**</td>
<td>.300**</td>
<td>.500**</td>
<td>.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aes.</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.326**</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.589**</td>
<td>.253**</td>
<td>.495**</td>
<td>.311**</td>
<td>.410**</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epist.</td>
<td>.228**</td>
<td>.326**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>.327**</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>.362**</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>.319**</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sim.</td>
<td>.253**</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.247**</td>
<td>.270**</td>
<td>.299**</td>
<td>.356**</td>
<td>.403**</td>
<td>.427**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val.</td>
<td>.621**</td>
<td>.589**</td>
<td>.327**</td>
<td>.247**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.403**</td>
<td>.657**</td>
<td>.417**</td>
<td>.622**</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inv.</td>
<td>.402**</td>
<td>.253**</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>.270**</td>
<td>.413**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.351**</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td>.357**</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rel.</td>
<td>.486**</td>
<td>.495**</td>
<td>.362**</td>
<td>.299**</td>
<td>.657**</td>
<td>.351**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.394**</td>
<td>.568**</td>
<td>.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans.</td>
<td>.300**</td>
<td>.311**</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>.356**</td>
<td>.417**</td>
<td>.208**</td>
<td>.394**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.712**</td>
<td>.219*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Id.</td>
<td>.500**</td>
<td>.410**</td>
<td>.319**</td>
<td>.403**</td>
<td>.622**</td>
<td>.357**</td>
<td>.568**</td>
<td>.712**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.242**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fam.</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td>.427**</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>.157</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.242**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed) *Correlations is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)**

Table 6. Correlational Matrix of Scales
Appendix D: Moderating Effect of Transportation on the Interaction Between Character Representation and Aggressive Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Familiarity</th>
<th>Transportation * Condition</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-23.974</td>
<td>20.174</td>
<td>17.848</td>
<td>-4.314</td>
<td>1.394</td>
<td>-6.677</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>19.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>21.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>27.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>33.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>29.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>25.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>20.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Moderating Effect of Transportation on the Interaction Between Character Representation and Aggressive Behavior