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Do Dark Personalities Prefer Dark Characters? A Personality Psychological Approach to Positive Engagement with Fictional Villainy

Abstract

Paradoxically, villainous characters in film, literature, and video games can be very popular. Previous research in the traditions of cognitive media theory and affective disposition theory has assumed that villainous characters can inspire positive engagement only when audiences discount the villains' immorality by focusing on positive traits or mitigating circumstances. Challenging this assumption, we argue that audiences with a conventionally immoral personality profile may come to engage positively with villainous characters because they share the villains' immoral outlook to some significant degree. We find robust support for this hypothesis in a North American sample ($n = 1805$) by comparing respondents' survey scores on the "dark triad" of personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) with their professed degrees of villain sympathy, identification, fascination, empathy, and enjoyment. We reject a competing hypothesis that such positive forms of engagement with villainous characters will be best predicted by respondents' agentic values, such as autonomy and competence. Our results support a need to consider personality as a basic determinant of character preferences.

Keywords: villain; fiction; cognitive media theory; affective disposition theory; dark triad; agency

We cannot prevail on ourselves to ... bear an affection to characters, which we discover to be blameable.

– David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757)

If only you knew the power of the dark side.

– Darth Vader, *Star Wars Episode IV: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

1 Introduction

It seems easy to explain why someone might like the typical hero of a fictional narrative. These characters are brave, conscientious, and prosocial. They are good, in a word, and goodness all but implies likeability. It seems harder to explain liking of a character with both moral and immoral traits. But it seems harder still to explain liking of a fully villainous character.

Villains embody damnable motives, traits, and ideologies (e.g., Eden, Daalmans, & Johnson, 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019). By definition, villains are made to be morally offensive, yet they are occasionally iconic, imitated, and celebrated characters in different media, including film (e.g., Darth Vader, Hannibal Lecter), literature (e.g., Lady Macbeth, Patrick Bateman), and video games (e.g., Sephiroth, Prince Arthas). What might explain this apparently counterintuitive fact? The research traditions of cognitive media theory and affective disposition theory assume that immoral characters could not inspire positive engagement by virtue of their very immorality, and both traditions have proposed alternative explanatory mechanisms that would account for such engagement. However, we argue and present evidence that some individuals may come to engage positively with villainous characters because *they are like them*, that is, because they share the villains’ immoral outlook to some degree. This perspective suggests that individuals characterized by conventionally immoral personality traits will be more likely to engage positively with villainous characters than individuals who are not

characterized by conventionally immoral personality traits. The present study tests this prediction in a North American sample ($n = 1805$) by comparing respondents' survey scores on the "dark triad" of personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) with their professed kinds and degrees of *villain positivity*, that is, their positive ways of engaging with the villains of fiction in terms of identification, empathy, sympathy, enjoyment, fascination, understanding, similarity, etc. Further, we test the predictive power of the dark triad against a competing hypothesis that highly agentic individuals will be more likely to experience forms of villain positivity. According to this competing hypothesis, villain positivity will be best predicted by agentic values, such as autonomy, competence, mastery, and status, which are commonly (though not uniquely) expressed and embodied by the popular villains of fiction.

A main objective of this research is to integrate the study of character engagement, which has focused on making universalistic claims about general audiences, with personality psychology. A personality psychological approach can complement such research by revealing individual-level differences in character engagement, and by explaining such differences at the level of personality.

2 Background

This section outlines research on villain positivity from the humanities tradition of cognitive media theory (CMT), on the one hand, and media psychology in the tradition of affective disposition theory (ADT), on the other hand. We isolate one explanatory theme for each of these influential traditions and observe that both traditions consider the problem to be commonly misstated: We do not engage

positively with immoral characters *because* of their immorality. Rather, both traditions suggest that we engage positively with immoral characters *in spite* of their immorality.

2.1 Cognitive media theory

Cognitive media theorists have tended to emphasize non-moral factors of media representations in accounting for morally problematic character engagement.¹ They argue that the appeal of a villainous character may not be due to the character's villainy per se, but instead due to other aspects of the character and the character's situation and representation in a narrative. This type of explanation may be characterized as *circumventive*: It circumvents the problem of engaging positively with immoral characters by suggesting that people do so for essentially non-moral reasons.

Smith (1999) surveys a range of circumventive factors that may account for positive engagement with villainous characters. First, immoral characters may be attractive by virtue of having individual traits that have nothing to do with the characters' moral status. Smith (p. 226) gives the example of Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) from *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), noting that this character "is on many occasions charming, witty, urbane, genteel, and learned." Moreover, in narratological terms, Lecter is not a destructive antagonist, but rather a kind of helper: He helps the protagonist, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), at several critical junctures (see also Grodal, 2009, chapter

¹ We would not wish to exaggerate the differences between the explanatory models in cognitive media theory and media psychology. Media psychological research outside of the ADT tradition has showed that non-moral factors, such as a character's attractiveness and popularity, can inspire positive forms of engagement, such as liking and identification (e.g., Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Likewise, cognitive media theorists frequently assimilate findings from media psychology generally, and media psychology in the ADT tradition specifically (e.g., Vaage, 2016).

4). Thus, while the character may be immoral, his *actions* frequently are not, and this may cause the viewer to take his side and empathize with his plight.

Other theorists have proposed other ways in which positive features of immoral characters may give rise to positive attitudes in audiences. Turvey (2019, p. 232) points out that many immoral characters appeal “to our heads just as much as our hearts.” They present uncommon admixtures of traits and motivations that audiences find intellectually intriguing. Hannibal Lecter’s puzzling motivations for helping Clarice Starling would also exemplify this cognitive form of attraction, which Turvey identifies with an attitude of morally disinterested *fascination* in a character (see also Mittell 2015, chapter 4). At the somewhat more abstract level of narration, Plantinga (2010) argues that narratives may rhetorically valorize certain non-moral qualities of immoral characters. Even the agency of a clearly immoral character can be alluringly portrayed by selectively focusing on aspects of the character that are not, in themselves, immoral. Darth Vader’s destructive rampages in *Star Wars*, for example, are frequently accompanied by powerful music that underscores his might, his sheer capacity to effect his will. To be like Darth Vader in this respect might well be attractive to some viewers.²

Smith explores yet another sense in which such “apparently perverse allegiances” may only be *apparently* perverse.³ Drawing on the genre work of Altman (1996), he notes that audiences’ attitudes toward immoral characters can be swayed by how fictions represent such characters and the drama

² Fascination with powerful villainy could ultimately arise from our general, evolved tendency, as social-hierarchic creatures, to monitor our social environments and attend to agents—like villains—exhibiting domineering, “alpha” behavior (Cheng & Tracy, 2014). Fascination in this sense is amoral: What is central to it is not finding a character appealing due to their moral *or* immoral behavior, but simply finding our attention gripped by highly “agentful” behavior (see also section 3.2).

³ “Allegiance” is Smith’s (1995) term for a positive stance towards characters founded on moral approval of their actions and attitudes. A “perverse allegiance” is a positive response to an immoral character.

surrounding them. Consider Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994). Jules, a cold-blooded murderer, is clearly a highly immoral character. In Plantinga's terms (2009), a direct, "sympathetic" mode of engagement with Jules would mark him as utterly contemptible. However, *Pulp Fiction* encourages an aesthetically "distanced" mode of engagement with Jules and his victims through the theatricality of his murders, as well as the frivolity with which they are handled by the film's other characters and by the overall narration. The murders are simply not taken very seriously. While some narratives certainly aim to convey a moral message, others, such as *Pulp Fiction*, are not preoccupied with rousing specifically moral emotions. They may instead aim to rouse a nominally non-moral response, such as humor.⁴ Narrative media can in this way prescribe a positive but non-moral response to an immoral character.

Finally, Tan (1996) has explored how audiences may relate to a fictional character in ways that fundamentally depart from real-world relationships and the morally reactive attitudes that govern such relationships (Strawson, 1962). For example, there are clearly many ways to "like" a fictional character, only some of which manifest essentially interpersonal attitudes, such as might exist between friends or family members. Characters may also be liked because they are poignantly and convincingly acted, or they may be appreciated as compelling embodiments of abstract ideas; consider Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) as one such case. Such attitudes do not target the fictional character's diegetic agency—they are not based in *fiction emotions*, in Tan's terminology. Rather, they target the character as a storytelling artifact, and as such are based in *artifact emotions*. Artifact emotions may not forge a true moral allegiance between the audience and the

⁴ For examples of how narratives can adopt conventional frames that either promote or prevent moral and emotional responding, see Grodal (1997, chapter 9) and Vaage (2013).

immoral character—most fans of the Joker would presumably not wish to “watch the world burn,” as he would—but they may inspire other forms of positive engagement, such as interest and fascination (see also Taylor, 2007, on aesthetic approval of villainy).

To summarize, these and similar arguments made by researchers in the CMT tradition suggest that a positive stance toward an immoral character can be based on factors that outweigh or discount the character’s immorality (e.g., counterbalancing non-moral traits, such as attractiveness, combined with aesthetic considerations that have no obvious analogues in normal interpersonal relationships). The CMT perspective is limited, however, in implicitly assuming a homogenous audience with shared sets of interests, beliefs, values, motivations, and so on, which would account for a broadly uniform response pattern. We suggest that the CMT perspective may be correct in explaining why some or even most members of an audience like villainous characters. However, we seek to complement the approach by examining individual differences in an audience and demonstrating that some audience members are attracted to villainous characters because they share these characters’ immoral traits to some degree.

2.2 Affective disposition theory

Media psychology in the influential tradition of affective disposition theory (Raney, 2004; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillman, 2000; Zillman & Cantor, 1976) postulates a tight, one-directional fit between perceived character morality and character liking: Judgments of character morality *determine* character liking. (We shall later discuss recent efforts to refine this model.) This simple formula has received much empirical support (e.g., Grizzard et al., 2020; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Zillman & Cantor, 1977).

However, it is both conceptually and empirically limited (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Vaage, 2016). Conceptually, it fails to distinguish between the different forms of liking discussed in the previous section.⁵ Most people would probably not like the villain Darth Vader in the sense in which they like a close friend, though they might like and even celebrate Darth Vader as a character in the *Star Wars* universe. Clearly, many villains are liked according to this latter use of the term. The formula also does not consider other forms of positive character engagement, including identification, empathy, sympathy, fascination, enjoyment, and understanding. But perhaps the best evidence for the limitations of the formula comes from popular culture's manifest fascination with the villains of fiction, for which it cannot account. People dress up as, form fan clubs around, buy merchandise modelled on, write fan fiction about, root for, and celebrate the villains of fiction. It seems clear that these various positive forms of character engagement presuppose some form of character "liking," broadly construed to include such attitudes as fascination and sympathy.

To explain positive engagement with immoral characters—the "Gordian Knot of Disposition Theory" (Grizzard et al., 2020)—media psychologists working in the tradition of ADT have recently come to emphasize how audiences may disregard or justify such characters' immoral actions. This type of explanation may be characterized as *mitigative*: It holds that individuals may cognitively mitigate moral factors that conflict with their aim of enjoyment. The argument, which typically targets positive engagement with morally flawed antiheroes in TV and film, starts from the premise that people normally use narrative media for enjoyment (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). For narratives to be enjoyable, they need likeable characters. Antiheroes, defined as significantly morally flawed

⁵ While some recent studies continue to employ single-item measures of "liking" of immoral characters (e.g., Janicke & Raney, 2018), others have tapped different forms of liking, including fascination and friendly disposition (e.g., Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013).

protagonists, do not fit this bill as, according to ADT, immorality reduces character liking. Audiences therefore *morally disengage* from the antihero in order to be able to maintain enjoyment in the character, and, through the character, in the narrative experience as a whole (Raney 2004). “Moral disengagement” is here to be understood as a technical term referring to a psychological process of representing immoral behaviors in a morally acceptable light (Bandura, 1999). This can be done by minimizing, rationalizing, reinterpreting, or otherwise justifying a character’s immoral behavior. For example, audiences might excuse the immoral actions of antihero Walter White (Bryan Cranston) from *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013) by noting that his various adversaries are even less scrupulous than he is, thus exonerating the character by way of advantageous comparison.

Studies have shown that moral disengagement in response to antiheroes predicts enjoyment of both the antihero characters and the stories they populate (see Janicke & Raney, 2018, for a review). It remains unclear, however, whether moral disengagement underlies positive forms of engagement with fully villainous characters, who are unambiguously immoral, and who rarely constitute the focal point of a narrative. While the ADT tradition does not yet have an empirical answer to this question,⁶ it has a theoretical postulate: We should expect moral disengagement to facilitate enjoyment of villainous characters since, according to ADT, moral approval *preconditions* character liking. Complicating this picture, ADT researchers have recently come to recognize an essential role for the mechanism of identification⁷ in facilitating liking of morally problematic characters, such as antiheroes. This

⁶ However, Sanders and Tsay-Vogel (2016) found initial evidence that fully villainous characters may *not* inspire moral disengagement in audiences.

⁷ The concept of identification has been a source of confounding equivocation in media research (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Smith, 1995), but an emerging consensus defines identification as a “loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character,” enabling desirable vicarious experience (Cohen 2001, p. 251).

theoretical revision was precipitated by findings that whereas moral monitoring cannot explain liking of an antihero character, identification with the antihero can explain such liking (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Raney et al., 2009; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Based on this research, Janicke and Raney (2018, p. 541) concluded that “liking of an antihero develops through identification with the character rather than moral approval (as with traditional hero protagonists).” Importantly, this revised view still sees a primary explanatory role for moral disengagement as a precondition for identification. Thus, while audiences may not be able completely to overlook an antihero’s moral shortcomings, they may come to represent those shortcomings as justified in order to be able to identify with the character. In summary, the revised model claims that audiences (I) morally disengage from the antihero’s transgressions (II) in order to enable identification with the character (III) for the purpose of experiencing enjoyment in the character and, through the character, in the narrative experience as a whole.

Could moral disengagement in the same way explain different forms of *villain* positivity? We believe that the ADT tradition correctly identifies moral disengagement as a precursor to enjoyment of immoral characters for at least some people. However, moral disengagement is at best a condition of such enjoyment; it could not be its motivation. This is because moral disengagement denotes an antecedently motivated cognitive strategy—a means to an end, that is, rather than an end in itself. According to the revised version of ADT, this end is identification, which then leads to the ultimate goal of enjoyment. But why would one want to identify with immoral characters in the first place, when most fictions also contain moral characters? Raney et al. (2009) proposed that an accepting attitude toward violence combined with a lack of moral conviction should predispose to identification with immoral characters. The positing of these specific constructs bespeaks the mitigative stance of the ADT tradition: Immorality is assumed to be an obstruction to enjoyment that, as such, needs to be cognitively

mitigated. Thus, a lax moral constitution would only *allow for* positive engagement with immoral characters. It would not motivate such engagement. Likewise, an accepting attitude toward violence is not the same as a positive *attraction to* violence (whether such attraction takes the form of a desire to be violent or merely an interest in violence). By contrast to these ADT-based assumptions, we hypothesize that character immorality may itself be attractive to certain individuals: specifically, individuals who themselves possess similar, conventionally immoral traits.

3 The present study: Personality psychology and character responding

A personality psychological approach to character responding starts from the assumption that significant differences in character responding exist, and that they are meaningful and measurable. This approach can be contrasted with an interpretive tradition of investigating the patterned use of narrational, stylistic, and characterological devices aimed at producing invariant effects in “audiences,” that is, an abstraction of typical responding. This latter tradition, exemplified most strongly in the CMT research outlined above, starts with a *how*. A personality psychological approach starts with a *who*.

Both approaches have merits. Uncontroversially, narrative works “prescribe” or “invite” responses for their audiences, including responses to individual characters. We say that such works are “emotionally colored” and in the business of conveying “morals,” that is, determinative lessons about how to think and act. Certainly, one can ask meaningful questions about the communicative aims of narrative artifacts (e.g., Gaut, 2007). However, this methodology does not address individual differences in

responding even to the same media content, which is not a marginal or insignificant phenomenon (Oliver, 2002).⁸

A personality psychological approach to villain positivity can complement the traditions of CMT and ADT in two distinct ways. First, the approach highlights individual differences in responding, which tend to be neglected by CMT, and, to a lesser extent, the ADT tradition, which has proposed trait-level modulators of identification (Raney, 2009), but which has not drawn upon the basic constructs of personality psychology. Second, a personality psychological approach may expand the explanatory scope of the ADT tradition by identifying personality trait-level modulators of the psychological processes explored by this tradition, including enjoyment, identification, and moral disengagement. In so complementing existing research traditions, the personality psychological approach can help approach an ideal of *thick explanation* (Smith, 2017, p. 52ff) that integrates a gamut of causal factors. One such significant factor in explaining people's peculiar fascination with the villains of fiction may be individual differences in conventionally immoral, "dark" traits.

3.1 The dark triad

The dark triad (Paulhus and Williams, 2002) subsumes the conventionally immoral personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism describes a grandiose and entitled interpersonal style whereby one feels superior to others and craves validation ("ego-reinforcement").

⁸ We should acknowledge here the existence of studies of audience reception drawing on ethnographic and other social science methods (e.g., Staiger, 1992; the work of Mass Observation is an important precursor). In this tradition, individual responses are explored but with the primary aim of understanding the beliefs and attitudes of social groups (defined by class, gender, generation, ethnicity, etc.).

Machiavellianism describes a manipulative interpersonal style characterized by duplicity, cynicism, and selfish ambition. Psychopathy describes low self-control and a callous interpersonal style aimed at immediate gratification. It has been suggested that the three components of the dark triad may reduce to a single factor (Book, Visser, & Volk, 2015). Contrariwise, it has also been suggested that a more comprehensive conception of dark personality traits should include other traits, such as sadism (Muris et al., 2017). These revisionary proposals notwithstanding, the dark triad remains the most studied and validated of the dark traits (Kaufman, Yaden, Hyde, & Tsukayama, 2019). We further note that while the dark triad traits *tend* to cluster together, they do pick out different aspects of a dark personality, and, as such, may explain different forms of cognition and behavior. Indeed, the different components of the dark triad have each been shown meaningfully to predict different personal outcomes, workplace behaviors, educational behaviors, mating behaviors, interpersonal behaviors, and antisocial behaviors (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013, for a review). As a unified construct that covers a broad and commonly observed range of antisocial tendencies, then, the dark triad provides a way of operationalizing conventional immorality at the level of personality.

Why expect a dark personality to predict villain positivity? Based on the psychology of interpersonal attraction and impression formation (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993), we suggest that such a relationship would be driven by (perceptions of) similarity at the levels of basic social values, motives, and attitudes. This is a common assumption and repeated finding in the media psychological literature on character engagement, liking, and identification. Individuals are found preferentially to engage with fictional characters that share their moral values and inclinations (e.g., Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Likewise, individuals with a dark personality may be drawn to characters who share their immoral values and inclinations, perhaps

because they represent a source of relevant information about what someone relevantly similar to them might do or have done to them (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Mar and Oatley, 2008), or because cues to similarity and familiarity activate innate mechanisms of empathy and sympathy (Preston & de Waal, 2002; but see Maibom, 2014, for critical discussion of the supposed automaticity of such mechanisms). It therefore seems plausible that darker personalities would be drawn to the villains of fiction.

Two recent studies support the existence of such a relationship. Appel, Slater, and Oliver (2019) found that a dark personality was negatively related to appreciation of “eudaimonic” narratives (“stories dealing with purpose in life, the human condition, and human virtue” (p. 769)). This relationship was mediated by perceived inauthenticity and corniness. While this study did not measure *character* evaluations, it did suggest that a dark personality may significantly modulate how individuals relate to issues of fictional morality. In another study, Black et al. (2019) showed that a self-reported individual disposition towards Machiavellianism was associated with a preference for immoral characters.⁹ This result is consistent with our suggestion that a dark personality will contribute to villain positivity.

However, we do not see a reason to assume that Machiavellianism would be uniquely explanatory of positive engagement with immoral characters. Other dark traits, including narcissism and psychopathy, may be equally or more explanatory. The present study predicted that scores on all three dark triad traits would be associated with villain positivity but was agnostic about which DT trait would be the strongest predictor. The relative importance of each trait was explored through forward stepwise regression.

⁹ Black et al. (2019) did not just investigate enjoyment of villains, but of “dark characters,” including antiheroes. In line with the aim of the present study, they stressed the need to investigate how people come to enjoy completely villainous characters (p. 12).

3.2 Agency (and communion)

The concepts of agency and communion, introduced by Bakan (1966), are increasingly recognized in personality psychology as two foundational and cross-cultural parameters of social cognition and behavior (Abele et al., 2016; McAdams, 1985; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012; Wiggins, 1991). Wiggins (1991, p. 89) describes the two concepts as follows: “Agency refers to the condition of being a differentiated individual, and it is manifest in strivings for mastery and power which enhance and protect that differentiation. Communion refers to the condition of being part of a larger social or spiritual entity, and it is manifested in strivings for intimacy, union, and solidarity with that larger entity.” Hogan (1982) influentially describes the communal individual as focused on “getting along,” whereas the agentic individual is focused on “getting ahead.”

Although Hogan (1982) stressed the tension between agency and communion, noting that successfully getting ahead may breed resentment in others and that getting along often requires sacrificing individual achievement, research clearly shows that agency and communion are statistically independent tendencies (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Consequently, a highly agentic individual could also be highly communal, as is the case for those who want to be recognized as great humanitarians by raising money for charitable projects that benefit others. On the other hand, some agentic individuals do seek mastery and power at the expense of others. The typical fictional villain would clearly fall into that category. And then there are “purely agentic” individuals who are neither particularly communal nor anti-communal. Therefore, unlike the traits that constitute the dark triad, agentic values per se are not necessarily immoral, antisocial, or socially undesirable. In fact, both agency and communion

constitute socially desirable traits that are often emphasized in the self-presentations of their bearers (Paulhus 2019).

The present research tested whether a purely agentic value orientation—that is, an appreciation of competence in achieving individual goals, regardless of whether those goals are moral or immoral—at least partially explains villain positivity. By dint of their self-absorbed, antisocial pursuits, villains tend to be driven individualists. They tend to be confident in their abilities and to employ these abilities for personal gain and recognition. In this respect they are similar to predominantly agentic individuals. Moreover, the *competency to shape events* (a key feature of agency—Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) seems to be part of the conventional wisdom of the appeal of villainy. Artists and critics frequently intuit that villains *make things happen*—that they tend to be driven and competent social agents—and that this quality can make them powerfully alluring. The following two examples originate from a series of bestselling novels and a writer’s guide to characterization, respectively.

She had always found villains more exciting than heroes. They had ambition, passion. They made the stories happen. (Chainani & Bruno, 2018, p. 98)

[Villains frequently] strive for a particular objective. Be it power, money, or love that one of these miscreants desires, he will bend nature itself to his will to achieve his prize. (Fredine, 2018)

The power and ambition of a villain might well inspire positive engagement from congruently agentic audiences, even if these audiences have no particular attraction to the villain’s immorality. Such a link would be in line with the CMT perspective, which, as noted, emphasizes how non-moral aspects of the villainous character could account for the character’s appeal. Indeed, several CMT researchers have proposed that agentic characteristics might be appealing. For example, Smith (2011, p. 78) argues that

the immoral character Tony Soprano of the TV series *The Sopranos* is attractive due to his Humean “sublimity,” his agentic traits of “status, dynamism, insouciance—in a word, *power*.” Vaage (2016, Chap. 4; see also Raney & Janicke, 2013) considers a similar explanation for the appeal of transgressive antihero characters, arguing that empathic engagement enables the audience to experience something of the power and confidence that the antihero possesses. Lacey (2002, p. 106) found qualitative empirical evidence to this effect, noting that his respondents cited the antiheroic gangster figure’s “ability to live a life beyond social structures and expectations.” Thus, an explanation based in agency would support existing theories emphasizing how non-moral factors may lead to positive engagement with villainous characters.¹⁰ Of course, villainous characters potentially embody many attractive non-moral traits, but we propose that agency bears special affinity to the role of the villain—one that exists and can be measured at the level of personality.

An alternative to the hypothesis that villain positivity is based on high levels of agency in both the audience and the villain is the hypothesis that the engagement is based on *unmitigated agency* more so than pure agency (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Unmitigated agency represents a combination of high levels of agency with low levels of communion. It results in “a focus on the self to

¹⁰ There may even be a remote connection here with arguments concerning “the male gaze,” widespread in contemporary film theory in the wake of Laura Mulvey’s influential study (1975). Mulvey’s argument might be summarized in the following way: mainstream films embody the male gaze insofar as male characters make the narrative happen (they are the agents of change), and control the space of the action visually (they are depicted primarily as characters whose gaze we follow, as they act, rather than those we look at). The powerful agency of these male characters is thus central to the “identification” that, according to such arguments, they induce as part of the structure of mainstream films. We note this connection here to demonstrate just how widespread the intuition concerning the appeal of agency may be.

the exclusion of others” and interpersonal relations that are “hostile, cynical, greedy, and arrogant” (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999, p. 132). Unmitigated agency, while not identical with any of the dark triad traits, has been observed to be a component of the dark triad traits (Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Thus, if unmitigated agency were more closely related to villain positivity than pure agency, then that would be evidence that the villain’s very immorality plays a significant role in promoting various kinds of positive engagement. If pure agency were instead the more robust predictor of villain positivity, then that would support the view that non-moral factors form the basis of the villain’s appeal. We tested whether pure agency or unmitigated agency better explains engagement with villains by comparing the magnitudes of correlations between participants’ scores on both kinds of agency with their professed degrees of villain positivity. Unmitigated agency scores were also entered into the exploratory regression to examine the unique contribution of this variable. Because unmitigated agency is a component of the dark triad traits, its relation to villain positivity was not regarded as a competing explanation for villain positivity, but, rather, as a compatible explanation.

3.3 Age and gender

It is well-established that the prevalence of delinquency and criminal behavior in Western societies peaks in the late teens and then declines thereafter (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007). Also well-established is the fact that males are far more likely than females to commit crimes that harm others (Ellis, 2005). Associations between age, gender, and the dark triad traits follow these trends, showing an increase in the late teen and early adult years, followed by a decline, with males showing a higher level of dark triad traits than females (Klimstra, Jeronimus, Sijtsema, & Denissen, 2020). Age

and gender were therefore included in the exploratory regressions, not as a competing explanation for villain positivity, but as a compatible one.

3.4 Forms of villain positivity

The present study's exploratory ambition recommended a broad and inclusive conception of villain positivity in the encompassing commercial mediascape of film, literature, and video games. We wanted to know how people conceive of their own positive engagement with the villains of fiction rather than whether we could fit those conceptions with any theoretical preconception. The study's respondents indicated the degree to which they tended to (a) identify with, (b) enjoy, (c) feel the emotions of, (d) be able to "get inside the head of," (e) understand narrative events in a manner similar to, (f) have a good understanding of, (g) understand the reasons of, (h) recognize the situation of, (i) root for, (j) sympathize with, (k) be fascinated by, (l) count as their favorite characters, (m) find interesting, and (n) feel similar to the villains of fiction (see Table 1, below, for a full list of shortened items). These items were formulated to target respondents' intuitive engagement with the villains of fiction. The items were modeled on Cohen's (2001) recommended items for measuring character identification; but, as noted, we wanted to include additional forms of villain positivity beyond identification.

Significantly, we did not ask respondents to report their engagement with any particular villains; rather, we asked audiences to rank how they *tended to* regard villainous characters. This approach allowed each respondent to recall and consider villainous characters of personal significance to them, as has been done in previous research (e.g., recently by Eden, Dalmans, & Johnson, 2017; Grizzard et al., 2020). However, we also added restrictive versions of two of the general questions listed above. These

restrictive versions asked respondents to report how they regarded “powerful and dominant” prototypical villains, naming as examples Darth Vader (*Star Wars*), Mystique (*X-Men*), and Agent Smith (*The Matrix*). These two items, which respectively targeted the degree to which respondents tended to “identify with” such characters and “enjoy” such characters, were added to ascertain that respondents’ intuitive conception of villainy did not diverge far from our own. We would have reason to question this assumption if the identification and enjoyment ratings given in response to these particular villains were significantly different from the ratings given in response to the non-restrictive formulations.

4 Method

4.1 Participants and procedure

We recruited a sample of North American respondents ($n = 1805$; 912 females, 884 males, 9 non-binary) through Amazon’s MTurk crowdsourcing service. Participant approval rating cutoff was set at 90%, meaning that only respondents whose previous work had been approved in over 90% of cases were able to access the listing. All respondents completed a survey of the following description: “Answer questions about yourself and your fiction preferences.” The survey page opened with additional information: “This survey asks about your personality and values as well as about your relationship to fictional villains in popular media such as film, literature, and video games. You must be 18 years or older to take this survey.”

4.2 Composition of the survey

The survey began with an assessment of gender, political orientation, and age. Gender was coded 1=male and 2=female. A non-binary response category was provided, but only nine individuals chose that category, so those cases were not included in gender correlation analyses. Age response categories were 18-27, 28-37, 38-47, 48-57, 58-67, and 68 and older (coded 1-6, respectively). Political orientation categories included conservative, liberal, libertarian, centrist, progressive, socialist, and none of the above (coded 1-7, respectively). The political orientation item was used simply to assess the representational adequacy of the sample rather than to test hypotheses. Responses to the item showed that among respondents who indicated a political preference, 88% identified as centrist, conservative, or liberal, with liberals somewhat more represented than the other two groups.

Next, the survey included these scales and variables in the following order: the Short Dark Triad scale (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014), the Agentic and Communal Values scale (ACV; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012), and a set of 22 items assessing the various forms of villain positivity described above.

The Short Dark Triad Scale (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014.). The SD3 was constructed by Jones and Paulhus to provide a relatively short but reliable and valid measure of the three socially aversive personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (see section 3.1). Sample items are as follows: “I hate being the center of attention” (narcissism, reverse-scored); “It’s wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later” (Machiavellianism); “People who mess with me always regret it” (psychopathy). Each scale contains 9 items, scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scale scores represent the sum of 9 item responses and can therefore vary between 9 and 45). Alpha reliability estimates of the final 9-item scales ranged in their four separate samples as follows: Narcissism (.68-.80), Machiavellianism (.71-.76), and Psychopathy (.72-.77). Jones and Paulhus report correlations, disattenuated for measurement error, between the three SD3 and longer

scales regarded as “gold-standard” measures of the three constructs of .87 for Narcissism, .83 for Machiavellianism, and .92 for Psychopathy. The scales also showed significant convergent correlations with established facets of the three constructs and with informant judgments of the three constructs.

The Agentic and Communal Values Scale (ACV; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). The ACV is a 24-item scale assessing Agentic values (12-items) and Communal values (12-items). Respondents indicate how important each value is to them on a scale from 1 (not important to me) to 9 (highly important to me). Scores on the two scales represent the sum of item responses and can therefore range between 12 and 108. A sample Agentic value is “Wealth (financially successful, prosperous).” A sample Communal value is “Forgiveness (pardoning others’ faults, being merciful).” Trapnell and Paulhus reported reliabilities between .81 to .85 in several samples, as well as considerable evidence for the construct validity of the ACV. In addition to computing scores for Agentic and Communal values, we also followed Trapnell and Paulhus’s suggestion to compute an unmitigated agency score by subtracting standardized Communion z-scores from standardized Agency z-scores.

Villain Positivity Scale. The Villain Positivity Scale was created for the current study. Items for this 22-item scale were designed to encompass a wide range of ways in which people can engage positively with villains (see section 3.3). Because the Villain Positivity Scale is a new measure, its reliability and factor structure were assessed for the first time in the current study. Sample items are “I tend to want the villain to succeed in achieving his or her goals” and “I tend to feel I have a better understanding of the hero than of the villain” (reverse-scored). A complete list of the items in abbreviated form appears in Table 1. Agreement with each item was indicated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A score on the full measure represents the sum of item responses and can therefore range from 22 to 110.

4.3 Data cleaning

1805 respondents completed the survey. Protocol validity testing (Johnson, 2005) eliminated 219 protocols from the sample. In addition, one protocol was removed because the respondent reported an invalid MTurk ID, lowering the number of valid cases to 1585. The elimination of suspicious protocols followed two criteria. The first criterion was based on what Johnson (2005) termed *psychometric antonyms*. Psychometric antonyms are pairs of items with opposite or conflicting meanings and that most individuals in a sample tend to answer in opposite directions. The strength of the tendency to answer the items in opposite directions can be quantified as a Pearson correlation coefficient. Three such items in the survey were identified:

Enjoy hero more than villain; Enjoy villain more than hero. (r = -.57)

Know exactly what villain is going through; Better understanding of hero than villain. (r = -.28)

Find villain most interesting character; Not interested in villain. (r = -.44)

For each respondent, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed across the three items and the frequency distribution of the coefficients was examined. As expected, 90% of respondents had a negative correlation coefficient; data from the 182 respondents who did not were removed from the data set.

Johnson (2005) also indicated that individuals who use the same response category many times in a row are probably not responding appropriately. Therefore, data from 37 individuals who gave the same response to the final 10 questions in the survey were removed from the data set.

5 Results

5.1 Scale reliability estimates

Cronbach alpha reliability estimates for the established scales were similar to values previously published and were all acceptable: Narcissism (.82), Machiavellianism (.83), Psychopathy (.89), Agency (.85), and Communion (.86). The items representing attitudes toward villains had not been previously tested as a scale. In the current sample, the 22-item scale showed an alpha reliability coefficient of .96. This high consistency justifies summing responses to all 22 items into an overall Villain Positivity score.

5.2 Principal components analysis of the villain positivity items

Despite the high response consistency to the 22 Villain Positivity items, a principal components analysis was undertaken to see whether the contents of the items might cluster into different themes. Rotation converged in 9 iterations, with a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .97 indicating adequate sampling. Three components with eigenvalues greater than one were identified, accounting for 55.0%, 7.7%, and 5.9% of the variance, respectively. A scree-plot also supported a three-component solution. Table 1 presents the varimax rotated loadings of the items on the three components. Inspection of item content of the highest-loading items on each component indicated that the first component assesses *identification with the villain*, the second component, *empathy for the villain*, and the third component, *fascination with the villain*. Component-based subscale scores were computed by summing responses to a set of the highest-loading items for each component (shown in boldface in Table 1). Cronbach

alpha reliabilities for the three subscales were as follows: *Villain Identification* (five items, $\alpha = .91$), *Villain Empathy* (six items, $\alpha = .91$), and *Villain Fascination* (five items, $\alpha = .88$). The good reliabilities of these short, distinctive subscales justified their use in addition to the overall Villain Positivity scale, and indicate that we successfully achieved our goal of assessing several distinct dimensions of villain positivity (see section 3.3).

Villain Item	Component		
	1	2	3
V1 Identify with villain	.73	.38	.19
V2 Identify with powerful/dominant villain	.73	.35	.08
V3 Enjoy hero more than the villain	-.64	-.02	-.44
V4 Feel emotions of villain	.43	.63	.25
V5 Get inside villain's head	.39	.70	.26
V6 Understand as villain understands	.32	.73	.26
V7 Good understanding of villain	.15	.76	.36
V8 Understand villain's reasons	.11	.77	.33
V9 Know exactly what villain is going through	.42	.72	.14
V10 Better understanding of hero than villain	-.60	-.06	-.28
V11 Want villain to succeed in achieving goals	.77	.31	.18
V12 Feel joy when villain succeeds, sad when fails	.77	.32	.11
V13 Fascinated by villain	.24	.42	.71
V14 Enjoy villain	.35	.41	.67
V15 Enjoy powerful/dominant villain	.36	.37	.52
V16 Villain tends to be favorite character	.64	.30	.53
V17 Enjoy the villain more than the hero	.67	.28	.53
V18 Find villain most interesting character	.34	.34	.71
V19 Not interested in the villain	.02	-.14	-.79
V20 Choose fiction based on cool/interesting villain	.40	.39	.44
V21 Find villain more fascinating than hero	.50	.30	.64
V22 My personality closer to villain than hero	.77	.35	.16

Table 1 Varimax Rotated Component Matrix for 22 Villain Items

Table 1 also shows that the factor loadings for the non-restrictive items assessing villain identification (V1) and villain enjoyment (V14) are highly similar to the items containing specific examples of

powerful villains (V2 and V15, respectively). (We also examined the item-total correlations for these items in our reliability analyses and again found the correlations for non-restrictive and restrictive items to be similar.) These findings support our assumption that the respondents' intuitive conception of villainy did not diverge far from our own conception.

5.3 Descriptive statistics and variable intercorrelations

Figure 1 compares the distributions of the three Villain Positivity component scores. This comparison shows that Identification scores skew heavily toward the low end, compared to Empathy and Fascination scores, which are distributed fairly evenly across the range of possible scores. These differences are also reflected in the item means of responses in the 1-5 response format for each component of Villain Positivity: 1.92 for Identification, 2.63 for Empathy, and 3.42 for Fascination. All pairwise comparisons of these component means following a repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni correction were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. That the sample scored lower on Identification than Empathy and Fascination would perhaps be expected for a sample of relatively normal individuals, because, as we shall later argue, identifying with a villain seems more immoral than empathizing with, or being fascinated by, a villainous character.

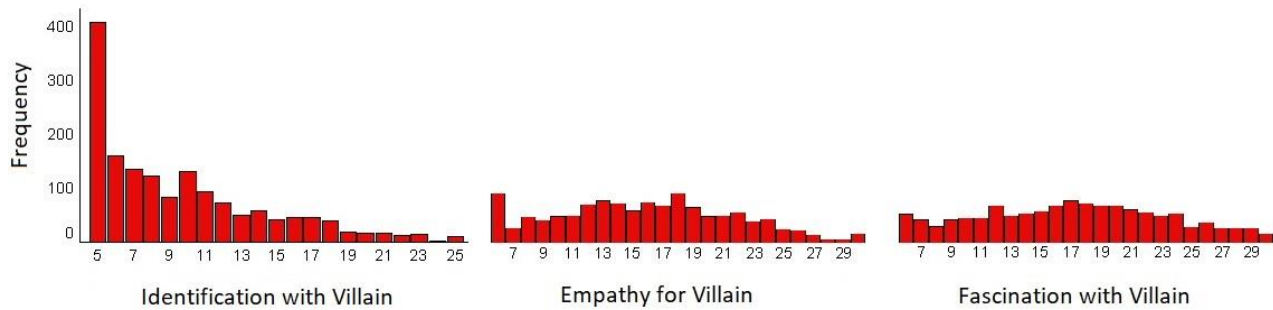


Figure 1 Component Score Distributions

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all of the variables in the study except political orientation. The mean scores for the three Dark Triad traits are only slightly lower than the mean scores for these traits reported by Trapnell and Paulhus (2012), again suggesting that our sample is relatively normal. The simple correlations of greatest interest are those between the predictor variables (three Dark Triad traits, Agency, Communion, unmitigated agency, age, and gender) and the variables assessing attitudes toward villains. Table 2 shows that the strongest predictors of overall villain positivity and its components are Psychopathy and Machiavellianism from the Dark Triad, followed very closely by unmitigated agency. Most of these correlations are in the $r = .40$ to $.50$ range, although the correlations with Villain Fascination lie closer to $r = .30$. The next strongest predictors of Villain Positivity are Narcissism, Agency, and Communion (in a negative direction), all on the order of $r = .20$ to $.30$. Finally, age and gender show negative correlations in the low $-.20$ s, indicating that villain positivity is slightly stronger in males than females and in younger rather than older individuals.

Scale	Mean	SD	Mach	Nar	Psy	Agn	Com	Unmit Agency	Age	Gender	Villain Positivity	Villain Identification	Villain Empathy	Villain Fascination
Machiavellianism	26.0	6.9	(.83)											
Narcissism	22.1	6.9	.42	(.82)										
Psychopathy	17.7	6.3	.58	.45	(.79)									
Agency	59.3	15.7	.46	.55	.38	(.85)								
Communion	80.1	15.0	-.32	-.16	-.40	.02	(.86)							
Unmitigated Agency	0.0	1.4	.55	.51	.55	.70	-.70	(na)						
Age ^a	2.4	1.2	-.24	-.13	-.25	-.26	.17	-.30	(na)					
Gender ^b	1.5	0.5	-.18	-.20	-.33	-.19	.18	-.26	.07	(na)				
Villain Positivity	53.8	19.3	.44	.29	.50	.32	-.27	.42	-.25	-.24	(.96)			
Villain Identification	9.6	4.8	.46	.34	.59	.36	-.30	.47	-.21	-.22	.86	(.91)		
Villain Empathy	15.8	6.0	.41	.29	.43	.31	-.18	.34	-.25	-.21	.89	.69	(.91)	
Villain Fascination	17.1	6.3	.33	.17	.34	.21	-.21	.30	-.21	-.21	.90	.63	.73	(.88)

^aAge groups coded 1=18-27; 2=28-37; 3=38-47; 4=48-57; 5=58-67; 6=68 and older. Frequencies were 367, 682, 267, 146, 98, and 25, respectively.

^bGender coded 1=male; 2=female. Frequencies were 765 male, 811 female, and 9 non-binary. Non-binary cases not included in gender correlations.

Numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are Cronbach alpha reliability estimates. (na) indicates the Cronbach alpha is not applicable.

With an N of 1585, correlations of $\pm .05$ are significant at the $p < .05$ level, $\pm .07$ at the $p < .01$ level, and $\pm .09$ at the .001 level (all two-tailed).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Main Variables of the Study

5.4 Comparing the predictive power of agency and unmitigated agency

Several methods can be used to assess whether unmitigated agency is a significantly stronger predictor of villain positivity and its components than pure agency. One is to convert the correlations to z -scores with Fisher's r -to- z transformation and then use Steiger's (1980) equations 3 and 10 as the basis for an asymptotic z -test. Using Lee and Preacher's (2013) Web utility for such z -tests, we found that the correlations in Table 2 are significantly higher for unmitigated agency in every case: Overall Villain Positivity ($z = 5.51, p < .00001$); Villain Identification ($z = 6.32, p < .00001$); Villain Empathy ($z = 2.05, p = .02035$); Villain Fascination ($z = 7.05, p < .00001$) (all tests one-tailed).

A second way to compare the predictive power of pure agency and unmitigated agency is through partial regression, looking at the correlation between one type of agency and a form of villain positivity while holding the other type of agency constant. The partial correlations between agency and overall Villain Positivity, Identification, Empathy, and Fascination, holding unmitigated agency constant, are $r = .04, .05, .10, \text{ and } .00$, respectively. Only the Empathy correlation is significant at the $p < .05$ level or better, two-tailed. The corresponding partial correlations for unmitigated agency, holding agency constant, are $r = .29, .33, .19, \text{ and } .22$, all significant at the $p < .001$ level, two-tailed.

The stronger correlations for unmitigated agency do not rule out the possibility that *some* villains may be appealing by virtue of their positive traits, such as pure agency. However, the stronger correlations between unmitigated agency and villain positivity demonstrate that those who engage positively with villains tend to share an antisocial, destructive form of agency with these characters.

5.5 Regression analyses

Forward, stepwise regression analyses were run to identify the relative contributions of different predictors of overall Villain Positivity and its components. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 3. In all four regressions, Psychopathy was the strongest predictor. Machiavellianism came in second in three of the four regressions and came in third in the final regression. These results implicate these two Dark Triad components as central to explaining villain positivity. Unmitigated agency contributed significantly toward the prediction of Villain Identification, Villain Fascination, and overall Villain Positivity.

Variables	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²
Overall Villain Positivity (DV)							
(Constant)	12.26	.000					
1 Psychopathy	10.15	.000	.287				
2 Machiavellianism	6.28	.000	.173				
3 Unmitigated Agency	4.21	.000	.115				
4 Age	-4.09	.000	-.091				
5 Gender	-3.55	.000	-.079				
Overall Model				141.16	5, 1570	.000	.308
Villain Identification (DV)							
(Constant)	3.70	.000					
1 Psychopathy	16.25	.000	.421				
2 Unmitigated Agency	6.63	.000	.168				
3 Machiavellianism	4.95	.000	.128				
Overall Model				329.67	3, 1572	.000	.385
Villain Empathy (DV)							
(Constant)	10.19	.000					
1 Psychopathy	7.30	.000	.215				
2 Machiavellianism	7.57	.000	.212				
3 Age	-5.34	.000	-.124				
4 Gender	-3.28	.001	-.076				
5 Narcissism	2.66	.008	.067				
Overall Model				100.86	5, 1570	.000	.243
Villain Fascination (DV)							
(Constant)	14.02	.000					
1 Psychopathy	5.29	.000	.167				
2 Machiavellianism	5.29	.000	.161				
3 Gender	-4.51	.000	-.111				
4 Age	-3.86	.000	-.094				
5 Unmitigated Agency	2.90	.004	.091				
6 Narcissism	-2.02	.044	-.056				
Overall Model				53.99	6, 1569	.000	.168
<i>Note.</i> Forward stepwise regressions, probability-to-enter criterion $p \leq .05$							

Table 3 Results of Stepwise Forward Regressions for Predicting Villain Positivity and Its Components

Gender and age played a smaller role in the prediction of villain positivity, entering the regressions after Psychopathy and Machiavellianism and not at all in the prediction of Villain Identification. But their role was consistent, indicating that male individuals and younger individuals tend to have more positive attitudes about villains.

The one unexpected finding among the regressions was the way that Narcissism interacted with the other variables in the prediction of villain positivity. Although Narcissism showed statistically significant, positive, simple correlations with overall Villain Positivity and the three positivity subscales, it entered only two regression equations, as the last predictor for Villain Empathy and Fascination, and in the latter it showed a negative beta weight. This means that whatever portion of Narcissism was positively related to overall Villain Positivity and Villain Identification, that portion was already accounted for by other variables that share that aspect with Narcissism. For Villain Fascination, Narcissism functions as a *suppressor variable*. This means that even though Narcissism as an individual variable correlates positively, overall, with Villain Fascination (i.e., narcissists are generally fascinated with villains), there is a unique part of Narcissism that is statistically independent of the other two Dark Triad traits, unmitigated agency, and gender and age that is negatively related to Villain Fascination. Perhaps it is a narcissist's unique self-absorption that interferes with interest in villains. The effect is small and impossible to pinpoint with the current methods, so understanding this potential suppressor effect remains for future research.

5.6 Data availability

The present study's data set and survey are available at

https://osf.io/pr5wf/?view_only=785b0a51292145598e7fe7ef3ef5e7ea.

6 Discussion

6.1 Main findings

The main hypothesis of the present study—that individual differences in dark personality traits would predict various forms of villain positivity—was roundly supported. Individuals with darker personalities were significantly more likely to report such positive modes of relating to villainous characters as enjoyment, identification, fascination, and empathy. Especially interesting is the capacity of individual differences to qualify the morality-liking link that has frequently been assumed universal: that audiences like moral characters and dislike immoral characters. Audiences are not monolithic; while many members of an audience will indeed root for the protagonist, audience members who possess dark traits appear to be drawn to villains who share those traits.

Of the three dark triad traits, psychopathy and Machiavellianism appear to be more important in explaining villain positivity than narcissism. Past research has shown that when these three traits are plotted on a circumplex defined by agency and communion, psychoticism and Machiavellianism lie very close to each other, clearly in the high-agency, low-communion (i.e., unmitigated agency) octant of the circumplex (Dowgwillo & Pincus, 2017; Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Narcissism, while still on the side of low communion, is much less so and more strongly oriented toward agency. Like pure agency, narcissism is more weakly associated with villain positivity than psychopathy and Machiavellianism, which better embody unmitigated agency. We do not want to draw strong conclusions here, however, because we did not specify villains for our research participants. Future research might show that narcissism is a stronger predictor of positive attitudes toward clearly narcissistic villains.

A competing hypothesis—that villains are preferred for their agentic ability to “make things happen”—was not well-supported. The modest correlations between pure agency and different forms of villain positivity indicate that some people may appreciate the power and ambition of some villains. However, the correlations between *unmitigated agency*—that is, a dark form of agency unbalanced by communal concern—correlated significantly higher with villain positivity than pure agency. When darkness is removed from agency, agency no longer predicts villain positivity. As unmitigated agency shares a large conceptual overlap with the dark triad, we consider this finding to support the present study’s main hypothesis.

6.2 Gender and age

Our analyses showed that gender was a significant source of individual variance in accounting for various forms of villain positivity. In general, males were more prone to experience the various forms of villain positivity. This gender difference can be partially explained by the fact that males tend to have a darker personality profile than females. In other words, it is the relatively dark personality of males that explains the connection between maleness and villain positivity. Young males in particular reported high levels of villain positivity, which appears largely to be a function of their particularly high levels of dark personality traits. However, in regression equations, maleness and age contributed uniquely to the prediction of villain positivity after accounting for psychopathy and Machiavellianism. The result of the regression analysis indicates that it is not just the higher levels of psychopathy and Machiavellianism in younger males that lead to villain positivity, but that there is something else about being young and male that is associated with villain positivity. What that something else might be is a question for future research.

One additional reason for the connection between maleness and villain positivity might be that there are more well-known male than female fictional villains. Such a discrepancy might make it the case that males typically assess their engagement with villains who are more similar to themselves in the various characteristics associated with maleness, whereas females might typically assess their engagement with villains who are more dissimilar to themselves in terms of gendered characteristics. The greater perceived similarity of males to the male villains rated might then partially account for the greater villain positivity scores of male respondents in our sample. Future research using specific villains with known gender could help evaluate this possibility. However, the stronger predictive value of dark personality traits in the current study suggests that gender is not nearly as important in explaining villain positivity as is personality.

6.3 Individual differences in forms of villain positivity

The various forms of villain positivity employed in this study all intercorrelate positively. This positive manifold justifies the aggregation of the various forms of villain positivity into a single factor, which, as has been shown, can be linked to dark personality traits. However, whereas the aggregation of measures may highlight some general trends, their disaggregation may fill in significant details.

One important detail is that the frequencies of high villain positivity based on fascination and empathy were more commonly observed in our sample than those based on identification (see Figure 1 above). This result may be uplifting to some, as it seems that interest in and empathy with a villainous character may be less morally alarming than personal identification with such a character (which, in accordance with the wording of the survey items rather than any theoretical preconception, would represent the perception that one is similar to the villain and the desire to see the villain succeed). Such differences in

the nature and moral significance of various modes of positive engagement with immoral characters underwrite the need for future research to specify which modes of positive engagement are of interest—the question of whether one “likes” a character, by itself, fails to discriminate between very different forms of positive engagement. In our sample, young males in particular reported high levels of identification with villainous characters. This result may not be too surprising, as young males are relatively prone to a broad range of antisocial tendencies (Moffitt, 1993). This propensity may be mediated by young males’ relatively darker average personality profile (Klimstra et al., 2020).

Relatedly, identification with villainous characters was even more closely associated with having a dark personality than was either fascination or empathy. The reason may be that fascination and empathy are more likely than identification to be based on concerns and impressions that are not, in themselves, antisocial. For example, someone might be fascinated by how the villain of the Joker came to his cynical perspective on humanity, without necessarily agreeing with that perspective. By contrast, identification with a villainous character seems unlikely in the absence of specifically antisocial identification. After all, if you did not at some level share a villain’s immoral outlook, why would you want him or her to succeed? Thus, one should take these conceptual differences seriously when considering the social implications of the present findings.

Finally, it is not obvious why our various measures of villain positivity should intercorrelate positively, as they do. These measures pick out many different kinds of attitudes, and while some of the attitudes seem inherently immoral (e.g., rooting for villain), others do not (e.g., interest in villain). The fact that all of these measures do intercorrelate positively, however, suggests that there is a common factor underlying all of them, and, as our results indicate, that factor may be found at the level of personality. However, this apparent explanation begs a different question in assuming that immoral people should be more interested in, or understanding of, immoral characters. Why should one expect *this* to be the

case? In a recent set of studies, Krause and Rucker (2020) found that individuals were more interested in villainous characters who resembled themselves, but only if the comparison were made without the threat of being socially judged for their interest in the immoral characters. The authors argued that “the combination of threat mitigation and perceived self-relevance in stories allows similarity to negative others to become attractive” (p. 12). In line with this interpretation, it may be that stories allow us to explore any aspect of ourselves freely, whether it is the bravery of Luke Skywalker or Princess Leia, the sly opportunism of Han Solo, or the cold cynicism of Darth Vader (see also Mar & Oatley, 2008; Vaage, 2013). Perceived self-relevance could in this way explain why such nominally non-moral attitudes as interest and fascination were associated with directly sympathetic and approbatory attitudes toward villains, which would rest, as we have argued, on a shared immoral outlook.

6.4 A revised research model

Our results suggest that previous models of positive engagement with immoral characters, potentially including morally ambiguous characters, may benefit from qualifying central theoretical assumptions. Thus, research in the CMT and ADT traditions may have underestimated the degree to which character preferences differ between individuals as a function of personality. Though it may be true that audiences typically engage positively with villainous characters in spite of, and not because of, these characters’ immorality, our results suggest that some audiences may also resonate with the villain’s very immorality. In addition, the ADT tradition may have placed too much emphasis on moral disengagement as a primary source of such positive engagement. As already noted, revised ADT models suggest that audiences morally disengage from immoral characters in order to be able to enjoy them. However, in taking a cue from the social-intuitionist paradigm of moral psychology (Haidt,

2001), we suggest that moral disengagement is possibly better understood as a rationalization of preexisting positive attitudes toward immoral characters than as a primary source and precondition of such attitudes. In other words, it may not be that individuals come to enjoy immoral characters because they are able to disengage morally from their immoral actions; rather, it may be that some individuals come to enjoy immoral characters because they are similar to these characters in salient ways, and that processes of moral disengagement allow such individuals to rationalize or minimize their morally questionable attitudes. This is a subtle but important theoretical distinction, in that our interpretation places less causal emphasis on cognitive processes of moral disengagement and more causal emphasis on underlying personality factors. Future research should seek to disentangle the contributions of moral disengagement from the contributions of having a dark personality.

7 Limitations

While we believe the present study identifies an important role for personality in shaping audiences' response to villainous characters, the study is not without limitations. First, our treatment of "villain positivity" is not comprehensively differentiated. We did not create different "liking" scales to assess different forms of liking, for example. That would be a herculean task. Instead, we assembled a large set of items that represent different forms of positive engagement, covering such general domains as sympathy, empathy, interest, and understanding. We then conducted a factor analysis to empirically arrive at a set of three different kinds of positivity. This, of course, is a simplified model. We see this as a compromise between an exhaustive, comprehensive detailing of every possible kind of positive character engagement, on the one hand, and a reductive focus on only one or a few modes of engagement, on the other hand. Nonetheless, we recognize that other forms of positive engagement

with villainous characters could have been more explicitly considered, including wishful identification (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) and friendship-like parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), and encourage future studies to explore these avenues.

A different way to increase the descriptive resolution of our approach would be to ask research participants to specify the villainous characters that came to mind for them when reporting their attitudes toward villainous characters. The villains' age and gender would then be known, and independent judges might even rate the characters' personality characteristics, as has been done in previous research (Carroll et al., 2012). Such an approach would allow for closer examination of the various points of audience-character similarity that may be thought to facilitate different modes of positive engagement.

Another limitation of our study resides in its correlational nature. We cannot conclusively establish that the observed link between the dark triad measurements and the various forms of villain positivity was mediated by a preference for the villain's immorality per se. To establish this link would require a more direct measure of the relationship. However, the numerous and conceptually related associations between immoral personality and the various forms of villain positivity minimally justifies the claim that personality matters for audience engagements with villainous characters.

Finally, our respondents encountered the various scales used in the study in a set, non-randomized order, and results could therefore be subject to order effects. For example, it is possible that, having considered the dark triad items, participants were primed to report higher values than they would have otherwise reported in response to the various items assessing different forms of villain positivity.

8 Conclusion

The present study is the first to report and conceptualize significant linkages between a broadly immoral personality profile and positive forms of engagement with immoral, villainous characters. The results of this study contribute to our understanding of the relationship between character morality and character appraisal. Since individual differences at the level of personality can be shown to qualify the morality-liking link, it may be conceptually and empirically inadequate to conceive of the relationship as being mostly or fully determined at the level of media content and/or instrumental cognitive strategies, as has been assumed by previous research in the traditions of cognitive media theory and affective disposition theory. We have therefore proposed to integrate the perspectives of cognitive media theory and affective disposition theory with a personality psychological approach. Such an expanded model may explain how even a fully villainous character can inspire positive forms of engagement in some individuals.

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