

Sympathizing with the “New Villain”: Morally Ambiguous Characters Representation and audience perceptions

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Introduction

In cinema, audiences have been inured to hang on for the happy ending, where heroes defeat the villains and liberate the victim from menace. Although it was commonly believed that conquest always goes to the hero, causing the sympathy with their side of the narrative (SIM, S., 2018), the late decade’s movies have appeared to somewhat change this stereotype by revealing that audience could in fact sympathize with the villain more than they would naturally do with the hero. Nevertheless, this mainly pertains if people are introduced to the villain’s point of view in the story. In that sense, Filmmakers have begun to sway people into sympathizing with the villain through picturing the villains of some classic fictional films as their own heroes in recent productions. Therefore, by screening the humanistic side of this villainous character and permitting the audience to discover some concealed traits within the villain’s upbringing and mentality.

Viewers have started to try to accept and recognize the villain, because they get to realize the convincing motivations behind the villains' actions. According to Johnson (2016), modern picture recreations are compelling due to the remarkable contrast between them and the original stories. This is because the traditional idea of evil becomes challenged when villains are portrayed as sympathetic and even repressed. A depiction of a "New Villain" is prevailing in the cinema and screen production industry, in which some morally ambiguous characters are being introduced to the audience, in a way that alters how they perceive the traditional relationship between character liking and moral judgment. Anti-hero narratives are also a part of the new production to present a narrative about a protagonist having reasonable and acceptable motives to do some bad actions. This belief led researchers to examine audience's perception of this modern depiction of the villain in recent movies, and the factors influencing the construction of an acceptable mental image of the "bad character".

Various efforts have been exerted to explore the phenomenon of the "new villains" depiction and how it may affect audience's perception. Many approaches and explanations are detected trying to understand this shift, the current study will be examining how the audience is developing personalized schemas to interpret the complex representation of fictional characters and specifically, the factors influencing the perception of morally complex characters presented in recent drama. In order to understand the background of the current research, the study will shed light on the evolution of theories explaining the psychological relationship between the audience and the fictional characters, from identification to affective disposition, emphasizing the important role of the notions of empathy, emotional involvement, and expectancy violations.

From Identification to Affective Disposition Theory ADT:

Drama with its various facets has been an important source of enjoyment for the audience. The protagonist in the storyline was always supported with moral values that encourage the audience to have positive feelings towards him and aspire for a reward for his good actions during his battle with an antagonist who lacks moral integrity and is doing bad actions, so he deserves punishment. That's how researchers explained feelings related to enjoyment for many years. Many theorists proposed explanations to the process of drama enjoyment, one of the most important theories is the "Affective Disposition Theory".

Zillmann, D. (1994) in his research about the mechanisms of emotional involvement

in drama, said that it's evident that different types of narratives are capable of touching the audience emotions. Many scholars were intrigued to understand the intensity of those emotional reactions, emotional involvement with the protagonist in his tragedy against the antagonist. Why do the audience, who are rational beings succumb to the actor's persona, and get emotionally involved with them as if they are friends in real life, ignoring the fact that they are in a fictional environment. The notion of "Identification" rooted as a Freudian concept, appears to be one of the most famous explanations used in psychoanalytic. The concept postulates that the audience identifies with the fictional character personas in order to vicariously live the gratifications that the hero has during the movie, and that they can't have in real life. The notion of "identification" can be traceable to the writings of Plato and Aristotle and was widely used in psychoanalytic theory (Aertsen, V., 2017).

Researchers elaborated on the work of Freud for a long period of time, during the second half of the 20th century, researchers suggested new approaches to explain emotional involvement, which lead to other perspectives in film studies. It was important to rapidly trace the evolution of the key critical concepts. The notion of identification in cinema studies, its critics, the spread of cognitive theory and its integration to the study of films. The notion of empathy, its roots and application in film studies will be discussed, as well as its relation to the affective disposition theory.

Hall. C.S, in his book (1954) that was a primer of Freudian psychology, introduced the definition of identification as "the incorporation of the qualities of an external object, usually those of another person, into one's personality". In 1982, Metz elaborated more specifically the idea of "Cinematic Identification", he differentiated between primary and secondary identification. Primary identification through the camera and sound system in the cinema, which replace the eye and ears of the audience. He emphasized that the camera in particular takes the audience in a certain path through a script with which the person identifies. He added that the identification with the actors as Freud suggested, happens in secondary identification.

According to Freud, the audience want to live the "Hero" experience, even if for a limited time, and that the scriptwriter and the actors gave him that chance by identifying with the character persona. Especially that the identification is an effortless experience that doesn't need special cognitive skills or particular imagination. (Zillman, 1994).

The concept of identification faced many critics and was described as vague and unnecessarily suggesting a relationship of identity between the audience and the character. Therefore, during the last decades, cognitive theory has been taking over the

field of film studies. Theorists prefer using other concepts illustrating the relationship between the character and the audience, for instance, emotional involvement (Aertsen, V., 2017). The cognitive approach was first introduced in the mid to late 1980s, applying the concepts of cognitive psychology in the study of the film's forms and the audience psychology. (Plantinga, C., 2002)

Zillmann, investigated through his research the idea of "Identification" with the characters in fictional movies, asking if people truly identify with fictional characters. He then doubted if the so-mentioned identification mechanisms actually work, and if people really get to live the character experience in order to gain the gratifications they got. He presented evidence that the audience might not "identify" with the persona, but they act as observers or third parties, "who did succumb to the theatrical, cinematic illusion that social reality unfolded before them". (P.36) In order to clarify his viewpoint, Zillman illustrated an example from the German institution of the Kasperletheater, massively watched by children. When anyone observes the children's reactions to Kesperle's antics, and in spite of being well-liked by them, this character doesn't elicit concurring affect through identification. When Kesperle, for example, was menaced by the devil who was sneaking behind him to harm him, children didn't want to be in his stead, a feeling that they should supposedly have, if they identified with his character, instead they shout in distress at him to take care or to watch out and look behind him. This signals that children acted in a desire to interfere, "they dealt with the character as their friends and enemies in their actual social environment". Finally, when the hero brings justice to the situation, children enjoy the redeeming of justice. And the assumption that they put themselves in the place of Kesperle to feel his victory is just not necessary. The audience is concerned with the well-being of the heroes, as if they were personal friends (Zillman, 1994). Then, the findings of many studies came in congruence with the "**respondent-as-witness**" assumption, (Sapolsky, 1979), therefore Zillman suggested an alternative concept of the process through which we engage our emotions to drama, and empathy was found to be one of the important notions he introduced.

The concept of Empathy in Drama:

The concept of Empathy could be tracked back to the German term *Einfihlung*, meaning "Feeling into" another entity, the concept was accepted and then entered the field of American psychology (Wispé, 1987). In his book, "The theory of moral sentiments" (1971, {1759}), the British philosopher Smith is considered the expert of this topic, as his referential book dealt with the notions related to sympathy, the foundation of

judgment concerning our own sentiments, approbation and disapprobation and the general rules of morality.

Zillman (1991) conceptualized and integrated various definitions of “Empathy”, through the examination of the theory and research about it. We can conclude that the audience members bring to any narrative situation they are in “empathetic response dispositions” that could sometimes be reflexive, or acquired through learning, some of them are acquired through sensitive emotional experiences, and some of them come from perspective taking. Generally, it is interpreted as “feeling with or for another individual”.

Affective dispositions and empathetic involvement:

Theories of empathy were usually concerned with the concordance of affect between model and observer. Zillman, (1991) suggested that affective disposition towards characters directly controls empathy. He suggested that positive affective dispositions towards the character lead to empathetic emotions, whereas negative affective dispositions will lead to unempathetic emotions, known as “Counter-empathic”. There is a positive relationship between the intensity of empathic or counter-empathic reactions and the degree of positive or negative affective disposition toward a character. This means that when the audience has a strong positive affective disposition towards a character, he will be more willing to develop strong empathic reactions. On the contrary, if the audience, through his observation of the character develops strong negative affective dispositions, he will probably develop strong counter-empathic reactions.

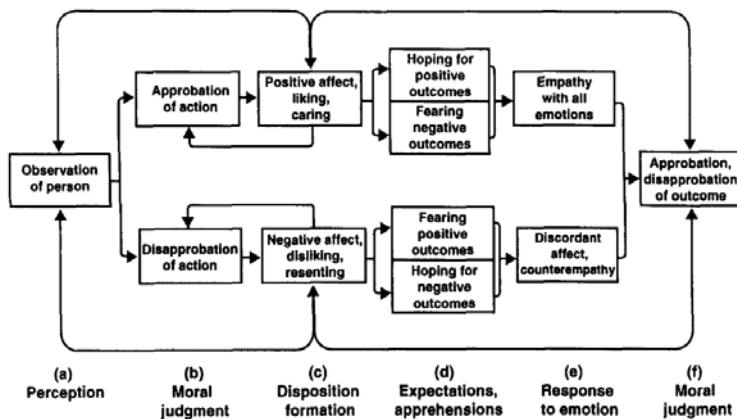


Figure (1) The mediation of Empathy in the Affective Disposition Theory

(Zillman, 1991)

The expectations about such a relationship between the affective dispositions and the empathic or counter-empathic reactions involves an approval or disapproval of the outcome. This means that empathizing with the good character implies hoping for a positive outcome and fearing negative outcome, whereas disliking the bad character involves fearing positive outcome that may happen to them and hoping for negative outcome. This process is understandable in context of moral judgment. The audience evaluates the character's personas as good or bad, the behavior of the character is presumed to be monitored and judged by the audience to be morally appropriate/good or inappropriate/bad. (Zillman, 1991)

H1: There is a positive relationship between the intensity of empathic reactions and the degree of positive affective disposition toward the character.

Character development and empathic reactivity:

One of the main principles in the research conducted about empathy in drama assumes that the audience is made to care about the characters, either positively or negatively. This dictum is directly related to the need for character development. Protagonists in drama must be introduced as friends to the audience, and antagonists as enemies. The affective dispositions are effectively built throughout the dramatic events, the better the characters are developed to maintain positive affective dispositions, the stronger the emotional involvement of the audience with the dramatic situation.

In his book "Entertainment functions of television", published in 1980, Tannenbaum, P.H., tackled the idea of entertainment as a vicarious emotional experience, and Zillman analyzed suspense in relation to entertainment. Both researchers suggested that the more the audience acknowledges the protagonist as a friend, and the antagonist as an enemy, the more they will have strong emotional engagement, the more they will have hopes for some outcomes and fears from others, and the more the respondents will show empathy or counter-empathy. The researchers linked those feelings to the final outcome of the entertainment experience, as the more the audience get involved in the dramatic events, the more they will appraise the experience as positive and entertaining (Tannenbaum, 1980; Zillmann, 1980, 1983). We can say that this was the principle of enjoyable drama, if this principle is not respected and the audience feel indifferent toward the characters presented, we are at risk of an emotionally flat drama experience. Therefore, to evaluate a good drama experience, one must find a development in protagonist and antagonist characters representing good or evil even

temporarily. Protagonists should be witnessed doing good things, and antagonists doing bad things, or demonstrating characteristics of good or evil (Hoffner and Cantor, 1991).

H2: The better the characters are developed to maintain positive affective dispositions, the stronger the emotional involvement of the audience with the dramatic situation.

If that was the case in character development in most of the dramatic works, one can exclude the melodrama type, in which this clearcut between good and evil may sometimes vanish. The protagonist and antagonist character are not established as good or evil, their characters are developing with every act revealing a part of their personality or another trait/face that we don't know. Therefore, the protagonist may do some morally bad actions, and the evil character may reveal some good sides, which modifies the affective dispositions toward both of them throughout the dramatic narrative. This reverse contributes to more emotional engagement, the unpredictability of the character behavior requires more attentional and elaboration skills from the audience (Zillman, 1994).

We can generally say that affective disposition theory (ADT) explained how individuals create and evaluate connections with fictional characters, and how what happens to the characters influences their enjoyment (Zillmann and Cantor, 1976). The question was directed from a psychological viewpoint through experiments (Aertsen, V., 2017). The judgement of intentional actions is directly related to moral evaluations. (Ditto & Pizzaro, 2007)

The Affective Disposition Theory retested:

Character liking based on moral evaluation and judgment has been a key factor in enjoying the drama presented, according to research in light of the ADT, the affective disposition theory states that enjoyment is a function of the affective dispositions viewers develop toward the characters through a storyline, it ranges from extreme liking to extreme disliking (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann, 2000). This formula explains the traditional Hollywood movies, where a good hero is fighting a bad villain. The ADT was empirically supported in many studies, for instance, (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Oliver, 1993, Raney & Bryant, 2002). On the other hand, few studies paid attention to morally complex characters applying ADT. If the moral judgment and character liking are main factors in the enjoyment process, then the protagonist who is morally complex will cause a problem to the audience in evaluating their actions and consequently liking

or disliking them, which will not lead to enjoyment.

Intentionality, consequential action, and casual response are three major factors influencing how people perceive villain characters. The villain is supposedly perceived as immoral, this is psychologically dependent on the villain's intentionality, meaning if he is doing the bad actions on purpose or by accident, this influences the overall viewer's judgement of the villain's character. Furthermore, the character consequential actions are influenced by many factors: how the narrative presents the villains, their history, and their point of view to the audience, as well as the villain's desire to do the action, the belief behind the action, and the skills required to perform it. Finally, casual responsibility is in charge of explaining why a villain commits a bad act, this leads to a tendency of reducing the blame and even sympathizing with him. (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, J., 2019)

A study conducted by Campo, M. (2017), focused on the shift in the presentation of the villains as dehumanized characters in old movies and the depiction of them as relatable and sympathetic in modern movies. The Joker in Batman narratives, for instance, exemplified absolute sinfulness, whereas recently a shift can be depicted in the portrayal of the character, presenting a human side, and suggesting moral ideas to spectators. In the same context, Ewald, J., in his study (2017) focused on the idea of how highlighting the Joker's fears in the recent portrayals, such as fear of marginalization, failure, and loss, allowed the audience to relate to the character more and thus understand and empathize with him.

Another shift in character depiction can be traced in *Maleficent*, the character was portrayed in *Sleeping Beauty* as naturally wicked, derived by vengeance and anger. Though, in the recent film "*Maleficent*," other features of the character were revealed, leading to people sympathizing with her. To back up this claim, a study conducted in 2016, used a comparative and descriptive approach. "*Maleficent*" was found to be not as malevolent as depicted in "*Sleeping Beauty*", the recent movie introduced the other side of the story that viewers didn't witness before. *Maleficent* showed the background of the story and why she carries this anger in her heart (Halidasia, N., 2016). Another study conducted in the same year supported this claim by analyzing the two screenplays (Francisco, M., 2016). On the engagement level, *Maleficent* did not participate in any discussion with Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, the only scene was when pushing her towards the spinning wheel to pertain the curse, whereas they were engaged in many discussions in the *Maleficent* movie, this reflected other sides of the character that weren't revealed in the older movie. Another significant contrast can be depicted in

Maleficent's visual representation: In *Sleeping Beauty*, she was only displayed with horns, then in *Maleficent*, she was presented with her lovely white wings that were cruelly taken from her.

Morally ambiguous characters:

As characters are a vital part of enjoying the movie content, their behavior uncovers their integrity and personality. Some protagonists behave consistently in a good way such as Spiderman, and some villains behave regularly in a bad way such as Freddy Krugger, these characters are depicted in a clearcut good versus evil. However, many characters are more complex, they are not presented in a simple way, we can say they are morally ambiguous characters. These characters can combine doing good and bad things. In recent drama, we can see the protagonist behaving in immoral ways, yet the audience is justifying him or even accepting his actions as they simply love him. Based on the popularity of these characters in recent drama content, this may suggest that these characters could be more enjoyed than merely good or merely bad characters. Krakowiak in his study focused on MACs, he was testing the ADT from a different perspective. The Affective disposition is premised on the interaction between character liking and character outcome. In his study Krakowiak focused more on the role of character morality. He also suggested that most people in the real world are not completely good or bad people, this may influence the audience perception of MACs as more realistic. (Krakowiak, 2012)

H3: There is a relationship between morally ambiguous characters and perceived realism.

The research in perceived realism complemented the tenets of the ADT in this particular point, research supported the assumption that people are genuinely motivated to enjoy the narrative they are watching, they therefore can excuse the bad behavior the protagonist did through a process of "moral disengagement". (Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). When a liked character engages in a morally questionable behavior, audience find themselves in a hard situation, they either choose to judge him morally and alter their enjoyment, or they choose to reduce their sensitivity towards the protagonist moral violation through moral disengagement to maintain their enjoyment (Frazer et al, 2022). On the other hand, previous research pointed out that presenting a person having no human weaknesses results in less appeal as it makes people feel inadequate. A wholly good character such as Superman may irritate some of the audience to perceive

him as less realistic (Aronson, 1969, Harron and Konijn, 2003).

According to a study conducted by Aertsen (2017), sympathizing with the villains is one of the primary qualities that binds the audience to the character. Aertsen investigated how often audiences sympathize with evil characters because they are portrayed as victims of oppression; thus, viewers are susceptible to sympathize with them, resulting in a complex relationship. The study's goal was to examine how sympathy is formed between the viewer and the characters, so the study investigated viewers who sympathized with villains (the audience sympathized with questionable moral qualities) and viewers who did not sympathize with the text's suggested character. As a result, the researcher chose to investigate the primary factors involved in the formation of an emotional bond. According to the findings, Approval, admiration, compassion, attraction, familiarity, and sexuality, are the basic feelings that compose sympathy for the heroes.

Similarly, Kelli Rae Marino (2008) found that for an extended period of history, villains were portrayed as greedy, horrific, and revenge seekers. This representation, however, evolved into the modern villain, in which the characters' backgrounds are clarified as well as what incentivized or affected them to become who they are. The author examined villains' plays such as Tony Kushner's "Angels in America", Martin McDonagh's "The Beauty Queen of Leenane", and Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's "Assassins", discovering that many viewers sympathized with the villains due to the humanization of the characters. Moreover, the analysis of the three plays in which the villains played suggested that the viewers could sympathize with the villains due to their portrayal and the manner in which their criminal intentions were presented. This was interpreted as a common representation of "modern villains," and along with their side of the story and personal struggles, it encouraged viewers to sympathize with the characters. Aside from the viewers who reported liking and feeling that bad guy are difficult to sort, "difficult to like or dislike, and incredibly cool". Both Morino's and Arestin's studies concluded that people sympathize with "modern villains" because of how they are presented. However, they used different techniques to reach this conclusion; one used psychological theory to explain it, while the other used theatre analysis to reach it.

In terms of the consequences of the character's actions, it was discovered that if the character committed a horrible act, but it resulted in a favorable outcome, the audience has a positive moral judgement of him. However, if the character makes a huge fault in order to gain personal benefit and it results in a positive outcome for the community in which he lives, the audience will judge his moral standards negatively (Tannenbaum et al, 2007).

H4: The Liking of an immoral protagonist negatively correlates with the desire to see him punished.

In his study in 2012, Shafer and Raney investigated the audience enjoyment of the anti-hero narratives. The researchers found that these narratives are much abundant in the entertainment production industry recently, and the affective disposition theory which was used to explain the traditional hero narratives is limited in interpreting the anti-hero narratives, mainly because of the morally complex character they are. Recent findings in this area suggest that in order to enjoy the MACs narrative, the audience develop specialized story schema that permits him enjoyment with disregard to moral judgement (Shafer & Raney, 2012).

H5: Previous exposure to an antihero narrative alters reactions to similar narratives (makes it more acceptable)

Applying the Expectancy violations theory to film studies:

The ADT posits that the audience uses the preexisting story schema to morally judge characters as good versus evil. The field of interpersonal communication offers a complementary perspective that reflects resemblance between social and parasocial attraction processes. Recent research using a novel statistical technique “response surface analysis”, found that the subversions in the expectations of the character’s behavior alter the audience relationship to the protagonist. More specifically, the audience’s relationship to the villain or anti-hero character will be stronger when they perceive him as acting more morally than they were expecting. However, their relationship with the hero would get weaker if he acted less morally than they were expecting. These findings are explained in light of the “expectancy violations theory” applied to the mass media context and borrowed from the interpersonal communication field. (Bonus et al, 2021)

H6: Subversions in the protagonist’s behavior influence audience relationship to him.

Methodology:

In order to get in-depth information, the current study used a focus group of 8 participants, age ranging from 20 to 24. Participants were recruited based on criteria related to their interest in drama, watching recent Netflix series and awareness of the impact of new narratives on youth. They are university students in their last year of study and fresh graduates that work in the university. Drama including movies and

series represent an important part of their daily lives, and they are interested in sharing their thoughts together. The recruitment process was organized in collaboration with the head of students' affairs and graduation project coordinator, to recruit participants who have relevant study background and are willing to give two hours of their time to discuss and share opinions. The researcher was the moderator of the discussion, two fellow colleagues were helping get notes and following up with the flow of ideas. The focus group duration was almost one hour and half. The discussion focused on the main variables of the study, the different theories explaining the process of emotional engagement, the perception of the new villain representation in drama, the anti-hero narratives and the mechanism of moral disengagement. The focus group has been video and audio recorded upon consent of the participants to be used for academic purposes. The results will be addressed according to the main variables of the study to support/decline the hypothesis.

Hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the intensity of empathic reactions and the degree of positive affective disposition toward the character.

H2: The better the characters are developed to maintain positive affective dispositions, the stronger the emotional involvement of the audience with the dramatic situation.

H3: There is a relationship between morally ambiguous characters and perceived realism.

H4: The Liking of an immoral protagonist negatively correlates with the desire to see him punished.

H5: Previous exposure to an antihero narrative alters reactions to similar narratives (makes it more acceptable)

H6: Subversions in the protagonist's behavior influence audience relationship to him.

Findings:

The participants in the focus group discussed the idea of the "New Villain" in recent drama, its representation and how it differs from the traditional villain image. The depiction of the "new villain", his main features, the motives for his actions and the aspects of emotional involvement and moral disengagement. The anti-hero who combines good behavior with some bad actions, how they perceive him, how widely is he accepted, how the recent representation of characters is influencing audience perceived realism. The results of the study are interpreted in the light of the Affective

Disposition Theory, audiences form affective dispositions toward the characters which lead to emotional involvement with them. The effect of important variables in relation to audience perceptions of the “New Villain” depiction is also discussed.

Positive affective dispositions and empathetic reactions:

Zillman, (1991) postulates that positive affective dispositions toward the character will probably lead to more empathetic reactions. A concept that was described in the theories of empathy suggesting the concordance between the emotions of the model and the observer. Previous studies suggested that through the narratives the audience develop positive affective disposition towards the character in movies and drama serials based on how they are portrayed and this affects the intensity of empathetic reactions they have for him. The more the character is portrayed to gain empathy in different situations in the drama development, the more the audience has tendency to be feel empathy for him/her. In the focus group discussion, Omar Tarek elaborated on this notion stating that recently, producers are introducing the crime in a way that makes the audience sympathize with the characters involved in a violent act, as we can identify their motives and background that led to this violent act. Anas Hisham completed the idea by mentioning the “the Joker” example in recent movies, as Batman told him in the latest version of the movie, that he had been always hated by people, and now in one new narrative, he gained their sympathy. “The villain nowadays is given a motive to act this way and you can see a good side in him”, continued Anas. These findings confirm the results of previous studies such as (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, J. 2019; Campo, M. 2017; Ewald, J., 2017; Francisco, M., 2016; Halidasia, N., 2016), these studies suggest that if viewers are shown why a villain commits a bad act, they tend to reduce the blame and even sympathize with the character. Therefore, the audience develops positive affective disposition toward the character of the “new villain” through empathy and emotional engagement. Accordingly, H1 can be accepted, “There is a positive relationship between the intensity of empathic reactions and the degree of positive affective disposition toward the character.

Character development and Anti-hero narrative schemas:

Research about empathy main statement is that audience are made to care about the characters, the affective dispositions are successfully constructed during the dramatic events, the better the characters are developed to preserve positive affective dispositions, the stronger the emotional involvement of the audience with the dramatic

situation. This all happens through character development, recent drama used this dictum to develop the morally ambiguous characters, including the anti-heroes which is excessively detected in more screenplays. The audience began to develop specialized schemas to process the anti-heroes narratives regardless of the character morality. The audience learned how to morally disengage in order to enjoy the movie or drama serials. To tackle these two points: character development and anti-hero specialized narrative schemas, the researcher mentioned some of the characters that are presented as villains or anti-heroes in recent movies and drama serials, for instance, Damon Salvatore (Vampire Diaries), Loke (Avengers), Lucifer, Jocker (Batman), Kai Parker (Vampire Diaries), Styles (Teen wolf), Klaus (Originals), Snape (Harry potter), Deadpool (Ryan Reynolds). Participants nodded in a sign of agreement with the choice of the mentioned characters to present examples of the “New villain” in recent drama. Discussing the above characters representation and how much they liked them, Nour Amin said that she likes the character of Styles from the American drama series Teen wolf (2011-2017), and a movie will be launched in 2023. Nour mentioned that “Styles is not a villain, he is a good person who got haunted by a bad spirit, that made him act badly in contrast to his nature. We as audience were justifying his bad actions then as he wasn’t himself when doing it, and that he was one of the best personalities and good characters in the whole series.” An example of the idea of character development and how it influences the audience’s emotional involvement.

When the participants discussed “Lucifer character” streamed in six seasons (2015-2018/Fox, 2019-2021/ Netflix), some of them (Mirna and Anas) reported that they started watching season one and didn’t continue, the reason was that they didn’t like the contradictory personality of Lucifer and the violent scenes. Nour interfered explaining that “Lucifer” actually represents the idea of the falling angel, who was cast out of heaven, he was representing the devil in the first episodes, but then he changed and became good when he falls in love with detective Chloe, whom he was helping as a consultant in solving crime cases. She added that “Damon Salvatore” from the “Vampire diaries” (2009-2017) in eight seasons represents the same idea, he was bad at first, but when he falls in love, he changed. Nour added that this all happens through character development, in which we learn more about the character, maybe he is not originally bad. A quote that she learned from Colleen Hoover book “It ends with us” **“There is no such thing as bad people. We’re all just people who sometimes do bad things.”** This quote could explain the personality of Damon Salvatore and Lucifer. Anas elaborated on the idea of representing the devil

in drama by comparing Lucifer to an Egyptian TV series called Wanous, in which the famous Egyptian actor represented the devil. Anas sees that the storyline in Wanous was more structured, and the drama events served the main story, whereas in Lucifer, the storyline was marginalized in favor of some commercial scenes that get more views. Mirna agreed with Anas, that in Wanous the storyline was captivating till the final act when the devil went in a monologue crying and saying that he was created that way, and he couldn't help it. Aya added to the same idea of Nour, she thinks that maybe they sympathized with the last scene because as Nour said, there are no such bad people, and that the circumstances alter their personality, so maybe they would change if the situation changed. Omar retackled the idea of psychology, he added that big production entities like Netflix study the audience needs and through their research, they know that we as human beings are weak and do mistakes, so presenting characters that people can relate to make the narratives successful. When discussing the idea of the chance to get to know more about the character in the course of serial drama, and consequently sympathizing with them. Aya said that the story itself, how the character is presented, the character development and the drama events happening to him are the main reasons we sympathize with him. Nour disagreed, the long duration of the serial drama gives the audience the opportunity and the space to live with the characters and feel them more than the movies that end in a relatively shorter duration. Some directors and authors are talented, they can get the audience attached to the characters in movies, but it's much more difficult. In the drama series "Originals" and "Riverdale" we got attached to the characters throughout the episodes through the character development. **If someone judged a certain action a character did as bad, we are able to understand why he did the action that way as we know him from the beginning, this gave us time to develop bonds with the characters and live with them, so we can get emotionally involved and sympathize with them.**

These findings are congruent with what Zillman postulated in 1994, he explained that the protagonist may commit some morally reprehensible acts, and the evil character may reveal some redeeming qualities, altering affective dispositions toward both characters throughout the dramatic narrative. The unpredictability of the character's behavior necessitates more attentional and elaboration skills from the audience, which contributes to greater emotional engagement (Zillman, 1994). Consequently, we can support H2: The better the characters are developed to maintain positive affective dispositions, the stronger the emotional involvement of the audience with the dramatic situation.

These findings are also consistent with recent research in this area suggesting that in order to enjoy the MAC's narrative (Anti-Heroes for instance), the audience develops specific story schema that grants him to enjoy the drama regardless of moral judgement (Shafer & Raney, 2012). This may explain the intensity of representation of characters that do not have a clear-cut edge between being good or bad, and the audience accepted them as being more complex and unpredictable characters. The continuous exposure to such narratives results in developing some sort of specialized schemas as a repertoire to be able to process this kind of narratives, and by time making them more acceptable. Accordingly, H5 can be supported: Previous exposure to an antihero narrative alters reactions to similar narratives (makes it more acceptable). This perspective is closely related to the idea of perceived realism, audience awareness of the complexity of the human personality leads him to perceive these morally ambiguous characters as more realistic.

Perceived realism:

Krakowiak, (2012) suggested that most people in the real world are not completely good or bad people, this may influence the audience perception of MACs (morally ambiguous characters) as more realistic. When discussing this idea with the participants, Caroline Boshra mentioned an important point explaining her vision about the new representation of the villains in recent drama, she thinks that "Due to the emphasize given to the notion of mental health lately, drama is focusing on giving the background of the character actions to understand his motives". Mirna Hossam completed this idea by adding that "The character may be a good person, but when treated badly by his family or entourage, this alters his behavior. He is not genuinely bad, but what he encounters in his life affects his personality". Nour elaborated the same idea, saying that because of the importance given to mental health recently, people tend to understand why a certain person acts that way, not only in drama but in real life as well. People are more likely to accept others, even if they act badly, and try to give them excuses. "The idea that we are the bad person in someone else's story may explain why we sympathize with the villain character in drama." The discussion then focused on the question: Do we sympathize with the "new villains" because they seem more realistic?

Menna said that during the episodes of a serial drama, we can see characters that are like people in our real lives. For instance, if I told you about a situation in which a person did some violent acts or behaved in an immoral way, you may judge him as a bad person, but if you know more about his motives, you may understand his actions. Whereas in

drama, they tend to present the background of the character's personality, that makes us evaluate them as more realistic and relatable.

Therefore, we can say that H3 is supported: There is a relationship between morally ambiguous characters and perceived realism. The above findings can be explained in the light of previous research, for instance, when a liked character engages in a morally questionable behavior, audience find themselves in a hard situation, they either choose to judge him morally and alter their enjoyment, or they choose to reduce their sensitivity towards the protagonist moral violation through moral disengagement to maintain their enjoyment (Frazer et al, 2022).

Perspective taking and expectancy violations:

Previous research supported the idea that viewers are genuinely motivated to enjoy the story they are watching, and as a result, they can rationalize the bad behavior the protagonist engaged in through a process known as "moral disengagement". This notion complemented ADT's core beliefs in this particular area. (Tsay and Krakowiak, 2011). Participants in the focus group approved the statement "while watching the movie I can get inside the character's head" to discuss the perspective taking variable.

Aya said that if the character is the protagonist of the movie or drama serials, he is usually presented with more focus on his background, the storyline evolves around him and his relations to other characters. In this context, we can relate to him, understand his morally bad actions and bad decisions, sympathize with him, and get emotionally involved with his story. On the other hand, if the character is presented as a bad person, with no more information about his motives, we cannot sympathize with him or understand his action.

The same idea was approved by Mirna, who gave an example of the recent Egyptian series "Dangerous bend", in which the audience got emotionally involved with the protagonist, who did many immoral actions as killing a young man, because they can understand why he do so. Until the last episode, when we discovered that he was the one who killed his daughter, and even though some of her colleagues give him excuses that the daughter was too ambitious, and she deserves dying. Mirna herself found that she couldn't sympathize with him.

Anas took the same perspective with the series "Thirteen reasons why" (2017-2020), through the first three seasons, Bryce Walker was introduced as a villain, in the last season, they were trying to change his image to a better person. "I can't let myself watch this season, they manipulate us, I don't want to sympathize with the villain at the end of

the day”, Anas reported about what his friend said.

Regarding the idea of sympathizing with the bad person or the villain especially in drama serials on Netflix, a new serial called “the good nurse” in which the protagonist is a nurse who is killing the patients with some medicaments, he was not given any reason for his bad actions, nor any background story that may make us understand why he is doing so. Nevertheless, at the last episode, audience sympathized with him because he “cried” when a girl that he was trying to help in the episodes confronted him, he told her “No one tried to stop me”. The other participants agreed with Nour, and Aya explained that seeing a man crying is not familiar, maybe that’s the reason why the audience sympathized with him, although throughout the episode many women cried, but it’s a familiar thing, so it didn’t have the same effect.

The main idea is that when the narrative presents the character background and storyline in order for him to be liked by the audience, they relate to him, and are able to understand his point of view and are emotionally involved with him. This leads to a hope for him to escape punishment and a desire for a happy ending. Therefore, H4 is supported: The Liking of an immoral protagonist negatively correlates with the desire to see him punished.

Moreover, previous research suggested that when the audience perceives the villain or anti-hero character to be acting more morally than they expected, this will affect their expectations about how he should act, these subversions in the character behavior influence his relationship with the audience. However, if the hero acted less morally than they expected, in a way that alters the audience expectation about his perceived morality, their relationship with him would be negatively affected. These findings are explained in light of the “expectancy violations theory,” which was derived from the field of interpersonal communication and utilized in the mass media context (Bonus et al, 2021). In this context, the participants in the focus group discussed this idea in the context of the recent representation of protagonists and anti-heroes are extremely confusing, as the character shift constantly during the narratives in a way that makes a clear moral judgment impossible. Nour Amin clarified this notion by giving examples of two characters: Lucifer and Damon Salvatore, they both encountered behavioral subversions throughout the episodes, that audience liked the characters and built a strong relationship with them. “Lucifer” in fact signifies the concept of the falling angel, who was thrown out of paradise, he was being the devil in the initial chapters, but then he transformed and became good when he falls in love with investigator Chloe, whom he was assisting as a specialist in unraveling crime incidents. She added that “Damon

Salvatore” from the “Vampire diaries” exemplified the same notion, he was bad at in the beginning, but when he falls in love, he changed. Therefore, the previous results can support H6: Subversions in the protagonist’s behavior influence audience relationship to him.

Discussion:

The current study represents an exploratory investigation about the depiction of morally complex characters as protagonists in recent movies and drama serials. Theorists from different fields tried to explain audience engagement to the fictional characters, we can’t mention a specific theory as being the more cohesive explaining this phenomenon, but Zillman affective disposition theory ADT has been widely used, it is mainly concerned with the relationship between character liking and affective disposition in mediation with moral engagement. That was nicely adequate for the traditional hero versus villain narrative, with a simple representation of the hero doing good actions and the villain performing the bad ones. Recently, morally ambiguous characters are widely represented in drama, people started to relate to them as more realistic, the availability of new media platforms such as Netflix, made it possible to produce many seasons, which gives the producers and drama creators the chance to develop the characters, provide more background details ending in the audience sympathy for them. Therefore, researchers tried to search for alternative to the ADT, or complement it with other perspectives, such as the expectancy violation theory from the interpersonal communication field, the narrative schemas, and other notions from cognitive psychology. The repetition of exposure to such modern narratives helped the audience create a specialized schema for this type of drama, in which they can expect to witness the protagonist as a complex character, they became more open to forgive his mistakes, lessen the importance of the moral judgement and empathize with his weaknesses. Many methodological approaches are used in a tremendous number of studies in this field, experiments, longitudinal surveys, discourse analysis and focus groups. The idea of studying how soft powers such as movies and drama narratives can affect audience perceptions in real life is an extremely important topic that could be more investigated in future research, it has been tackled in research related to parasocial interactions with the heroes of movies. The viewer’s experience that has been tailored to his own pace of watching, the phenomenon of binge watching, and the innovative types of drama serials and movies are opening new horizons for research in many fields. Future research should be more oriented towards an interdisciplinary

approach and apply new statistical data analysis methods, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to be able to study the diverse facets of this experience. Likewise, the worldwide power of drama serials and movies is a concern in the field of cultural studies and international communication, focusing on how new generations inclinations and taste are being shaped. The field of film studies and new drama forms is in constant progress, including values and new culture that influence audience perceptions, shaping their perspectives in the real world, with many aspects that need further research.

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