

## Parasocial relationships with morally ambiguous media characters – the role of moral foundations

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### Abstract

Parasocial relationships are examined in diverse contexts and with various media characters, from news presenters to fictional movie heroes. A popular character trope in recent productions is the morally ambiguous media character (MAC). MACs disrupt the dichotomy between hero and villain, simultaneously exhibiting moral and immoral behavior. MACs attracted the attention of researchers, but little is known about parasocial relationships with them. This study examines these relationships by applying a multidimensional morality approach. The five moral domains of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity are considered for the media character and the viewers. The role of these moral domains in parasocial relationships with morally ambiguous media characters was examined through an online survey ( $N=250$ ). The results show that moral behavior generally and moral behavior in care, fairness, and loyalty increased the strength of parasocial relationships, regardless of the viewer's moral foundations. The characters' behavior in authority and purity did not influence the viewers' general morality perception nor their parasocial relationships with them. The study contributes to the existing literature about MACs by considering viewers' parasocial relationships, their moral foundations, and the perceived morality in each of the five moral domains.

### Keywords

parasocial relationships, moral foundations, moral intuitions, morally ambiguous media characters (MAC), affective disposition theory, online survey

## 1 Introduction

Some media users imagine themselves being the seventh member of *Friends*, some have romantic feelings toward Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*, some experience life on the edge with their cinema hero James Bond, and some empathize with Leslie Knope's struggles in her political career in *Parks and Recreation*. Audience members can build relationships with media characters as if these were part of their social circle (Tukachinsky, Walter, & Saucier, 2020). Parasocial relationships (PSRs) describe different kinds of social relationships audience members develop toward media characters (Giles, 2002); like social relationships, these can range from falling in love with the protagonist of a romantic movie

to supporting an avatar in a video game. Early research often focused on non-fictional characters such as news presenters or talk show hosts (e.g., Perse, 1990; Rubin, Haridakis, & Eyal, 2003; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), while nowadays PSRs are often analyzed with real people, such as influencers or celebrities, in the context of social media (e.g., Beautemps & Bresges, 2022; Kowert & Daniel, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In studies about viewers' parasocial engagement with fictional media characters in television, a significant number of studies analyze viewers' favorite media characters (e.g., Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013; Cohen, 2004; Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Hoffner, 1996; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008;



Schmid & Klimmt, 2011), often resulting in the study of classical movie heroes.

In addition to classical heroes, another character trope is popular in entertainment content (Kleemans, Eden, Daalmans, Ommen, & Weijers, 2017; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012): Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*, and Jaime Lannister in *Game of Thrones* are famous among viewers. These characters cannot be considered classical heroes because they are characterized by moral ambiguity. They use violence, manipulate others, or exceed the limits of the law, but unlike traditional villains, they are not depicted as sheer evil and are liked despite their immoral behavior (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Oliver et al., 2019). *Morally ambiguous characters* (MACs) differ from traditional heroes and villains, who would be positioned at the opposite ends of a continuous morality scale. MACs fall somewhere along the continuum between the poles. These characters either fluctuate between moral and immoral behavior (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012) or violate morality in some domains while upholding moral standards in others (Eden, Daalmans, & Johnson, 2017; Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Limperos, & Woolley, 2015). Unlike heroes, MACs may exhibit behavior that violates commonly held moral intuitions to overcome obstacles or succeed in challenges (Oliver et al., 2019). For example, Annalise Keating is a successful defense attorney for hardened criminals, but she pays the price for her success. To defend her reputation, she rescues guilty defendants from punishment and does not hesitate to manipulate or blackmail others to achieve her goals. Despite those kinds of moral violations, MACs differ from traditional villains or antiheroes because they possess redeeming qualities (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Annalise Keating, for example, is characterized by many positive attributes: She is a valued colleague at work; she is highly reliable and loyal to her friends; she supports the students in her classes at university; and, in general, she is a strong advocate for justice. Further, MACs can be categorized into more specific types, for example, ranging from perfect hero to perfect villain (Tamborini et al., 2018) or while considering their role in the plot, differ-

entiating morally complex protagonists from antagonists (Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023).

Morally ambiguous media characters and how viewers process and react to them have attracted the attention of researchers (Kleemans et al., 2017). For example, studies have analyzed why MACs are liked, why viewers accept their immoral behavior, and how viewers react to such behavior (e.g., Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Grizzard, Huang, Fitzgerald, Ahn, & Chu, 2018; Grizzard, Francemone, Fitzgerald, Huang, & Ahn, 2020; Kleemans et al., 2017; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tamborini et al., 2018). Several constructs, such as transportation (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012), suspense (Eden et al., 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012), and identification (Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), have been shown to contribute to entertainment experiences with MACs. However, little is known about parasocial relationships with MACs, even though the PSR is a crucial concept in entertainment research (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). While suspense, transportation, or identification are relevant during media exposure (Cohen, 2001), PSRs outlast the viewing situation (Tukachinsky, 2011). The analysis of PSR provides a long-term perspective that considers factors outside the direct viewing situations. PSRs are not only crucial to viewers' enjoyment of media content (Klimmt et al., 2006), but can also affect future media consumption (Dibble et al., 2016) and have persuasive effects (e.g., Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016). Thus, understanding the role of PSR in viewers' evaluation of MACs is essential and expands the existing research by including a concept that outlasts media exposures. Therefore, the first goal of this study is to analyze viewers' parasocial relationships with morally ambiguous media characters.

In people's everyday lives, the perception of morality can be divided following the moral foundation's theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2008) into *care*, *fairness*, *loyalty*, *authority*, and *purity*. This perspective moves away from the idea that morality can be classified on a unidimensional continuum

from immoral to moral. Instead, a person's behavior can be seen as more moral or less, considering distinct types of moral concerns (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). This multidimensional approach to morality has also been applied to the perception of media figures, providing a more nuanced picture of MACs (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2018; Kleemans et al., 2017). An individual's sensitivity to morality violations varies across these domains (Graham et al., 2011). With that, the individuals' liking of a MAC depends on their specific behavior in cherished domains (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020; Grizzard et al., 2018; Kleemans et al., 2017). Based on this theoretical background, media users should like characters who uphold morality in the domains viewers consider essential and dislike those who do not. For example, it can be assumed that viewers with a strong sensibility for fairness should tend to dislike Annalise Keating because of her behavior, which is often guided by her subjective perception of justice and repeatedly violates general standards of fairness. This combination of considering viewers' moral foundations and the five moral domains when analyzing a media character's behavior is barely done in existing research. Thus, the second goal of this study is to consider this multidimensional approach to morality and analyze the role of morality domains in parasocial relationships with MACs. Taking these two goals together, the study's twofold research question is:

- › RQ: How does a character's behavior in different moral domains affect the intensity of parasocial relationships, and to what extent is this dependent on viewers' moral foundations?

## 2 Theoretical background

The affective disposition theory (ADT) may be used to explain why MACs are liked. Character liking is strongly linked to the viewers' perceptions of a media characters' morality (e.g., Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Following the ADT, viewers enjoy media content when liked characters succeed,

and disliked characters fail (Zillmann, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). To form their affective dispositions toward media characters, viewers use their moral judgments to evaluate the characters' actions (Raney & Janicke, 2013; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). The success of morally ambiguous characters who display clearly immoral behaviors challenges ADT's predictions (Raney, 2004), as viewers positively engage with MACs despite their immoral actions. This resulted in a lot of research analyzing viewers' engagement with morally challenging characters (e.g., Eden et al., 2011; Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023; Kleemans et al., 2017; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Oliver et al., 2019; Raney, 2004). These studies used and tested different approaches to why viewers can positively engage with immoral characters and underlined the importance of the relationship between morality and character liking.

While character liking is particularly relevant for entertainment processes during media use, PSRs outlast media exposure and can influence attitudes and behaviors beyond the immediate situation (Dibble et al., 2016), thereby contributing to the existing research about viewers' connections with MACs. PSRs are defined as enduring bonds between viewers and media characters going beyond media exposure and similar to social friendships (Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The extension beyond the viewing situation differentiates them from parasocial interactions (PSI). PSI refer to the viewers' feeling of being in real reciprocal interaction with media characters during media exposure (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). While PSI are relevant during the viewing situation, PSRs persist and may potentially affect viewer's morality perceptions beyond media exposure. PSRs can also be differentiated from viewers' character liking or identification. Character liking describes viewers' affective disposition toward a media character (Dibble et al., 2016). PSRs go beyond mere liking, as they describe the viewers' perception to be friends with the media character, to share personal stories, or to support the media character emotionally (Tukachinsky, 2011). Identification is a more fleeting feeling of experiencing the story from the character's perspective (Cohen, 2001). In this study, we

focus on viewers' PSRs with MACs because we are interested in potential influences that outlast media exposure and because extant research has demonstrated that media users do form PSRs with media characters even if they act immoral, as we will elaborate in the next paragraph.

Viewers form PSRs with a variety of media characters (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), not just with classical heroes; PSRs have been shown to develop with disliked characters (Bonus, Matthews, & Wulf, 2021; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), with villains (Brodie & Ingram, 2021), or with MACs (Oliver et al., 2019). PSRs with disliked characters might be best understood as a form of love-hate relationships rather than friendships. For example, Tian and Hoffner (2010) showed that viewers also form parasocial relationships with disliked characters from a drama show. These PSRs were weaker than the ones viewers formed with neutral or liked characters (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Another study found the same pattern and additionally showed that these relationships become increasingly polarized over time, depending on the new information viewers get about the characters (Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010). An important influence on these PSRs stems from viewers' responses to the moral or immoral behavior of the characters (Eden et al., 2011; Kleemans et al., 2017). A study showed that PSRs with villains and heroes depend on the morality of their behavior. For both character types, immoral behavior weakened viewers' PSRs with them (Bonus et al., 2021). Thus, parasocial relationships can evolve with positively and negatively portrayed characters, but the morality of a character's behavior influences the intensity of the relationship. This relationship was already analyzed in several contexts and with different types of media characters, and shall be re-analyzed with MACs in this study. Based on this literature, we assume that this positive relationship between moral behavior and PSRs is also true for morally ambiguous media characters:

- › H1: The more moral the general behavior of a morally ambiguous media character is perceived to be, the stronger viewers'

parasocial relationships with the media character will be.<sup>1</sup>

The moral foundation's theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2008), which conceptualizes morality along the domains care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity, has been applied to the perception of media figures. For example, in the model of intuitive morality and exemplars (MIME), the five moral domains are integrated to analyze the connection between media and morality (Tamborini, 2013). These domains have also been used to explain viewers' degree of character liking (e.g., Eden et al., 2015, 2017; Grizzard et al., 2017; Kleemans et al., 2017). Instead of categorizing characters as simply "good" or "bad," researchers have used the validated character moral foundations questionnaire (CMFQ: Eden et al., 2015; CMFQ-X: Grizzard et al., 2020) to examine the morality perception of media characters regarding the five moral domains (Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). For example, Eden et al. (2015, p. 201) showed that heroes are evaluated as being "more moral than villains across all five domains." Characters who violate morality standards in authority and purity may however still be perceived as heroes, while media characters who violate standards in care and loyalty are perceived as villains (Eden et al., 2015).

These results demonstrate that moral ambiguity can affect perceptions of media characters differently, depending on the moral dimensions that are upheld or violated by the media character. We include perceptions of the media characters' behavior regarding the five morality domains in hypothesis 2. Thereby, we extend the findings of Eden et al. (2015) from viewers' perceptions of media characters to PSRs. We assume that some morality domains have a stronger impact on the general perceived morality of a character than others, and that it is finally the general perceived morality that determines the intensity of PSR. Thus, we postulate that the general morality evaluation of a character mediates the relationship between the char-

1 In the preregistration, this hypothesis was reversed (i.e., the more moral the violations, the less intense the PSR); it was adjusted to facilitate the interpretation of the coefficients in the results section as higher values now mean more moral.

acters' morality in specific domains and PSR. Based on Eden et al. (2015), care and loyalty are supposed to have a strong impact on both PSR and general perceived morality. The characters' morality in these two domains is supposed to positively influence the viewers' general morality perception, which, in turn, increases viewers' PSR. For authority, purity, and fairness, we expect a lower impact on general morality and PSR, as immoral behavior in these domains was not punished by viewers in Eden et al.'s study (2015). We assume that the general morality positively influences PSR, but that the characters' behavior in authority, purity, and fairness does not influence their general morality nor directly the viewers' PSR with them.

Overall, we assume that the effect of the characters' perceived morality in each domain on PSR is mediated through the general morality evaluation, which is affected by the character's evaluation regarding care and loyalty but not regarding authority, purity, and fairness. Or, in other words, we postulate that a character's moral behavior regarding care and loyalty affects PSR because it affects the overall morality evaluation, while the character's behavior regarding the other domains is not relevant for general perceived morality and thus does not affect PSR.

- › H2: The influence of the characters' morality in each domain on the strength of parasocial relationships is mediated through the general perceived morality for a) care and b) loyalty, while c) authority, d) purity, and e) fairness do not influence PSR nor general morality.<sup>2</sup>

Besides the characters' moral behavior in the five moral domains, also the viewers' moral foundations in each domain should be considered when analyzing viewers' relationships with media characters. Existing research about media characters already included the multidimensional approach to morality by applying the five moral domains to media characters (e.g., Eden et al., 2015;

Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). By including the viewers' moral foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2008), the role of morality in relationships between viewers and media characters can be analyzed more nuanced. For example, a study by Bonus et al. (2021) showed that other factors besides perceived morality, morality expectations, and the media character's status (hero vs. villain) must influence viewers' parasocial relationships. They examined the impact of morality and the expectation of moral violation on PSRs with heroes and villains in *Star Wars*. While viewers had stronger PSRs with each hero than with each villain, different patterns emerged after watching the new movie. Immoral and moral behavior and positive and negative moral expectancy violations strengthened but also weakened PSRs with some media characters, and the patterns were not consistent for heroes or villains. Bonus et al. (2021) concluded that, probably, not all viewers perceive the characters the same way; a character can be a hero to one person but an antihero to another. The authors assumed that factors on an individual level could influence these evaluations (Bonus et al., 2021). Therefore, we strive to include the five morality domains from the viewer's perspective with the moral foundations. Following the moral foundation's theory (MFT), higher scores on a dimension (e.g., authority) indicate a sensitivity toward this specific domain. Based on their moral foundations, viewers may react differently to the immoral behavior of a media character. For example, a viewer with high sensitivity for purity would evaluate a purity violation like drug use as worse than another viewer with low sensitivity for purity (Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). We assume that:

- › H3: The more important a morality domain is for a viewer – a) care, b) fairness, c) loyalty, d) authority, e) purity – the stronger his/her parasocial relationship with media characters he/she perceives as moral in the same domain.

### 3 Method

To answer the research question and test the hypotheses, an online survey was conducted

<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis was adapted during the review-process. The analysis of the original hypothesis can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/395tb/>

with 250 participants. Before, a pretest was used to determine the morally ambiguous media characters for the main study. The following subchapters present the study's design, the pretest, the measures, and the final sample.

### 3.1 Research design and procedure

An online survey was conducted with participants from the research panel *Sosci Panel*. In the online survey, participants' moral foundations were measured first. Then, participants were confronted with a list of eight MACs from several recent television series. These characters were selected based on a pretest (see section 3.2). All eight characters were considered morally ambiguous because they conducted both moral and immoral actions during the narrative. The participants were asked to indicate all the characters they knew from this list; they were then randomly assigned one of these chosen characters. This procedure allowed us to capture different intensities of PSR. If participants could directly choose their favorite character from the list, the selection would be strongly biased toward strong PSRs. As the goal was to analyze the influence of morality on PSR, we strived to have a high variance of PSRs in our sample. Participants were presented with a short description of the character, illustrating an equal number of moral and immoral actions to emphasize the character's moral ambiguity. Participants then answered questions about their PSR with the character, the character's perceived morality in general, and the five morality dimensions. The final part of the questionnaire collected sociodemographic characteristics.

### 3.2 Pretest

To choose fictional media characters perceived as morally ambiguous, a pretest was administered in June 2021 (see OSF: <https://osf.io/395tb/>). Using platforms and blogs (e.g., Coriatty, 2016; Maily, 2018), a preselection of possible MACs was made with the search terms "morally ambiguous character," "moral ambivalence," and "moral ambiguity." To ensure that participants were familiar with the characters in our study, the search

results were compared with "top" lists (e.g., Netflix's most-watched shows), and only characters from recently successful productions were included. This preselection resulted in a list of 27 fictional media characters. In the pretest, participants could select up to five media characters from the list. For each selected media character, character liking and perceived morality in general (Tamborini et al., 2013; Weber, Tamborini, Lee, & Stipp, 2008) according to the five morality dimensions (short CMFQ-X: Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard et al., 2020) were asked. After these ratings, a description of the media character was presented, and participants were asked to indicate how accurate they found this description. The descriptions were used to activate the moral ambiguity of characters in participants' memory in the main study. The evaluation in the pretest helped assess their quality and identify descriptions needing an adaptation before the main data collection.

A total of 100 people participated in the pretest; six participants were unfamiliar with any media characters on the list and were not included in the analysis. The other 94 participants ( $M_{age} = 26.1$ ,  $SD_{age} = 4.92$ ; 79% female, 50% students) evaluated between one ( $n = 7$ ) and five ( $n = 46$ ) media characters and made a total of 365 evaluations.

Several criteria drove the choice of media characters for the main study, as follows. 1) Number of evaluations: Only characters that at least ten participants had evaluated were chosen to ensure that the final character sample comprised popular characters likely to be known by participants. 2) Distribution of perceived morality: Since this study is interested in investigating PSR with MACs, only characters at the center of the general morality continuum were included. For the moral domains, they could show very (im)moral behavior in certain domains, as this is exactly what an MAC could be. Overall, neither very moral nor very immoral, but in certain domains very immoral, and in others, very moral. 3) We checked for participants' character liking and did not have to exclude any characters due to very low character liking (all > 3.00). 4) Gender and television show: All characters in the final sample were from different shows to provide diversity. The sample was balanced between male and fe-

male characters. 5) Genres: Since the criteria above applied to a larger sample of male than female characters, the final selection of male characters was based on the genre of the show according to the IMDb classification; characters from different genres were chosen to ensure diversity.

Those five steps resulted in a selection of eight media characters for the main study: Jaime Lannister (*Game of Thrones*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock* [BBC]), Lucifer Morningstar (*Lucifer*), Mike Ross (*Suits*), Blair Waldorf (*Gossip Girl*), Annalise Keating (*How to Get Away with Murder*), Piper Chapman (*Orange Is the New Black*), and Claire Underwood (*House of Cards*). The ratings for the character description we provided in the pretest were checked for these eight characters. The two less suitable descriptions were those of Jaime Lannister and Piper Chapman. Both were slightly below five on a seven-point Likert-type scale rating (Jaime Lannister:  $M=4.96$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ,  $n=23$ ; Piper Chapman:  $M=4.67$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ,  $n=9$ ),<sup>3</sup> indicating that the description did only somewhat accurately represent the media character. Therefore, these two descriptions were revised (but not retested) before including them in the main survey.

### 3.3 Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (e.g., “not applicable at all” or “do not agree at all”) to 5 (e.g., “totally applicable” or “fully agree”). After data-cleansing, the number of participants assigned to each character was almost equal: Jaime Lannister (32), Sherlock Holmes (33), Lucifer Morningstar (30), Mike Ross (33), Blair Waldorf (31), Annalise Keating (28), Piper Chapman (31), Claire Underwood (32).

#### 3.3.1 Participants' moral foundations

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire assessed the participants' moral foundations, comprising the five moral domains of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (Graham

et al., 2011, 2013). This multidimensional approach to morality measured to what extent people vary in how they endorse, value, and apply these five moral dimensions (Graham et al., 2011). High scores represent more-pronounced moral beliefs regarding the specific domain. Some items had a strongly skewed distribution, and adjustments had to be made to achieve sufficient Cronbach's alpha values. These low reliabilities for the MFT scale were an issue in other research (e.g., Davies, Sibley, & Liu, 2014; Iurino & Saucier, 2020) and newer studies (e.g., Harper & Rhodes, 2021; Zakharin & Bates, 2021) show other factor solutions for the MFT than the six-factor solution proposed by Graham et al. (2011, 2013) and used in this study. This could explain the low reliabilities. As described in the preregistration, we opted for a single-item measure with a close-to-normal distribution and a good theoretical fit to the construct in cases where no sufficient Cronbach's Alpha could be obtained for an index. Originally, each dimension was measured with six items: authority: ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ,  $\alpha=.72$ ) and purity ( $M=2.47$ ,  $SD=0.81$ ,  $\alpha=.73$ ). For the domain of care, two items had to be dropped to achieve acceptable scale reliability (care:  $M=4.31$ ,  $SD=0.62$ ,  $\alpha=.67$ ).<sup>4</sup> For fairness, Cronbach's alpha was .58, and no satisfactory value could be achieved by dropping an item. “Justice is the most important requirement for a society” was chosen as a single item ( $M=4.36$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ). For loyalty, Cronbach's alpha was .52, and no satisfactory value could be achieved by dropping an item. “People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong” was chosen as a single item ( $M=2.45$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ).

Other studies showed that single-item measures can result in valid measurements (Allen, Iliescu, & Greiff, 2022; R. A. Matthews, Pineault, & Hong, 2022). However, as we intended to measure the domains with several items, and items were dropped based on the

3 Piper Chapman was rated by ten participants (see point 1), but one of them only rated character liking and the morality question, not the description's appropriateness. Thus,  $n=9$  only applies for the rating of the character's description. For the other characteristics of Piper  $n=10$ .

4 With the six original items of this subdimension, Cronbach's alpha value was .62. When dropping two items, “One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal” and “It can never be right to kill a human being,” a value of .67 could be achieved and was used for further calculations.

low internal consistency of the dimensions, we ran several robustness analyses to evaluate the generalizability of our analyses using the single items (see section 4).

### 3.3.2 General perceived morality

The general perceived morality of the MACs' actions was assessed using two items from previous research about MACs (Tamborini et al., 2013; Weber et al., 2008). The two items (e.g., "The character's overall behavior was moral") measured the extent to which each character's behavior was considered moral or immoral ( $M=2.84$ ,  $SD=0.85$ , Spearman-Brown = .69).

### 3.3.3 Characters' moral domains

In addition to generally perceived morality, the perception of each character's morality regarding the five moral domains was measured using the Character Moral Foundations Questionnaire (CMFQ-X; Grizzard et al., 2020). The questionnaire is based on the Moral Foundation Questionnaire (see below) and comprises the same five moral domains as the scale for the viewers: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. The items were recoded so that high scores represent greater morality in the specific domain.

Four of the domains showed satisfactory scale reliabilities: Care ( $M=2.80$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ,  $\alpha=.77$ ), fairness ( $M=2.73$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ,  $\alpha=.81$ ), loyalty ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ,  $\alpha=.73$ ), and authority ( $M=2.11$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ,  $\alpha=.67$ ). For purity, the Cronbach's alpha was .55, and a single item was chosen "Character seems like s/he would do something disgusting" ( $M=3.22$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ). That the measurement of purity can be problematic was shown in other research about the moral domains (Gray, DiMaggio, Schein, & Kachanoff, 2023).

### 3.3.4 Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships ( $M=2.61$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ,  $\alpha=.92$ ) were examined using Tukachinsky's (2011) parasocial friendship scale. The two dimensions of parasocial friendship support (e.g., "If the character were a real person, I would be able to count on the character in times of need") and communication (e.g., "If the character were a real person, I could have disclosed many things about myself to the character") comprise 13 items (Tukachinsky,

2011). The PSF scale covers relational aspects of parasocial processing (Dibble et al., 2016), distinguishing PSR from PSI.

### 3.3.5 Character liking

The viewer's general liking of the MAC ( $M=2.97$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ,  $\alpha=.81$ ) was measured with four items. The items (e.g., "I like the character") are based on previous research on the liking of morally ambiguous media characters (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013; Tamborini et al., 2018; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011).

## 3.4 Participants

Participants were recruited through a non-commercial research panel (SoSci Panel: <https://www.soscipanel.de/>) in February 2022. The software G\*Power was used to conduct a power analysis before data collection. Our goal was to obtain  $1-\beta=.80$  power to detect a small effect size of  $f^2=.05$  at the standard .05 alpha error probability for an interaction effect (three predictors, F-tests, multiple linear regression: fixed model,  $R^2$  deviation from zero). We attempted to recruit 250 participants, assuming that not all would complete the survey.

In total, 271 participants finished the survey, with 21 excluded from the final analysis. Of these 21 participants, 16 were excluded due to a failed attention check, three because of too many missing values (> 40%), and 2 resulted from taking too long to complete the survey (more than two standard deviations from the mean). This resulted in a final sample of 250 participants; 61% were female, 37% male, and 2% non-binary. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 82 years old ( $M=40.92$ ,  $SD=14.41$ ), and most were employed (50%), followed by 18% who were students, 8% who were self-employed, and 8% who were retired.

## 4 Results

In the first step, Pearson zero-order correlations were calculated for the primary constructs (Table 1). The general perceived morality of the media characters and the strength of PSRs are positively correlated with four morality domains, namely care, loyalty, puri-



**Table 1: Pearson zero-order correlations for the main constructs**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 PSR											
2 General Morality	.58***										
3 Participant: Care	-.01	-.04									
4 Participant: Loyalty	.12	.03	.09								
5 Participant: Authority	.09	-.01	.14*	.31***							
6 Participant: Purity	.04	-.02	.28***	.42***	.60***						
7 Participant: Fairness	.06	-.01	.25***	-.09	.02	.05					
8 Character: Care	.40***	.44***	.01	.07	.11	.07	.05				
9 Character: Loyalty	.55***	.51***	-.03	-.01	.01	.00	.04	.41***			
10 Character: Authority	.11	.08	-.23***	.05	.20**	.06	-.05	.24***	.09		
11 Character: Purity	.17**	.23***	-.18**	.09	.14*	.08	-.04	.42***	.10	.56***	
12 Character: Fairness	.59***	.60***	-.03	-.04	-.06	-.06	.06	.52***	.51***	.06	.19**

Note:  $n=250$ ; Parasocial relationships: 1=low level of PSR, 5=high level of PSR. All morality variables: 1=very immoral behavior, 5=very moral behavior. \* $p<.05$ , \*\* $p<.01$ , \*\*\* $p<.001$ .

ty, and fairness, but not with authority. Participants’ moral foundations and perceptions of the character’s behavior in the same moral domain show no correlation except for authority. The viewers’ general evaluation of a character’s behavior in a moral domain was not related to their moral foundation for care, loyalty, purity, and fairness. Viewers with a stronger value for authority were related to a more positive evaluation of the media character’s behavior regarding authority.

Before testing the hypotheses and ensuring the reported patterns were consistent across media characters, we conducted a multilevel analysis with the character as a grouping variable. A null model was calculated to assess the intraclass correlation (ICC), showing how the variance is distributed between the individual and the character level. As the value of the ICC is .118, about 12% of the variance in PSRs can be attributed to the character. The variation at the individual level was of interest, and we proceeded with regression analyses for the pooled data.

**4.1 Main analysis**

To test the first hypothesis, a regression was run with the general perceived morality of a character as the independent and viewers’ parasocial relationships as the dependent variable. For the second hypothesis, five mediation models were calculated using the PROCESS macro for R (Hayes, 2017). In each model, one of the media characters’ five moral domains was used as the independent

variable: care (model 1a), loyalty (model 1b), authority (model 1c), purity (model 1d), and fairness (model 1e). In all models, general morality was the mediator, and parasocial relationships were the dependent variable. To test the third hypothesis, five moderation models were calculated with the viewer’s moral foundation in the domains of a) care, b) group loyalty, c) authority, d) purity, and e) fairness as the predictors; PSR as the dependent variable; and the perceived morality of the media character in the domains of a) care, b) group loyalty, c) authority, d) purity, and e) fairness as the moderators. For the moderation analysis, all variables were mean-centered. For the models with single-item measures, additional robustness checks were run to ensure the generalizability of the results.

The first hypothesis, assuming a positive effect of the general perceived morality of the media character on viewers’ PSRs, was supported. The more viewers perceived the media character’s behavior as moral, the stronger their PSR was with that character ( $B=0.60$ ,  $SE=0.05$ ,  $t=11.07$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $F(1,248)=122.50$ ). The second hypothesis assumed a mediation effect of general morality between the moral domains of a) care and b) loyalty on PSR, but not for c) authority, d) purity, and e) fairness. The results (Table 2) show that characters whom viewers perceived to behave morally in care and loyalty were also considered more moral in general, and viewers formed stronger parasocial relationships with them. Their morality in care and loyalty

**Table 2:** Influence of the media character’s morality in each domain on parasocial relationships, mediated through the general morality of the media character

	<i>M: general morality<sup>a</sup></i>			<i>DV: parasocial relationships<sup>b</sup></i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1a						
characters’ care	0.35	0.05	<.001	0.16	0.05	.001
general morality				0.51	0.06	<.001
Model 1b						
characters’ loyalty	0.48	0.05	<.001	0.34	0.06	<.001
general morality				0.41	0.06	<.001
Model 1c						
characters’ authority	0.09	0.07	.186	0.07	0.06	.261
general morality				0.59	0.05	<.001
Model 1d						
characters’ purity	0.08	0.04	.044	0.04	0.04	.236
general morality				0.59	0.05	<.001
Model 1e						
characters’ fairness	0.51	0.04	<.001	0.33	0.05	<.001
general morality				0.36	0.06	<.001

Notes: M=moderator, DV=dependent variable. Total indirect effects are only indicated when they are significant. 5000 bootstrapping. *n*=250. Model 1a: a:  $R^2=.19, p<.001, F(1, 248)=58.13$ . b:  $R^2=.36, p<.001, F(2, 247)=68.96$ . Indirect effect:  $B=0.18$ . Model 1b: a:  $R^2=.26, p<.001, F(1, 248)=89.38$ . b:  $R^2=.42, p<.001, F(2, 247)=88.41$ . Indirect effect:  $B=0.20$ . Model 1c: a:  $R^2=.01, p<.186, F(1, 248)=1.76$ . b:  $R^2=.33, p<.001, F(2, 247)=61.95$ . Model 1d: a:  $R^2=.02, p<.044, F(1, 248)=4.10$ . b:  $R^2=.33, p<.001, F(2, 247)=62.06$ . Model 1e: a:  $R^2=.36, p<.001, F(1, 248)=139.93$ . b:  $R^2=.42, p<.001, F(2, 247)=90.49$ . Indirect effect:  $B=0.18$ .

increased viewers’ PSRs directly and through an increased general morality (H2a/b confirmed). The same pattern was found for the characters’ fairness, leading to the rejection of H2e. The characters’ moral behavior with regard to authority did not influence viewers’ general morality perception of them, nor did this behavior influence their PSRs with these characters (H2c confirmed). For purity, the characters’ behavior in purity had a weak but positive effect on viewers’ general morality perception. Viewers evaluated characters’ behaving morally pure as more moral in general. However, this moral behavior in purity did not increase viewers’ PSRs directly nor through an increased general morality perception (H2d partially confirmed).

The robustness checks (see supplementary material, Table 5) showed that for the domain of purity, the results are not robust and need to be interpreted with caution. The direct effect of a character’s purity on general morality was only found for the items “do something disgusting” and “violate standards of purity and decency.” For the purity construct overall, and for two other items (“live a healthy lifestyle” and “be a smoker”), there was no direct effect on general morality.

The third hypothesis assumed a moderation effect between the viewer’s moral foundations and the character’s perceived morality in a domain on the strength of PSRs. It was assumed that viewers with a stronger sensibility for a morality domain should have stronger PSRs with media characters they perceived as moral in the same domain. For all morality domains, no interaction effects on PSRs were found between viewers’ and characters’ morality (Table 3; hypothesis 3 is rejected). The strength of PSRs is not dependent on the viewer’s moral foundations in combination with the behavior of the media character in the same dimension. The direct effect of the perceived media character’s moral behavior on PSRSs was significant for care, purity, loyalty, and fairness but not for authority. In particular, the moral conduct of the media character regarding care, loyalty, and fairness is positively related to PSRs. This underscores the importance of characters’ moral behaviors for viewers to engage in PSRs, independent of viewers’ moral foundations. Again, moral behavior regarding authority does not seem essential for PSRs with these media characters.

**Table 3:** Influence of the participants’ moral foundations on parasocial relationships, moderated by the media characters’ behavior five moral domains

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
<b>Model 2a</b>					
Viewers’ Care	−0.03	0.08	−0.37	.713	[−0.200, 0.135]
Characters’ Care	0.34	0.05	6.89	<.001	[0.242, 0.436]
Care Viewers * Characters	−0.05	0.08	−0.67	.503	[−0.198, 0.097]
<b>Model 2b</b>					
Viewers’ Loyalty	0.10	0.04	2.47	.014	[0.020, 0.175]
Characters’ Loyalty	0.53	0.05	10.40	<.001	[0.433, 0.636]
Loyalty Viewers * Characters	0.05	0.04	1.32	.189	[−0.027, 0.237]
<b>Model 2c</b>					
Viewers’ Authority	0.08	0.08	0.98	.326	[−0.082, 0.247]
Characters’ Authority	0.10	0.07	1.37	.171	[−0.044, 0.244]
Authority Viewers * Characters	0.09	0.10	0.91	.365	[−0.102, 0.277]
<b>Model 2d</b>					
Viewers’ Purity	0.02	0.07	0.35	.727	[−0.112, 0.161]
Characters’ Purity	0.13	0.05	2.69	.008	[0.034, 0.219]
Purity Viewers * Characters	0.05	0.05	0.96	.336	[−0.054, 0.156]
<b>Model 2e</b>					
Viewers’ Fairness	−0.00	0.07	−0.03	.976	[−0.134, 0.129]
Characters’ Fairness	0.51	0.05	11.22	<.001	[0.419, 0.597]
Fairness Viewers * Characters	0.12	0.07	1.70	.090	[−0.018, 0.249]

Notes: Model 2a:  $R^2 = .16$  ( $p < .001$ ). Model 2b:  $R^2 = .32$  ( $p < .001$ ). Model 2c:  $R^2 = .02$  ( $p = .175$ ). Model 2d:  $R^2 = .03$  ( $p = .042$ ). Model 2e:  $R^2 = .35$  ( $p < .001$ ). All variables are mean-centered.  $n = 250$ .

The robustness checks show that the results are stable for the care domain, using the chosen four-item index with good reliability, the six-item index despite bad reliabilities, and all items as single-item measures (see supplementary material, Tables 6 and 7). Also, for fairness, using the index shows the same results despite low reliability and all items as single-item measures (see supplementary material, Tables 6 and 8). For the domain of loyalty, the results are not robust and depend on the chosen item, so they need to be interpreted with caution and cannot be used to generalize for the loyalty domain overall (see supplementary material, Tables 6 and 9).

**4.2 Exploratory analysis**

The viewers’ affective disposition toward a media character is an important mechanism in explaining the processing of MACs (Eden et al., 2011; Raney, 2004; Raney & Janicke, 2013). Character liking is strongly related

to the viewer’s morality perception of a media character; characters who uphold moral standards are generally liked more, but once viewers have started to like a character, they are also more likely to excuse moral violations (Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Shafer & Raney, 2012). One could thus argue that the relationship between moral evaluations of the characters’ behavior and PSR is just a reflection of character liking. Even though viewers can form PSRs with disliked characters (Bonus et al., 2021; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), the parasocial friendship scale used in this study focuses on positive PSR. Therefore, a hierarchical regression was run to control if the morality of a character’s behavior still influences PSR when controlling for the viewers’ mere liking of the media character. Results show that character liking significantly contributes to PSR ( $\beta = .76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $F(1, 235) = 329.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .58$ ). After introducing the gener-

**Table 4:** Comparison of quadratic vs. linear regression fit for the characters’ perceived morality on parasocial relationships

Outcome: PSR	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>
General morality						
linear model	0.60(.05)	11.07	<.001	122.5	.33	<.001
quadratic model	-0.15	-3.00	.003	67.72	.35	0.001
Character: care						
linear model	0.34(.05)	6.88	<.001	47.32	.16	<.001
quadratic model	-0.07(.04)	-1.63	.104	25.15	.16	<.001
Character: loyalty						
linear model	0.09(.04)	2.14	.034	4.57	.01	.036
quadratic model	-0.05(.03)	-1.41	.159	3.29	.02	.039
Character: authority						
linear model	0.12(.07)	1.69	.093	2.84	.01	.093
quadratic model	0.05(.08)	0.69	.493	1.66	.01	.19
Character: purity						
linear model	0.13(.05)	2.70	.007	7.29	.02	.007
quadratic model	-0.06(.04)	-1.60	.111	4.94	.03	.008
Character: fairness						
linear model	0.52(.05)	11.45	<.001	131.2	.34	<.001
quadratic model	-0.03(.04)	-0.68	.498	65.68	.34	<.001

Notes: *N*=250. a *df* for linear models=248, for quadratic models=247.

al morality of a character, the change in *R*<sup>2</sup> is significant (*p*<.001); thus, moral evaluations contribute to PSR beyond the effect of mere character liking. In other words, character liking ( $\beta = .64, p < .001$ ) and the character’s morality ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ) both significantly contribute to PSR ( $F(1, 234) = 192.22, p < .001, R^2 = .62$ ). This underlines the importance of considering the character’s morality when analyzing PSR with MACs, and that considering PSRs supplement the findings regarding liking and MACs.

It can be argued that it is not the perceived morality of the characters that lead to a PSR but rather the perceived moral ambiguity. To test this, we ran exploratory analyses to analyze the role of the perceived moral ambiguity of media characters’ behaviors. Moral ambiguity is thereby conceptualized in two ways. First, ambiguity can mean that a character’s behavior is perceived as neither immoral nor moral (e.g., Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). We ran quadratic regressions to examine whether viewers have stronger PSRs with characters perceived as ambiguous in this sense. We posited that morality evaluations indicate moral ambiguity around the mean of the scale and that this ambiguity would strengthen or weaken PSRs. In this

case, quadratic regressions should better fit the data than linear models. Our data did not support this assumption, demonstrating that moral ambiguity – in the sense that the media character is assessed as neither very moral nor very immoral – does not influence PSR (Table 4). The characters for this study were selected based on their location on the immoral-moral continuum in the pretest. There is a lack of very immoral or very moral characters to test this assumption.

Moral ambiguity could be indicated by exhibiting behavior that is immoral in one domain but moral in another domain (e.g., Eden et al., 2015, 2017). To analyze this kind of ambiguity, we built a mean index for the perceived moral behavior of the MACs across the five domains ( $M = 2.63, SD = 0.67$ ). To account for the variance in the perception of morality across all domains, we calculated a new variable with the standard deviation from this mean and used this standard deviation as a predictor. Lower values indicate morally consistent behavior regardless of the level of morality. Higher values stand for differences in perceived morality across the five domains and, thus, moral ambiguity ( $M = 0.87, SD = 0.36$ ). A linear regression shows a significant effect of this kind of moral

ambiguity ( $B=0.81$ ,  $SE B=0.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ) on PSR ( $F(1,248)=30.76$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.11$ ). The more ambiguous a viewer perceives a MAC to be, the stronger is the PSR with that character. When including morality and moral ambiguity in the same model as predictors for PSR ( $F(1,247)=66.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.35$ ), the character's morality is a stronger predictor ( $B=0.54$ ,  $SE B=0.06$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than the ambiguity ( $B=0.37$ ,  $SE B=0.13$ ,  $p=.007$ ). Regarding PSRs, the perceived morality of a character's behavior is more important than the perceived ambiguity.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

Parasocial relationships with media characters are a core element in media use and media enjoyment (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). Besides often analyzed classical movie heroes, morally ambiguous characters are another prevalent character trope in entertainment productions and entertainment research (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). While there is much research about MACs, for example, about viewers' identification with these characters or their liking, there is a lack of studies investigating viewers' more enduring bonds with MACs in the form of PSRs. The present study extends the literature by investigating how morally ambiguous behavior relates to the strength of viewers' parasocial relationships.

The results demonstrate that viewers who evaluate the media character as more morally have stronger PSRs with them (H1). While other studies have already shown this effect for character tropes like heroes or villains (Bonus et al., 2021; Tian & Hoffner, 2010), we demonstrate that this is also the case for MACs, who have a special role when it comes to moral behavior. As a lot of research about morality and media characters refers to the ADT, existing research focused on viewers' liking of MACs or their identification with them (e.g., Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023; Raney & Janicke, 2013; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). This study expands the existing literature by examining viewers' PSRs as long-term connections with MACs, as PSRs are not limited to exposure and can develop beyond the mediated contact between viewer and media

character (Dibble et al., 2016). In line with ADT (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977), our findings suggest that viewers' moral judgments of the media character's behavior do influence not only short-term affective dispositions during media use but also long-term dispositions in the form of PSRs. This underlines the importance of morality for viewers' processing of the mediated encounter with MACs beyond media exposure. More research is needed to analyze how other factors, such as the character's role in the story (e.g., protagonist vs. antagonist) or the development of (im)moral actions over time, influence PSRs with MACs.

In our study, perceived morality predicts viewers' PSRs with MACs better than their perceived ambiguity. Further, perceived morality is positively related to PSR even when controlling for character liking. Moral evaluations, thus, contribute to PSR beyond their effect on mere character liking. To better understand this influence, future studies would need to consider recent developments in this research area. For example, the role of moral disengagement in viewers' relationships toward MACs (e.g., Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013), the interdependence of characters (e.g., Grizzard, Francemone, et al., 2020), or viewers' moral expectancy toward MACs (e.g., N. L. Matthews & Bonus, 2023).

Considering the characters' moral behavior in different moral domains, divergent patterns emerge for the five moral domains (H2). The characters' behavior with respect to care, loyalty, and fairness positively influences viewers' general perception of them being moral and their parasocial relationships with that character. If a character behaved morally with respect to authorities, this did not influence viewers' general morality perception nor their PSR with this character. This expands the assumptions of Eden et al. (2015), who showed that viewers perceive characters violating authority and purity differently than characters violating care or loyalty. Our study shows that care, loyalty, and fairness are important for viewers' overall assessment of a character's morality and also for their parasocial relationships with this character.

For the characters' behavior in purity and the effect of this behavior on viewers' general perception of their morality, inconsis-

tent results were found. In all models, the characters' purity did not influence viewers' PSRs. In the main analysis with the one-item measurement, only one aspect of the characters' purity was considered, and the concept could not be represented in its full breadth. It is possible that items like "live a healthy lifestyle" or "be a smoker" are not ideal when applied to MACs. Probably viewers expect MACs to act somehow impure without punishing them for their impure behavior or by accepting this as normal for this character trope. This would need to be addressed in future studies analyzing the moral domain of purity for MACs, for example, by including viewers' moral expectancies toward MACs or by testing other items covering a media character's moral behavior in purity.

This study analyzed the five moral domains for viewers and media characters. Among the five dimensions of morality, authority stands out. We find that respecting authority does not contribute to PSRs. Standing up against dominance hierarchies is accepted behavior, and a character's submission to authority can negatively affect PSRs. Our results are consistent with the findings of Eden et al. (2015). They found that characters violating morality standards in authority were still perceived as heroes, despite their immoral behavior. This aligns with typical movie heroes who often disobey authorities, for example, to avoid harming others or taking a stand against injustice. Immoral behavior about authority is accepted and can strengthen PSRs with these media characters (Bonus et al., 2021).

Viewers' moral foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2008), i. e., the extent to which they value care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity, do not influence the association between the perceived moral behavior of a media character and a viewer's PSR with the character. The assumption that viewers who value a particular morality domain have stronger PSRs with media characters they perceive to be moral in the same domain was not confirmed (H3). We did not find evidence that violating morality standards in a domain important to a viewer negatively affects the PSR. When individuals have a strong sensibility for a moral domain, there was no negative effect of a MAC's immoral behavior on

the individuals' parasocial relationship with them. A possible explanation could be that other factors not controlled for in this study can influence the relationship between perceived morality in the different domains and the PSR. This might be, for example, the importance of a morality domain in the context of the particular show. In a reality-based jurisdiction drama, the moral foundation of fairness might be considered far more critical than in a humorous fiction production with a shallow theme, leading to a different evaluation of a character's behavior. Thus, this context should be considered in future studies.

The selective moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 2016) could also explain the lack of influence of viewers' moral foundations on PSRs. This theory postulates that individuals internalize personal standards of morality. Through different mechanisms, they morally disengage and justify immoral behaviors normally standing against their personal standards (Bandura, 2016). Applied to MACs, this would mean that viewers adapt their usual moral sensibilities assessed with the MFT when disengagement cues are available. For example, Raney (2004) suggested that individuals might overcome their moral sensitivities for typical hero protagonists, as viewers want to enjoy the plot and are motivated to like the character; thus, they might be more generous when the hero shows behavior that would usually violate their moral standards. Some researchers have already applied moral engagement theory to MACs (e.g., Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), and future studies should analyze the role of viewers' PSRs in this process.

Overall, the analyses showed that besides the general morality, it is worth analyzing morality more nuanced, as done in this study with the use of the five domains for viewers and media characters. The different results for the five domains emphasize that a character's immoral behavior can have diverse effects, dependent on the moral domain that was violated. This aligns with the findings of Kleemans et al. (2017). They showed that violations of certain morality dimensions are less predictive for viewers' PSRs than the global moral evaluation. As with PSRs, we analyzed a concept that has relevance beyond

the viewing situation; these differences were important. It might be that processes like increasing moral deliberation or shifting moral priorities explain viewers' PSRs with MACs (Kleemans et al., 2017). To do so, future studies should analyze these processes during media exposure and apply long-term measures, so that possible shifts and their impact on PSRs can be examined.

When interpreting the results, it is important to note that we evaluated the *perceived* morality of a media character from the viewer's point of view and not a neutrally assessed morality. It could be argued that a character's violation of morality in a domain of importance to the viewer has an impact on the perceived morality of the character rather than on the strength of the parasocial relationship the viewer develops with that character. The correlation analyses showed no negative correlation between viewers' moral foundations and their perceptions of MACs' behaviors in the same moral domain, thereby contradicting this hypothesis. Still, our assessment is the *subjective* perception of the viewers. Future studies could also include a more neutral assessment of the media character's behavior in the five morality domains to overcome this subjective influence.

A strength of this study is the variety of moral ambiguity represented in the chosen media characters. We analyzed eight MACs from recent and well-known entertainment productions. As the representation of morality can vary in different genres (Bilandzic, Hastall, & Sukalla, 2017; Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2017), we included media characters covering a variety of genres: action, adventure, comedy, crime, drama, fantasy, mystery, and romance. Future research might extend this approach by investigating the influences of characteristics such as the genre, the context of the series, and the character's gender or physical appearance. Additionally, the recent development in the literature about MACs should be considered, and MACs should be analyzed more nuanced. For example, following the approach of Tamborini et al. (2018), categorizing them into perfect heroes, imperfect heroes, morally equivocal characters, imperfect villains, and perfect villains (Tamborini et al., 2018) and also respecting the characters' role in the

plot, for example, if they are a protagonist or an antagonist (Frazer & Moyer-Gusé, 2023).

This study included only media characters evaluated as morally ambiguous in a pretest. Following the multidimensional view of morality (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020), these eight characters are diverse in their moral domains. We conceptualized morality as the overall evaluation across these domains and as the variance between the domains. Our results suggest that the degree of the character's moral ambiguity was less critical for the strength of the viewers' PSRs than the overall morality of their behavior. This underscores that MACs' immoral behavior can be accepted to a certain degree – especially when it concerns malicious behavior against authorities – yet viewers still develop stronger PSRs with MACs they perceive to be moral. To better understand the role of ambiguity compared to morality, further studies should include various media characters ranging from those considered highly immoral to those who exhibit high moral behaviors.

This study has several limitations that necessitate discussion. First, the study used a cross-sectional design with a possible self-selection bias. The data for this study cannot show causality between morality, moral ambiguity, and parasocial relationships. As moral foundations are relatively stable traits (Graham et al., 2012), it seems plausible that they influence subsequent PSR and the perception of characters. Still, further studies with experimental designs would be needed to shed light on a causal relationship between morality perception and parasocial relationships. As studies showed that the moral evaluation does not need to be stable, and viewers can adapt them during the course of a narrative (Bonus et al., 2021; Eden et al., 2011; Kleemans et al., 2017) this should additionally be considered in future studies to analyze the constant interplay between moral evaluation and PSR.

Second, the study's design has some limitations. It created a possible self-selection bias, as participants were confronted with a list of MACs from popular productions on streaming platforms. They were asked which media characters they knew well and then randomly assigned to one of these charac-

ters. A particular form of self-selection was unavoidable, as participants could not answer questions about a character they did not know. The advantage of this approach is that we did not need to confront participants with an experimental stimulus, the effect of which would have been particular to the moral or immoral actions shown in the stimulus and would not allow for a generalization. Due to the study's design was a different time lag between observing the media character and the self-assessment in the survey for each participant. We attempted to minimize this effect by including only media characters from the most-streamed and successful series during data collection. Additionally, the chosen approach resulted in the targeted variance of viewers' PSR with the characters. The overall mean of the sample was slightly below the midpoint of the scale. Most of the participants reported medium PSRs, which needs to be considered when interpreting the results, as viewers with very strong PSRs were not represented in the sample.

Third, using single-item measurements for participants' moral foundations regarding fairness and loyalty and the media characters' perceived moral behavior in the purity domain limits the interpretation of the results. The Moral Foundations Questionnaire has been validated and used for research worldwide. Moral foundations are considered a universal construct with differences in the importance of the moral domains across regions worldwide (Graham et al., 2012). However, the five-factor structure failed to replicate in several studies, and relatively low reliabilities were often found (e.g., Harper & Rhodes, 2021; Zakharin & Bates, 2021), especially for purity (Gray et al., 2023). In our study, participants from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were recruited – three countries with similar cultural backgrounds. It is possible that the scale did not align closely enough with the context.

For viewers, insufficient scale reliabilities were achieved for care, fairness, and loyalty. The robustness analyses showed that the results for care and fairness are robust. For viewers' fairness, five of the six items (i.e., the importance of someone acting reasonably or providing everyone with the same rights) are strongly left-skewed with means of 4.19 and

above on a 5-point Likert-type scale (see details on OSF). The ceiling effect with a slight variance may have led to insufficient scale reliability in this case. For loyalty, the results need to be interpreted with care, as different results were found when using different single items or the overall scale. When taking a look at the items, some explanations can be found. The distribution of items was strongly skewed (skewness  $> -/+1$ ), and some of the items developed in the U.S. context are probably not suitable for the context they were applied in. Especially the items relating to loyalty to one's country (e.g., "I am proud of my country's history") can be problematic in Germany due to historical events. That's also why an item that refers to loyalty regarding family and not the home country was chosen for the main analysis.

Only purity had insufficient scale reliability for the characters' moral domains measured with the CMFQ-X (Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). The purity domain was discussed in other research, and other better-suited domains were suggested (Gray et al., 2023), so these results align with these discussions. In general, more research is needed using this validated scale to test the appropriateness of the scale for different character tropes, in different genres, and in different types of media productions.

Taken together, this study integrates the multidimensional view of morality on both sides, for viewers and for morally ambiguous media characters. The results show that the moral behavior of MACs regarding the five morality domains can have different effects on viewers' parasocial relationships: While the characters' moral behavior in care, loyalty, and fairness increases viewers' general perception of their morality and their parasocial relationships with them, the morality of their behavior in authority and purity seems less important for viewers' general morality assessment and their PSRs with them. Immorality caused by violations regarding authority and purity is more readily accepted than care, loyalty, and fairness violations. Additionally, moral behavior appears to be more critical for the strength of PSRs than the level of moral ambiguity. This study adds to the existing literature by analyzing the character trope of MAC with regard to the relation-



ship between moral or immoral behavior on viewers' PSRs. This relationship was analyzed with a non-student sample and a selection of MACs. Morality was considered a multi-dimensional construct, enabling a more nuanced analysis of these complex character types. This resulted in different patterns for the morality domains, which opens up promising avenues for further research.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Open data

This study was preregistered at OSF. The original preregistration and the data supporting this study's findings are available at: <https://osf.io/395tb/>

### Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited). <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/scoms/article/view/j.scoms.2023.03.3969>

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