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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Influence of Morality Subcultures on the Acceptance and Appeal of Violence

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Two studies examined how disposition theory-based morality subcultures predict the acceptance and appeal of violence. Study 1 used groups formed by median splits of individual difference variables (religiosity, aggression, and sex) thought to be trait correlates of morality subcultures in three 2 × 2 × 2 designs varying trait, perpetrator disposition (positive, negative), and motive (justified, unjustified) to predict the acceptance of violence in story resolutions for a scenario. Study 2 extended this design using domain-specific dimensions of morality from moral foundations theory (MFT) to predict perceptions of violent content and its appeal. The results suggest that morality subcultures predict response to violent drama and that dimensions of morality based on MFT offer a framework for defining morality subcultures.

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The acceptance and appeal of violence in media entertainment has been the focus of sustained research in communication (Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000). One of the most often applied rationales for research in this area is derived from Zillmann's (2000) moral sanction theory of delight and repugnance. Moral sanction theory holds that media consumers are "untiring moral monitors" (p. 54) who respond to the outcome of narratives based on perceptions of outcomes as morally appropriate or just. Therefore, the acceptance of violence as justified is a major determinant of its appeal. Central to the present studies, the theory argues that similarities in the acceptance of media violence and its subsequent appeal are dependent on shared value systems among groups of individuals who judge observed behavior utilizing similar moral frameworks. Zillmann called these groups "morality subcultures." In light of this reasoning, factors that identify morality subcultures should be a central

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concern for media scholars and practitioners. Research on this aspect of moral sanction theory has most often applied a disposition framework, in which individual difference variables are used in lieu of theoretically defined morality subcultures to determine viewer reactions to outcomes. Krcmar (2009) argues that the isolated individual difference variables studied in disposition research have been limited and suggests that a broad-based theory is needed to understand reactions to entertainment driven by shared value systems. The present paper introduces a program of research on media and morality. Two studies—the first examining the acceptance of violent reprisal and the second examining its appeal—build on each other to show the value of progressing from a set of individual difference variables to a unified theory of morality for examining issues related to morality subcultures in entertainment research.¹

We began the current research with an attempt to identify morality subcultures by relying on individual difference variables important to the acceptance of violence, such as sex and trait aggression. These variables were selected based on the assumption that they would act as correlates of morality subcultures. We used these correlates to predict the acceptance of violent character behavior portrayed in short scenarios varying character disposition and motive. Since features irrelevant to morality are confounded with these correlates, our understanding of the functional manner in which morality affects acceptance of violent media was blurred. Thus, in line with Krcmar's (2009) view on the utility of individual difference variables and the need for a broad, theoretically based approach to morality subcultures, we introduce Haidt and Joseph's moral foundations theory (MFT) in Study 2 to provide such an approach (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2008). MFT proposes the existence of five domain-specific moral modules that we suggest can be used to differentiate morality subcultures. We used these modules to predict the appeal of violence portrayed in short scenarios varying levels of domain-relevant content. This paper introduces MFT as a basis for studying morality subcultures in entertainment research and provides the first empirical test of this theory's application to understanding how morality subcultures can affect the appeal of entertainment.

Combined, these studies show the evolution of thought that led to the current theoretical model. The paper begins with a discussion of disposition logic detailing the role of morality and morality subcultures in enjoyment of drama outlined in Zillmann's (2000) moral sanction theory. Next, we discuss logic behind research on MFT, and how the theory can be applied to identify morality subcultures that predict the acceptance and appeal of violent entertainment. Finally, we introduce two studies that show the progression of our research from mere correlates of morality subcultures to theoretically derived indicators of the same.

Disposition theory and violent drama

Disposition-based theories have been used to explain audience enjoyment in a variety of different entertainment genres, including sports, humor, and suspense (cf. Raney,

2006). One of the central tenets of disposition theory in drama is that enjoyment is largely dependent on the outcome of events and whether or not consequences seem morally justified. In his moral sanction theory, Zillmann (2000) argues that audience members continuously scrutinize character behavior and outcomes, judging both as right or wrong based on their personal sense of moral propriety. From this, the audience develops a sense for the moral integrity of the characters and forms expectations about the characters' behaviors (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Affect toward characters will fluctuate to the extent that audience members assess character behavior as proper (Raney, 2004). This process can be used to explain why audience members might sanction and enjoy violence in entertainment media as disposition logic holds that we not only approve violent reprisal, but we enjoy it, if it is deemed warranted. In fact, we cheer harsh treatment of wrongdoers, but only if their behavior was loathsome enough to merit such severe retribution (Bryant & Miron, 2002). At the same time, unjustifiable overretribution can cause considerable distress. In effect, the need to justify punishment compels the inclusion of atrocities in plots to allow the enjoyment of violence taken in revenge. This narrative technique has long been a common feature in violent storylines (Sontag, 1966). Indeed, its success begs the question: How do viewers judge behavior as properly or improperly retributive?

Although philosophers may posit that decisions of right and wrong stem from the existence of formal moral systems (Bentham, 1948; Kant, 1785/ 1922), there is reason to believe that most perceptions of justice are not governed by strict adherence to or deviations from an exacting set of rules prescribing specific behaviors (Zillmann, 2000). Instead, they are somewhat spontaneous appraisals shaped by basal reactions to witnessed events.² Zillmann (2000) distinguishes the more deliberate process of forming "moral judgments" from these less formal, contemplative "moral sanctions." Whereas moral judgment can be characterized by comparatively formal thought processes, which may prescribe specific rewards and punishments for particular acts, moral sanctions are thought of more simply as a "readiness to accept, in moral terms," the observed outcomes of events (p. 59). In this sense, moral sanctions include any and all behaviors one is ready to accept. Thus, instead of a clear-cut judgment of an act's morality based on its deviating from specific retribution called for by an exacting moral code, the comparatively impulsive "readiness to accept" nature of moral sanction appraisals allows for broader latitude in determining which acts are deemed morally justified.

The fact that individual values vary implies that behaviors considered morally appropriate by some will be considered inappropriate by others (Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). Within and across populations, the great disparities found in the moral appraisals of particular social practices such as capital punishment, nudity, adherence to religious precepts, drug use, and premarital sex make differences in moral appraisal between different groups undeniably clear. However, while diversity in judgment is expected to characterize the population at

large, different “morality subcultures” within the greater population are expected to show uniformity indicative of social validation processes.

Morality subcultures

Zillmann (2000) makes special note of morality subcultures in his moral sanction theory. He cautions that any theory attempting to explain drama's appeal based on audience assessments of moral sanctions must account for the differences in basal morality found among segments of the population. He argues that disparity in basic ideas of morality will cause audience enjoyment to vary. Though judging the propriety of character behavior is a central feature of disposition-based theories, factors that shape perceptions of behaviors as appropriate or justified have not been a central research focus. Instead of examining variance in basal morality and determining its influence on judgments of behavior, most research has simply assumed that these differences exist. Notably, two recent investigations have begun to explore related issues. In research examining, subjectively held notions of social justice, Raney and Bryant (2002) demonstrated that attitudes toward vigilantism and punishment predict enjoyment of crime drama. Raney (2003) extended this initial work to show that these attitudes, along with trait empathy, could predict audience judgments about justification for violent reprisal, and overall enjoyment of drama. The ability of these variables to predict perceived justification and program enjoyment varied as a function of a perpetrator's motive for violent reprisal. These findings are in line with research suggesting that dispositions toward characters and moral judgments of behavior can be shaped by individual differences such as trait empathy (Hoffmann, 1987; Zillmann, 1991, 2000).

It follows that other trait variables may also indicate morality subcultures. Although we do not argue that trait variables represent cultural determinants of morality, there may be strong correlates between moral subcultures and certain trait variables. With regards to violence, previous research has identified several potential correlates of its acceptance and appeal. Some of the most important of these potential correlates are trait aggression, religiosity, and sex. For example, research shows that trait aggression is related to the acceptance of violent conflict resolution (Bushman, Huesmann & Whitaker, 2009; Sparks & Sparks, 2009). In addition, Bushman (1995) demonstrated that trait aggression moderated aggressive affect and behavior after viewing a violent film, suggesting that high trait aggression may indicate elaborate networks for aggression-related feelings. Other research suggests that trait aggression may demarcate specific norms of appropriateness of violent reprisal (Kiewitz & Weaver, 2001). In the case of religiosity, research indicates a negative correlation between religiosity and the acceptance of violent conflict resolution (Hoffner *et al.*, 1999). Other research suggests that religious norms will influence the acceptability of violent retribution (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Finally, sex has also been identified as a potential moderator of the preference for and appeal of violent media (Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, & McDermott, 1979; Bushman, Huesmann, &

Whitaker, 2009; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981). Some research (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972) finds that males are more influenced by violence in media, perhaps reflecting the different societal values imparted to men and women concerning the appeal of violence (Jansz, 2003). Although other individual difference variables important to the acceptance and appeal of violence exist, these variables were selected due to the prevalence of past findings and their potential to logically correlate with morality defined subculture groups. In Study 1, we examine these variables, and test the notion that these different indicators of morality subcultures will moderate the influence of dispositional factors on the acceptance of violence. Specifically, we hypothesize that sex, religiosity, and trait aggression will moderate the influence of dispositional considerations on the level of acceptance of violent reprisal.

After examining the influence of these individual difference variables on the acceptance of violence in Study 1, Study 2 begins to apply a broader theory of moral psychology to understanding the appeal of violence in entertainment. Recently, converging evidence across disciplines has shown support for the conceptualization of broad cultural differences in moral reasoning (Haidt & Joseph, 2004, 2008; Shweder *et al.*, 1987). This research has led to a theory of cultural moral differences known as MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). MFT proposes that cultures vary in their emphasis on different universal dimensions of morality, and that observable patterns in this variance comprise the separate moral foundations of cultures. The different dimensions identified by MFT are grouped into five domain-specific areas known as moral modules. Moral modules combine past experience and emotion into intuitive “bits of mental structure” that influence moral judgments in specific content areas without conscious deliberation (Haidt & Joseph, 2008, p. 6). The five modules, identified in Haidt and Joseph (2004) and Haidt and Graham (2007), include harm (related to alleviating the suffering of others and empathy), fairness (concerned with reciprocity and justice), ingroup/loyalty (dealing with common good and punitiveness toward outsiders), authority (negotiating dominance hierarchies), and purity (concerned with contamination). The importance of each module in determining response to moral violations is shaped by cultural experience. For example, one culture may place great weight on the authority module, and therefore perceive violations of authority to be more immoral than violations of other modules (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The importance of these modules in determining instinctive responses to moral violations has been validated in several studies (Graham *et al.*, 2009; Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008). Because the content areas of the modules cover ethical domains relevant to traditional violent media content, they may be key to understanding how morality influences the appeal of violence.

In order to investigate the role of dispositional considerations for the appeal of violent media, the harm and fairness modules are particularly germane. Although the portrayal of violence in media will likely depend on the interaction of all five moral modules, we propose (due to features prevalent in violent media, such as graphicness and justification) that the harm and fairness modules should be

principal in the evaluation and appeal process of violent media, People should be expected to rely on considerations of harm when evaluating the graphicness of violence in media, and they should be expected to rely on considerations of fairness when evaluating the justification of violence in media. Thus, in Study 2, we hypothesize that such graphic violence in media should have less appeal for individuals who are sensitive to harm violations. People for whom harm is important will perceive the violence in narratives as more graphic. Similarly, we hypothesize that justification for violence should have greater appeal for individuals who find fairness to be particularly important. People for whom fairness is important will perceive narratives with justification for the violence as more warranted. Following Study 2, we discuss both studies to show the value of research that shows a progression from isolated individual difference variables to a unified theory of morality subcultures in entertainment.

Study 1

Study 1 was our first attempt to identify morality subcultures. We began by using traits thought to be indicative of morality subcultures in order to examine their influence on the acceptance of violent reprisal. This study tests the hypothesis that morality subcultures moderate the influence of dispositional factors on the acceptance of violence, such that (a) acceptance of violence will vary as a function of dispositions toward the perpetrator/target and the perpetrator's motive for violence; and, more importantly, (b) this level of acceptance will be moderated by traits indicative of different morality subcultures. Three traits thought to correlate with morality subcultures (religiosity, trait aggression, and sex) were used to represent subculture groups. These trait correlates were between group factors (using a median split for continuous variables, and male/female categories for sex) in three 2×2 experiments that varied perpetrator disposition (positive, negative), and motive (justified, unjustified) to predict the acceptance of violence.

Methods

Participants and procedure

A total of 565 undergraduate students were recruited from communication classes at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. Data were collected in two waves, with 77 participants in the first wave and 478 in the second; the first wave of data collection did not include the religiosity index. In addition, the second wave provided incomplete data from 44 participants for the religiosity items, and 15 participants for the Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ). Despite the presence of missing data in the analyses, the descriptive statistics for participant age and the sex breakdown within each analysis were fairly similar. For the analyses addressing sex, verbal aggression, and anger, mean age was found to be 20.61 ($SD = 1.97$), with 170 males and 395 females in the analyses. For the analyses on

religiosity, the mean participant age was found to be 20.62 ($SD = 1.98$), and the sex breakdown included 139 males and 310 females. For analyses on physical aggression, the average age was 20.61 ($SD = 1.98$) with 167 males and 382 females responding, and for analyses on hostility the average participant age was found to be 20.63 ($SD = 1.99$), with 163 males and 372 females responding.

Students completed the questionnaire to fulfill a class requirement. They were informed that they were taking part in a study measuring attitudes. The questionnaire began with a set of individual difference measures. The questionnaire continued with one of four incomplete conflict scenarios varying perpetrator disposition and motive for aggression, which were randomly administered to participants.³ After reading one of the four scenarios, participants rated the acceptability of 15 potential conflict resolutions that differed in their level of violent reprisal.⁴

Stimulus materials

The four scenarios manipulated perpetrator disposition (positive, negative) and perpetrator motive (justified, unjustified). In each scenario, two characters (Dave and Paul) confront each other. The positive disposition matched a liked perpetrator with a disliked target, and the negative disposition matched a disliked perpetrator with a liked target. The positive disposition was established with the statement: "Paul, one of the most likable people you could ever meet at school, walks into a room and sees Dave, a well known and widely despised campus bully." For the negative disposition, the clauses describing the perpetrator and target were switched. The rest of the scenario manipulated perpetrator motive. Protection of life and personal gain were selected to represent the justified and unjustified motives, respectively.⁵ The perception of a justified motive was induced with the statement: "The last time they met, Dave threatened to knock Paul unconscious. Since Dave had always followed through with similar threats to others, Paul was sure that once Dave saw him he would make good on this threat. Paul wanted to protect himself. With this in mind, Paul decided to..." Participants in the unjustified motive condition read the following: "Paul believes that if he confronts Dave in public, he would gain great popularity among other students. In order to increase his popularity, Paul decided he would..."

Measures

Acceptability of violent reprisal

To measure the acceptability of violent reprisal, the attitudes toward the aggression questionnaire was adapted by Tamborini and Lachlan (2003) from procedures established by Sherif's (1962) research on attitude structures.⁶ Participants were given a list of 15 statements identifying possible resolutions to the incomplete conflict scenarios. All choices started with a statement that read, "Paul decides to do something he knew would." Participants were then asked to "place a check next to the one that you think is the most acceptable thing for him to do in the situation described." The item selected served as the measure of "most acceptable"

reprisal. The resolutions ranged from 1 (give physical and emotional support to Dave that not only had lasting benefit, but would “surely” give great joy to both him and his family) through 8 (have no physical or emotional impact on Dave) to 15 (cause certain death, and mutilate Dave’s corpse).⁷ The 15 options on the scale were developed through a series of pilot tests showing 99% agreement on rank ordering among 10 raters (Tamborini & Lachlan, 2003). Low scores represent the acceptance of acts that are extremely helpful and nonviolent and high scores represent the acceptance of acts that are extremely violent and antisocial (i.e., represent the belief that greater retribution is acceptable). Scores for this measure were uniformly distributed (skewness = .09, kurtosis = -1.09, $M = 5.49$, $SD = 3.22$)

Religiosity

The duke religiosity index (DRI: Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997) is a 5-item scale that assesses organizational, nonorganizational, and intrinsic religiousness (Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004). Analyses on the scale have demonstrated both that the scale is reliable (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997; Storch, Roberti, Heidergken, et al., 2004) and that it fits a stable, one-dimensional factor structure (Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004). An example item reads, “I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life,” with response options anchored at 1 (definitely true of me) and 5 (definitely not true of me). Coefficient α in the present study indicated that the scale was adequately reliable, $\alpha = .89$, and all items were averaged to form a composite score ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.16$).

Trait aggression

The BPAQ (Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to measure trait aggression. The BPAQ has 29 items measuring four subtraits of aggression from 1 (never or hardly applies to me) to 5 (very often applies to me). The four subscales include physical aggression (nine items: e.g., “Given enough provocation, I may hit another person”; $\alpha = .85$, $M = 2.78$, $SD = 2.11$), verbal aggression (five items: e.g., “I often find myself disagreeing with people”; $\alpha = .74$, $M = 3.46$, $SD = .95$), anger (seven items: e.g., “I have trouble controlling my temper”; $\alpha = .78$, $M = 2.71$, $SD = .87$), and hostility (eight items: e.g., “Other people always seem to get the breaks”; $\alpha = .70$, $M = 3.14$, $SD = .93$).

Results

In order to explore the potential for group membership in morality subcultures to moderate acceptance of violent reprisal, three separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted, one for each trait variable.⁸ In each analysis, perpetrator disposition and motive were entered as between-subject factors to examine the main and interaction effects of our manipulated variables. Next, to examine the moderating effect of our trait variable, median splits were performed on all continuous trait

variable scores to separate subjects into the groups of “low” and “high” on each variable. These trait variables were entered as a moderating between-subjects factor in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA to examine the predicted three-way moderation effect of perpetrator disposition, perpetrator motive, and traits on our dependent measures.

Sex

The analysis for sex revealed main effects for both motive, $F(1, 540) = 9.73$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$ and sex, $F(1, 540) = 5.79$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Those observing violent retribution with a justified motive ($M = 6.20$, $SE = .25$), and men, ($M = 6.07$, $SE = .30$), expressed higher levels of acceptable reprisal than did those observing violence with an unjustified motive, ($M = 5.05$, $SE = .26$) or women, ($M = 5.18$, $SE = .22$). Next, a two-way interaction was detected between disposition and motive, $F(1, 540) = 8.31$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, such that disliked perpetrators with justified motives had the highest level of acceptable reprisal ($M = 6.71$, $SE = .45$) and disliked perpetrators with unjust motives the lowest ($M = 4.50$, $SE = .50$). Also, a three-way interaction was detected between disposition, motive, and sex, $F(1, 540) = 7.81$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Figure 1). Examining the pattern of means suggests sex moderates the interaction of dispositional set and perpetrator motive on the acceptability of violent reprisal. For males, retribution was highest in the negative disposition/justified motive condition, ($M = 8.00$, $SE = .73$), and lowest in the negative disposition/unjustified motive condition ($M = 4.28$, $SE = .75$). For females, retribution was highest in the positive disposition/justified motive condition, ($M = 5.62$, $SE = .29$) and lowest in the negative disposition/unjustified motive condition, ($M = 4.71$, $SE = .60$).

Religiosity

For religiosity, a main effect was detected for motive, $F(1, 426) = 4.39$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Those observing violent retribution with a justified motive ($M = 5.80$, $SE = .34$) expressed higher levels of acceptable reprisal than did those observing violence with an unjustified motive, ($M = 4.76$, $SE = .36$). Main effects were not observed for religiosity or disposition. Similar to the analysis of sex, a two-way interaction was found between disposition and motive, $F(1, 426) = 5.09$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$ such that violence committed by disliked perpetrators with a justified motive ($M = 6.16$, $SE = .63$) was most acceptable, and violence committed by disliked perpetrators with an unjustified motive was least acceptable ($M = 4.01$, $SE = .68$). Also, a three-way interaction was detected, with religiosity moderating the interaction of dispositional set and character motive on the acceptability of violent reprisal, $F(1, 426) = 3.93$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Figure 2), such that those low in religiosity appear to have polarized reactions to characters with negative disposition. The highest level of retribution for low-religiosity participants was found in the negative disposition/justified motive condition ($M = 6.89$, $SE = 1.07$), and the lowest level of retribution was found in the negative disposition/unjustified condition ($M = 3.22$, $SE = 1.07$). For the high religiosity group, the highest level

of retribution was found in the positive disposition/justified motive condition, ($M = 5.57$, $SE = .36$), and the lowest level of retribution for high religiosity was found in the negative disposition/unjustified motive condition ($M = 4.80$, $SE = .83$). This pattern is markedly similar to the pattern observed for sex.

Aggression

Analyses were then performed on the four subtraits of the BPAQ. No significant interactions were found for hostility, verbal aggression, or anger.⁹ For physical aggression, main effects were detected for motive, $F(1, 525) = 12.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$, such that justified motive led to higher levels of acceptable violent reprisal ($M = 5.99$, $SE = .24$) than unjustified motive ($M = 4.74$, $SE = .26$). Main effects were also present for physical aggression, $F(1, 525) = 10.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$, such that those high in physical aggression reported higher levels of acceptable reprisal ($M = 5.95$, $SE = .25$) than those low in physical aggression, ($M = 4.78$, $SE = .26$). As in prior analyses, there was a two-way interaction between disposition and motive, $F(1, 525) = 5.82$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .01$, such that the highest level of acceptable reprisal was found for negative perpetrators with justified motives ($M = 6.32$, $SE = .43$) and the lowest level for negative perpetrators with unjustified motives ($M = 4.35$, $SE = .46$). Again, a three-way interaction was detected showing that differences in trait physical aggression affect the interaction of dispositional set and perpetrator motive on the acceptability of violent reprisal, $F(1, 525) = 4.70$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Figure 3). For individuals high in physical aggression the combination of negative

Figure 1 Three-way interaction of Disposition, Motive, and Sex.

disposition and justified motive produced the highest level of acceptable reprisal in the analysis, ($M = 7.80$, $SE = .57$), whereas negative disposition/unjustified motive produced the lowest, ($M = 4.57$, $SE = .68$). For those low in physical aggression, this pattern was different, with positive disposition/justified motive producing the highest level of acceptable retribution ($M = 5.62$, $SE = .34$), and the negative disposition/unjustified motives producing the lowest ($M = 3.86$, $SE = .68$). This pattern of means is consistent with both prior analyses.

Study 1 discussion

Study 1 examined the ability of trait individual difference variables used as indicators of morality subcultures to moderate the separate and combined effects of perpetrator disposition and motive on the acceptance of violent reprisal. Differences were found for respondents falling in different subgroups on three individual difference variables (sex, religiosity, and physical aggression) in a similar fashion, indicating that efforts to define morality subcultures show promise for predicting perceptual differences in the approbation of narrative violence to the extent that subculture values interact with disposition and motive in a predictable manner. For example, although the interaction of motive and disposition has no effect on women's acceptance of violence, for some reason it affects acceptance of violence for men. Similarly, although the interaction of motive and disposition has no effect on the acceptance of violence for those low in trait aggression or high on religiosity, it affects acceptance of violence for those with high trait aggression or low religiosity. This suggests potential

Figure 2 Three-way interaction of Disposition, Motive, and Religiosity.

differences in moral reasoning for males and females, for those high and low on trait aggression, and those high and low on religiosity.

Although the effect sizes are small, given the relatively weak manipulation and the distal nature of the predicted effect, the fact that these results show consistency is indicative of broad-based differences in individual perceptions of acceptable violent retribution. At the same time, sex, religiosity, and trait physical aggression are a disconnected set of individual difference variables and do not necessarily lend themselves to a coherent system of moral reasoning. Although these findings support the notion that broad groups of viewers respond in predictable fashion to violent retribution, this conventional approach to studying audience reactions to media violence did not use theoretically unified indicators of these subcultures, instead focusing on indicators that had substantial prior research backing their inclusion as discriminating factors in the acceptance of violent reprisal. As noted by Krcmar (2009), this approach is less likely to yield interpretable results. Instead of using individual difference variables noted in the violence literature, a more discerning attempt to identify morality subcultures would use a system based on a comprehensive theory of subcultural differences in morality, such as that proposed by MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). To this end, Study 2 examines whether the moral modules identified in MFT can be used to define membership in morality subcultures by examining the extent to which the weighting of specific modules can predict response to violent media.

Figure 3 Three-way interaction of Disposition, Motive, and Physical Aggression.

Study 2

Study 2 focuses on perceptions of violence and its appeal examining the influence of the harm and fairness modules on the perception and appeal of violent media that contains module-specific content (i.e., graphic or justified violence). To accomplish this, the study examines if membership in a morality subculture as defined by the salience of specific modules will shape overall appeal of violent content as well as perceptions of content attributes. We expect that viewers for whom harm is salient will find narratives with strong graphic content less appealing, as well as more graphic. In a similar fashion, viewers for whom fairness is salient will perceive narratives with strong justification as more appealing, as well as more justified, than narratives with unjustified violence. Finally, we expect that neither harm nor fairness will be a strong predictor of perceptions unrelated to the module (i.e., harm will not strongly predict perceptions of justification and fairness will not predict perceptions of graphicness) or related appeal.

Methods

Participants and procedure

A total of 135 undergraduate students (101 female, age $M = 20.52$, $SD = 1.60$) were recruited from communication classes at a large public university in the Midwestern United States. As with Study 1, students received class credit for participation. All participants completed a two-part online survey. The first part contained the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ31: Haidt, Graham, & Hersh, 2006). The second part contained descriptions of four film narratives and several scales used to assess perceptions and appeal of each narrative. Participants were told that they were taking part in a pilot test of new film products, and that their opinions would be used to see if the products had potential to be developed on a larger scale.

Stimulus materials

Film descriptions

The film descriptions used in this study were four short narratives taken from an earlier study (Tamborini, Lachlan, Bowman, & Eden, 2006) that varied attributes of media violence in order to create different levels (high, low) of graphic violence and justification for violence.¹⁰ These levels were created by (a) varying the text to suggest that violent content would be more or less graphic or justified and (b) attaching content descriptor labels (e.g., blood and gore) attributed to the Motion Picture Association of America. For example, to imply that a film would be high or low in graphicness, the text included or omitted phrases such as “body parts fly and blood spurts.” To imply high or low justification, the text described violence performed “to protect the innocent” or “for fun and glory.” Single-item measures were used to assess the extent to which each narrative was perceived as just or graphic: “The movie presented will show (graphic/justified) violence” with response items anchored at 1 (It will not show [graphic/justified] violence) and 7 (It will show a great deal of [graphic/

justified] violence). To examine if our manipulation was successful, paired *t*-tests were run for both attributes by narrative. The results of these tests demonstrated that two descriptions (Blood Reign and Mystic Battle) varied significantly as intended. Blood Reign was both significantly higher in perceived graphicness, $t(135) = 7.35, p < .05$, and lower in perceived justification, $t(135) = -3.87, p < .05$, than Mystic Battle. The means and standard deviations are as follows: for graphicness, Blood Reign ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.60$) and Mystic Battle ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.71$); for perceived justification, Blood Reign ($M = 3.44, SD = 2.22$) and Mystic Battle ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.95$). As such, these two narratives were selected for use in all subsequent analysis.

Measures

Harm and fairness

The harm and fairness modules were measured using representative items from the MFQ31. The MFQ31 is split into “relevance” and “statement” type items. Although Graham et al. (2009) validated this scale and recommend all items within each module be averaged together to produce the moral foundation scores for each, our own confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) found that the “statement” items did not load strongly on either factor and were subsequently dropped from analysis. After removing the “statement” items, the measurement model had adequate fit, $CMIN/df = 1.92$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .96, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08. Our criteria for model fit included a minimum discrepancy statistic (CMIN/df) below 2.00 (Byrne, 1989), RMSEA below .08 (Brown & Cudeck, 1989, 1993) and CFI above .90 (Bentler, 1990). For harm and fairness, all items were averaged for analysis. These seven items (four for harm and three for fairness) included the prompt: “When you judge an action as right or wrong, how relevant are the following considerations in your decision?” and responses were anchored with 1 (*not at all relevant*) and 5 (*very relevant*) on a 5-point scale. Items for harm included, “Whether or not someone was harmed; cared for someone weak or vulnerable (reverse-coded); suffered emotionally; was cruel,” ($\alpha = .73$). For fairness, items included, “Whether or not someone. . . was denied their rights; was treated differently than others; acted unfairly,” ($\alpha = .72$).

Film appeal

A modified version of measures used by Potter, Mahood, and Yao (2003) was used to assess preference for and perceptions of the violent content presented. Preference was measured by asking participants how enjoyable, appealing, likeable, and exciting they thought the film would be on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater appeal. Cronbach's α for the four items was .94, and these items were averaged for analysis. Perceptions of the content were assessed by two single-item scales measuring the level of graphic violence and justified violence expected in each film. Participants responded on a scale from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater perception of the attribute. Overall, the appeal of Blood Reign ($M = 1.86, SD = 1.12$) was significantly lower than the appeal of Mystic Battle ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.34$), $t(135) = -3.33, p < .05$.

Results

We ran all analyses in AMOS with MFQ scores on harm predicting perceived graphicness, MFQ scores on fairness predicting perceived fairness, and both perceived graphicness and fairness predicting film appeal. To account for the high correlation between harm and fairness ($r = .58, p < .05$), we added a link between those two exogenous variables. We ran two models, one for each film narrative. The overall fit of both models was acceptable. Fit indices for Blood Reign were $CMIN/df = 1.75$, $CFI = .97$, and $RMSEA = .08$, and fit indices for Mystic Battle were $CMIN/df = 2.30$, $CFI = .97$, and $RMSEA = .09$.¹¹

The first analysis examined the extent to which harm salience predicted the perception of graphic content and subsequent appeal of Blood Reign, a highly graphic film narrative with low justification for violence. As predicted, harm salience was a significant predictor of perceived graphicness ($\beta = .29, p < .05, R^2 = .09$) and perceived graphicness was a significant predictor of enjoyment, ($\beta = -.19, p < .05, R^2 = .07$). This indicates that individuals scoring high on the harm module showed greater sensitivity to graphic violence and that perceived violence negatively impacted appeal. A simple regression predicating enjoyment from harm salience alone demonstrated that harm salience was a significant negative predictor of appeal ($\beta = -.21, p < .05, R^2 = .04$). This is evidence that harm can affect film appeal differently dependent on the salience of the module and the extent of domain-relevant content in a narrative. Furthermore, as could be expected in a narrative with low levels of justified violence, fairness was unrelated to appeal, although this approached significance ($\beta = -.15, p = .07$). Fairness was also unrelated to perceived justification ($\beta = .01, p = .88$), indicating that moral module salience is not predictive of appeal or perception of attributes when content relevant to that domain is not present. Finally, fairness was not predictive of perceived graphicness ($\beta = .09, p = .27$), nor was harm predictive of perceived justification ($\beta = -.07, p = .44$) in line with Haidt's assertions that perceptions of content in unrelated domains are not affected by module salience.

The second analysis examined the extent to which fairness salience predicted the perception of justified content and subsequent appeal of a highly just film narrative, Mystic Battle. Similar to the first analysis, the salience of fairness predicted the appeal of Mystic Battle, ($\beta = .24, p < .05, R^2 = .02$). Although the predicted influence of fairness salience on perceived justification was not significant ($\beta = .07, p = .44$), perceived justification did predict appeal ($\beta = .20, p < .05, R^2 = .06$). This indicates that perception of just content predicted higher story appeal, although the role of fairness salience is not clear from these results. Furthermore, as could be expected in a narrative low in graphic content, harm was not predictive of appeal, although this approached significance ($\beta = -.17, p = .09$). Regarding the content-specificity of modules, as expected harm was not predictive of perceived justification ($\beta = -.15, p = .17$), nor was fairness predictive of perceived graphicness ($\beta = .07, p = .46$).

Study 2 discussion

The second study attempted to determine if membership in a morality subculture based on MFT can dictate perceptions and appeal of violent media. It defined morality subcultures through scores on the harm and fairness modules, and examined if these modules could distinguish reactions to narratives varying in domain-relevant content. For the film high on graphic content (*Blood Reign*), results indicate that scores on the harm module predicted the perception of graphicness. Data also indicated that harm scores predicted the appeal of this narrative high on domain-relevant content, whereas fairness was unrelated to appeal in this narrative. For the film with strong justification for violence (*Mystic Battle*), scores on fairness positively predicted appeal. Also as expected, harm was not related to appeal in this narrative. Inconsistent with expectations, fairness did not predict perceptions of domain-relevant content in this film. For both films, neither module was a significant predictor of the perception of domain-“irrelevant” content or its appeal. Overall, perceptions of graphic violence and justified violence predicted appeal of domain-relevant content in their respective narratives, and predicted perceptions of domain-relevant content in one narrative. These results support the contention that morality subcultures, with respect to violent content, may be defined by scores on the harm and fairness modules and these morality subcultures can play a role in the perception of film content as well as appeal.

General discussion

Overall, both studies support our contention that acceptance and appeal of violence is moderated by morality subculture membership. Since justice considerations are central in disposition theory (Raney, 2003), evidence that morality subgroups vary systematically in perceptions of justice is important not only for understanding the audience for violent drama, but also for suspense, humor, sports and any other genre to which disposition theory is applied.

Although this paper suggests that research on morality subcultures has been limited by the lack of a theoretical base, we began by replicating the isolated, individual difference variable approach used in past research. The first study demonstrates that individual difference variables may predict media response. While descriptive, we would argue that these variables are only indicators of morality subcultures rather than causal antecedents capable of explaining audience response. Although isolated individual difference variables like sex may account for variance in the acceptance and appeal of violence, they do not help us understand the mechanisms responsible for these outcomes in a manner that increases predictive utility. Based on the view that a broad, theoretically based approach to understanding phenomena improves on isolated individual difference variables (Krcmar, 2009), we applied a psychological theory of morality to explicate the relationship of morality subcultures to media violence. This approach goes beyond the examination of individual difference variables by both distinguishing the features that define morality subcultures and using these features to predict viewer responses to media. The findings in this

paper show the benefits of using MFT to study morality subcultures and suggest its potential to provide a foundation for other areas of entertainment such as disposition formation, selective exposure, enjoyment, and agenda setting.

The potential of this approach is apparent in research by Tamborini (2011), which presents a model showing the potential short- and long-term reciprocal influence of morality and mass media based on MFT logic. Parts of this model have been tested in research subsequent to this initial attempt showing that all five modules negatively predicted perceived character morality in stories that violated domain-relevant modules (Tamborini, Eden, Bowman, Grizzard, & Weber, 2009), and that the fairness module can account for the complex moderated mediation suggested by Zillmann's (2000) moral sanction theory (Eden & Tamborini, 2010). Finally, survey research showed that audience members use distinct combinations of module-relevant attributes to differentiate heroes and villains in popular media (Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Woolley, & Limperos, 2008). Using moral modules this way situates future work on morality subcultures within a broader-based, established theory of moral psychology.

Limitations

We note three limitations to the current set of studies. First, conceptual ambiguity persists regarding the definitions of morality subcultures. In both studies, the stimulus materials were text manipulations likely to provide only weak inductions. While acknowledging this, we submit that despite the relatively benign nature of the induction, not only did substantial differences emerge but also several group variables moderated these effects. We might speculate that considerably stronger outcomes could result from more stimulating media content. Particular to Study 2, because we did not include vignettes that looked at content that should be relevant to other modules from MFT—purity, authority, or ingroup/loyalty modules—we cannot tell the extent to which these other modules play a central role in defining morality subcultures that would find films that uphold or violate purity, authority, or ingroup/loyalty appealing. In addition, we did not examine scenarios that varied content relevant to only Harm or Fairness. We therefore do not know the extent to which all modules work independently and in combination with each other to define morality subcultures which predict appeal. Finally, both studies relied on student samples that potentially limit generalization to other audiences. Although we might expect these universal modules to exist across populations, there is evidence that variance within these modules is restricted within student populations (Haidt *et al.*, 2009). The fact that we were able to demonstrate the predictive utility of the modules with a restrictive sample suggests that this approach may be a more powerful and robust predictive tool than our data indicate.

The broad goal of our research was to understand the influence of morality subcultures on the appeal of entertaining media content. By identifying the importance of moral subcultures in dispositional considerations and examining their effect on

the perceived acceptability of violence, we have taken great strides toward our goal. We have combined recent theorizing in moral psychology with entertainment theory to predict perceptions of and preference for graphic content and justified narrative. This research shows the progression from a disconnected set of individual difference variables as indicators of morality subcultures to identifying and testing variables drawn from a theoretical background from which to base future investigations into morality subcultures. Of course, harm and fairness are not the only modules that might influence entertainment's appeal. In fact, we feel that the same processes are likely to play a role in other forms of dramatic and nondramatic narrative. We might expect different moral modules to predict appeal in other content areas. For example, ingroup/loyalty might be more central to the manner in which audiences' respond to character behavior in soap opera, authority may be particularly relevant to war drama, and purity might predict preference for the type of vulgar comedy found in gross-out films. Future research should continue to examine the relationship between module salience and content portrayal's effect on appeal and enjoyment.

MFT may have broader implications for other issues in entertainment theory as well (Tamborini, 2011). For example, how do module salience and presence of content relevant to that module interact when more than one module is heavily invoked in a narrative? How are different morals weighted when in conflict with each other? How does content portrayed in mass media create or shape patterns of module salience? Past research (Tamborini, 2011) has shown changes in moral judgment through prolonged exposure to specific types of popular media content. Does this shift represent a change in module salience for individuals or groups? If these modules are truly universal and their varying weights develop through culture, MFT's logic might be used to identify features that delineate appeal within and between morality subcultures.

Notes

- 1 In disposition research acceptance of violence can refer to acceptance of violence shown by an antagonist or protagonist, and as violence initiated without motivation or as reprisal for provoking acts. Most disposition research examining acceptance of violence focuses on the acceptance of violent reprisal (cf. Raney, 2006). Throughout the paper we use the shortened term acceptance of violence to refer to acceptance of violent reprisal.
- 2 As we will argue later in the paper, this notion is consistent with recent conceptualizations of moral judgment put forth by Haidt (2001) and Haidt and Bjorklund (2008).
- 3 The study also included measures of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (REPQ) (Eysenck *et al.*, 1985) the Kohn (1972) Authoritarianism-Rebellion scale, the Rubin (1981) TV Realism scale, and demographic items. No significant findings were associated with these measures. For space considerations, all mention of these scales have been left out. All data associated with these measures are available from the first author.
- 4 Conventional disposition logic holds that audience members form dispositions by carefully considering the moral propriety of a character's behavior (Zillmann, 1998). However, Raney (2004) has challenged this position asserting that people often form

- dispositions quickly and without the need for close scrutiny. The use of abbreviated scenarios lacking narrative detail is based on Raney's assertion that respondents will use simple heuristics learned over years of media exposure to make quick dispositional attributions and form expectations about character actions based on the limited information provided in the scenarios concerning character attributes and motives.
- 5 The motives selected for use in the justified/unjustified conditions were based on the National television violence study (NTVS) categorization scheme (Wilson et al., 1997). NTVS categorizes reasons for using violence in a list that identifies protection of life and retaliation as justified motives, and anger and personal gain as unjustified motives.
 - 6 Whereas Sherif's work has been criticized for its inability to accurately predict attitude change, it is considered a useful approach to observing and understanding the structure of attitude judgments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).
 - 7 Following Sherif's (1962) protocol, the anchors for the scale were set at extremes unlikely to be considered acceptable.
 - 8 These data were also analyzed using moderated regression and simple slope analyses. Results were generally consistent with ANOVA models. For all regression analyses, first disposition, motive, and the trait variable of interest were entered into a regression model predicting most acceptable behavior. Next, all two-way interaction terms were entered (Disposition $\times$ Motive, Disposition $\times$ Trait, and Motive $\times$ Trait). Finally, the three-way interaction of interest (Disposition $\times$ Motive $\times$ Trait) was included in the model. To conserve space only the predicted three-way interaction is reported here. For sex, the three predictors remained significant with the inclusion of the third interaction term in the model (Motive: $\beta = .18, p < .01$; Sex: $\beta = .13, p < .05$; Disposition $\times$ Motive: $\beta = -.16, p < .05$) and the predicted three-way interaction was also significant, Disposition $\times$ Motive $\times$ Sex: $\beta = -.16, p < .01$; $F(7, 547) = 3.69, p < .01$; $R^2_{adj.} = .03$. For physical aggression, in the final step motive and physical aggression remained significant predictors (Motive: $\beta = .15, p < .01$; Phys: $\beta = .24, p < .01$) and the predicted three-way interaction approached significance, Disposition $\times$ Motive $\times$ Phys: $\beta = -.09, p = .08$; $F(7, 544) = 6.09, p < .01$; $R^2_{adj.} = .06$, while religiosity was not significant, Disposition $\times$ Motive $\times$ Religiosity: $\beta = -1.11, p = .27$; $F(7, 433) = 1.07, p < .38$. Examination of the simple slopes in all three cases indicated the same pattern of results as the ANOVA models, with the negative disposition/positive motive condition exhibiting stronger acceptability of violence for men, individuals with high trait aggression, and individuals with low religiosity.
 - 9 For hostility, a main effect was detected for motive, $F(1, 506) = 21.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. For verbal aggression, main effects were detected for both motive, $F(1, 531) = 21.62, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$, and verbal aggression, $F(1, 531) = 4.82, p < .03, \eta^2 = .01$. Those higher in trait verbal aggression ($M = 5.65, SE = .22$) were slightly more accepting of violent reprisal than those low in verbal aggression ($M = 4.99, SE = .21$). The recurring main effect for motive was once again found in the analyses involving anger, $F(1, 531) = 21.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$.
 - 10 The four scenarios were taken from previous research (Tamborini et al., 2006) which manipulated two levels (high/low) on each of three independent variables (graphicness, justification, realism) in a Latin square design. The third variable, perceived realism, was less central to the current investigation and therefore omitted from the current results.

- 11 Although this is slightly above generally acceptable threshold for CMIN, other reviewers (i.e., Marsh & Hocevar 1985; Wheaton et al., 1977) suggest that it falls within acceptable range.

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폭력의 인정과 호소에 대한 도덕적 하위 문화의 영향

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요약

본 논문은 두가지 연구를 통해 어떻게 성향이론에 근거한 도덕성 하위 문화들이 폭력을 받아들이거나 호소하는지를 알기위해 단행되었다. 연구 1 은 개인적 차이 변수 (엄격성, 공격성, 그리고 성)의 중간값에 의해 형성된 집단을 사용했으며, 세가지 2X2X2X 디자인을 통해 다양한 특징들을 발견하려고 하였다. 연구 2 는 이러한 연구를 확대하여 도덕 기초이론으로부터 폭력적 내용의 인지와 호소를 예측할 수 있는도덕성의 특정한 영역 차원을 사용하였다. 결과들은 도덕성 하위 문화들은 폭력적인 드라마에 대한 반응을 예측하였으며, 도덕성 기초이론에 근거한 도덕성의 차원들은 도덕적 하위 문화들을 정의하는 프레임을 제공하였다.

L'influence des sous-cultures morales sur l'acceptation et l'attrait de la violence

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Deux études ont examiné comment les sous-cultures morales, tirées de la théorie de la disposition, permettent de prévoir l'acceptation et l'attrait de la violence. L'étude 1 est partie de groupes formés par des séparations en deux à la médiane de variables de différence individuelle (religiosité, agressivité et sexe) considérées comme étant des traits corrélés de sous-cultures morales, dans trois modèles 2 X 2 X 2 en variant le trait de caractère, la disposition (positive ou négative) de l'auteur de la violence et la raison (justifiée ou injustifiée). Elle cherchait à prédire l'acceptation de la violence dans des résolutions d'histoires dans différents cas de figure. L'étude 2 étendait ce modèle en utilisant des dimensions morales propres aux domaines tirés de la théorie des fondements moraux pour prévoir les perceptions de contenu violent et de son attrait. Les résultats suggèrent que les sous-cultures morales prédisent la réaction aux scènes violentes et que les dimensions de la moralité basées sur la théorie des fondements moraux offrent un cadre pour définir les sous-cultures morales.

Mots clés : moralité, violence, attrait, disposition, média

Der Einfluss von moralischen Subkulturen auf die Akzeptanz und die Anziehungskraft von Gewalt

In zwei Studien untersuchten wir, wie moralische Subkulturen auf Basis der Dispositionstheorie die Akzeptanz und die Anziehungskraft von Gewalt vorhersagen können. In Studie 1 extrahierten wir Gruppen auf Basis der Mediansplits von Variablen zu individuellen Unterschieden (Religiosität, Aggression, Geschlecht), die als Eigenschaftskorrelate von moralischen Subkulturen in drei 2 x 2 x 2 Design eingesetzt wurden. Wir variierten Eigenschaft, Täterdisposition (positiv, negativ) und Motiv (gerechtfertigt, nicht gerechtfertigt), um die Akzeptanz von Gewalt in der Auflösung einer Erzählung vorherzusagen. In Studie 2 erweiterten wir dieses Design um domain-spezifische Dimensionen von Moral basierend auf der Theorie der moralischen Grundsätze, um die Wahrnehmung von gewalthaltigen Inhalten und ihre Anziehungskraft vorherzusagen. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass moralische Subkulturen die Reaktion auf gewalthaltige Drama-Inhalte vorhersagen, und dass Dimensionen von Moral basierend auf der Theorie der moralischen Grundsätze einen Rahmen für die Definition von moralischen Subkulturen bieten.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Moral, Gewalt, Anziehungskraft, Disposition, Medien