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Mind Over Morals: Character Morality and Viewer Need for Cognition as Predictors of Anticipated Enjoyment of a Television Show

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MIND OVER MORALS: CHARACTER MORALITY AND VIEWER

NEED FOR COGNITION AS PREDICTORS OF

ANTICIPATED ENJOYMENT OF A TELEVISION SHOW

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A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

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by
Amanda E. Moore
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Using affective disposition theory (ADT) as a theoretical framework, this study examined the role of need for cognition (NFC) in a potential viewer's desire to consume media content featuring a morally ambiguous character. According to ADT, enjoyment is driven by a viewer's moral evaluations of characters (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Another body of research, which examines media consumption through the lens of uses and gratifications theory, emphasizes individual differences in a viewer's desire to enjoy and select media content (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973). One such individual difference that has emerged as a predictor of media selection is need for cognition (NFC); defined as an individual's desire to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). A great deal of previous media entertainment research has focused on either morality or individual differences, but rarely on both. This thesis sought to contribute to recent research that has begun to fill that gap. Specifically, the objective of this thesis was to investigate the effects of both the morality of a main television character and the potential viewer's NFC, a specific individual difference, on anticipated enjoyment and selection of a fictitious television show and on affective dispositions toward the main character.

The study was conducted using an experiment with a 3 (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) X 2 (high NFC vs. low NFC) factorial design. Three versions of an original television plot synopses were created, each featuring a moral, morally ambiguous, or immoral main character. The show, titled *Southern Justice* focused on Harrison Brooks, a seasoned detective accused of murder. Brooks' actions and the resulting outcomes were

ii

manipulated to create the three conditions (moral, morally ambiguous, and immoral). After reading the plot synopsis to which they had been randomly assigned, participants reported their anticipated enjoyment and selection of the show and to what extent they liked the main character, Brooks. Results revealed that the morality of the main character and NFC respectively had consistent effects. Specifically, the results showed that participants liked and were more likely to select a television show that focused on a moral, rather than an immoral or morally ambiguous, character. Moreover, participants with a high level of NFC were more likely to anticipate enjoying and selecting the show than were participants with low NFC, regardless of the morality of the show's main character. However, contrary to expectations, no interaction effects between a participants' NFC and the morality of the main character were found for any dependent variable. These results indicate the utility of NFC in predicting individual television preferences but suggest moral complexity does not influence its role. In all, this research has implications for television producers and target niche audiences. Future research should aim to further explore NFC's role in a viewer's media enjoyment and selection.

Keywords: affective disposition theory, anticipated enjoyment, anticipated selection, character liking, moral ambiguity, need for cognition

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who have provided me with every opportunity imaginable. I thank my dad for always offering his wisdom and logic and my mom for showering me with positivity. Thank you for always letting me dance, skip and hop to the beat of my own music. Without your love and support none of my success would be possible. To my sister, who always encourages me to explore my wildest dreams and obscure passions, I thank you for offering your couch as an oasis and paving the way for me. To my brother and sister-in-law, who have taken care of me the last five years at Clemson. I thank you for spoiling me with everything you do and opening your home for me when I needed an escape. I also want to offer thanks to all of my family members who supported me the summer I applied for Clemson's undergraduate Communication Studies program and my summer during my graduate program. Without you I may have never had a chance to complete a master's degree. I thank you all for showing me what it looks like to work hard, achieve your dreams, and be a positive influence on the world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents (Continued)

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A wealthy Madison Avenue Admen who lies and cheats, a serial killer who only murders other serial killers, and a cancer-ridden chemistry teacher who cooks methamphetamine to cover his medical bills – each are morally ambiguous protagonists who took over television between 2006 and 2008. Media and morality have always been a concern in society and academia. However changes in character and content creation have revitalized the discussion. Over the past several years, popular discussion regarding content creation has surfaced around the idea of shows designed for intelligent people. Recent discussion has classified *Mad Men, True Detective,* and *House of Cards* as shows, all featuring a morally ambiguous main character, designed for intelligent viewers (O'Rourke, 2014). Little research on media and morality has explored the role of a viewer's need for cognition (NFC) in their television preference. Understanding how a viewer's NFC interacts with the television content can provide useful information on viewers' individual differences in media selection and enjoyment.

This research will explore whether NFC influences the desire to consume media content characterized as morally ambiguous. Specifically, the study uses an experimental method to examine if anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection of a television show will vary based on the potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the show's main character. In addition, the study will explore whether NFC influences affect towards characters and, in turn, anticipated enjoyment.

Media and Morality

Research concerning media and morality began with the Payne Fund Studies (1930 – 1940); the studies examined the effect of movies on children's behavior and suggested that viewers' social attitudes could be affected by movies (Cressey, 1938). As a result, the studies influenced a political debate concerning moral guidelines for television production that continues today. Over the decades since, politicians, popular culture figures and scholars alike have debated the relationship between media exposure and the deterioration of the mass publics' moral values. However, other research has examined the role of morality in less harmful media viewing outcomes. An important contribution to the body of work in the area of media effects is Zillmann and Cantor's (1972) proposal of affective disposition theory (ADT), which explains that entertainment viewers make moral judgments of a character's actions and these judgments affect a viewer's enjoyment of content. The researchers proposed that a viewer uses their moral judgments of a character to assess if a character is good or bad. Once a viewer assess the morality of a character they are inclined to continue to want to like the character they have decided to like based on this morality assessment. Viewer's enjoyment is then driven by outcomes for the characters. Therefore, a viewer's moral judgments' of a character is correlated with their enjoyment of the show, such that enjoyment is greatest when good characters experience positive outcomes and bad characters experience negative outcomes (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). In the past, producers made the decision to feature traditional heroes and villains to increase a viewer's enjoyment of the show, such as Superman and his arch nemesis Lex Luthor. However, television producers began

to feature characters, like the complete cast of *Mad Men*, who seemed to appear somewhere between what is traditionally considered good or evil. Viewers' evaluations of a characters' morality became convoluted when these characters with varying degrees of morality began to appear.

Research has begun to explore enjoyment of morally complex media content. For example, Eden, Gizzard, and Lewis (2011) addressed the issue of disposition development and character evaluations of moral, immoral, and ambiguously moral characters. The research examined enjoyment of less morally defined characters and outcomes for characters. Results indicated that ambiguously moral characters are distinct from traditionally good or bad characters and are a factor in overall viewer enjoyment (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, understanding enjoyment through the lens of ADT has become increasingly complex as shows like *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad*, *True Detective*, *House of Cards,* and *Mad Men* feature morally ambiguous (i.e. not "good" per se) main characters, yet attract large audiences.

Over the last decade, producers seem to have begun replacing the hero/villain dichotomy and a happy ending with morally ambiguous characters. In order to examine this production choice, morality, morals, and content must be taken into consideration as well, because understanding the study of production choices made by media on a broad level aids in unveiling the cyclical relationship between audience and producer (Mastro et al., 2012). The morally ambiguous main character would be discarded if it was not received well by audience members. The inclusion of morally ambiguous main characters may be explained through the concept of taste cultures. Gans (1974) originally addressed

taste cultures, which refer to the act of a producer creating content for a specific type of person. Zillmann (2000) used his moral-sanction theory to extend the idea of taste cultures to examine morality subcultures. Morality subcultures refer to an audiences' shared sense of values regarding media content. Zillmann argued that moral terms are a factor in an audience members' affective disposition towards a character (Zillmann, 2000). Therefore, producers may include morally ambiguous characters in order to target a specific type of audience viewer. Television producers create content for varying audiences because media users have different viewing motives. Uses and gratifications theory explains how viewers' select and prefer different media options. Together, uses and gratifications theory and taste cultures can be used to examine the symbiotic relationship of producer and audience. In other words, media producers' intent to target specific morality subcultures may provide an explanation for the rise in morally ambiguous characters.

One characteristic that distinguishes morally ambiguous characters from traditional heroes and villains is complexity, which may be a factor in an audience members' selection preference. Studies have demonstrated the role of need for cognition (NFC), a psychological trait that indicates an individual's motivation to analyze complex problems, in media preferences. For example, Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) examined the role of NFC in predicting reality-based TV viewing. The study concluded that NFC does not predict overall reality-based TV viewing, however it has the potential to predict viewing of specific programs (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003). NFC may also predict viewing of television content featuring morally ambiguous characters. If

NFC influences a viewer's choice to consume content with morally ambiguous characters, then it can be suggested that shows depicting morally ambiguous characters are designed for a specific taste culture. Programming featuring morally ambiguous characters could then be classified as smarter television or television requiring audience members to employ cognitive complexity. Thus, ADT could be expanded to include that a viewer's enjoyment is driven by a viewer's tendency to cognitively evaluate a character's morality.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2015 there are more television viewers than ever before. According to Nielsen's 2015-16 National Television Household estimate, there are 116.4 million homes with televisions in the U.S (The Nielsen Company, 2015). With the combination of more online-streaming options and television content television viewership is continuing to increase. As television viewership increases and viewing options evolve, producers have more motivation to target specific audiences and to understand what media consumers are watching and why they do so.

In an attempt at targeting audiences, media producers design specific content intended to appeal to different audiences preferences (Mastro et al., 2012). This concept explains the variation of television genres available to viewers; some viewers prefer comedies, while others prefer horror shows. Groups of people have similar responses to media, thus producers target group-level responses based on specific factors (Mastro et al., 2012). Gans (1985) defines these groups as taste cultures, thus referring to the action of a producer intentionally creating content for a specific type of viewer. Taste cultures may explain why producers have introduced morally ambiguous main characters to television shows. In this instance, certain viewers may prefer a television show that features a morally ambiguous main character, rather than a traditionally good main character. Zillmann's (2000) concept of morality subcultures can be used to further explain the inclusion of morally ambiguous characters. Building upon Gans' (1974), Zillmann (2000) expanded the idea of taste cultures by applying his moral-sanction

theory to examine morality subcultures. Zillmann defines morality subcultures as a groups shared sense of values regarding media content. Therefore, different audience members may prefer television content based on the morality of the main character. The steady increase of morally ambiguous characters featured on television and the potential rise of 'smart television' suggests that morality subcultures and taste cultures may offer an answer regarding media selection.

Although in recent years 'smart television' and morally ambiguous characters have seen an increase, researchers have previously examined television content featuring these aspects. In *Cable Watching: HBO, The Sopranos, and Discourses of Distinction*, Donna Polan (2007) examines the production to consumption process while focusing on HBO and *The Sopranos*. Polan attributes the popularity of *The Sopranos* as a result of its emotional and intellectual appeal, which then ignited a change in television content (p. 262). In addition, *The Sopranos* was noted for featuring one of the first morally ambiguous main characters. The continued popularity of morally ambiguous television characters and 'smart television' suggests that other television shows are following *The Sopranos'* lead. *True Detective* and *Mad Men* air on Sunday nights, therefore similar to *The Sopranos* they are classified as "water cooler shows;" shows scheduled on Sunday nights are intended to spark reflection and discussion (Polan, 2007, p. 273). In addition to offering an intellectual appeal, both *True Detective* and *Mad Men* mimic *The Sopranos* by featuring morally ambiguous characters.

The phenomenon of intelligent television shows warrants exploration. As it stands, little research exists on television content supposedly created for a smarter

audience. Online discussions declare shows, such as *Mad Men,* to be designed for intelligent individuals, however these discussions fail to provide specific evidence for that argument. However, systematic research can contribute to such a discussion by investigating the appeal of shows considered "intelligent" among viewers. In other words, the popularity of television shows considered intelligent begs the question as to why viewers are motivated to view these shows. Previous research suggests need for cognition, or the extent to which an individual tends to enjoy analyzing complex problems, suggests this personality characteristic may explain preferences for media content that features moral complexity. Therefore, one aspect to consider is selection patterns in viewers with varying levels of NFC. To that end, this study examines how anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection of a television plot vary based on the potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character in an attempt to explore viewer motivations for consuming morally ambiguous content. Theories of media selection and media enjoyment can be used to explore why audiences may prefer and enjoy certain television content, such as *True Detective*, *Mad Men*, and *The Sopranos*.

Media Selection and Enjoyment

Media selection and enjoyment research has examined variations, predictors, and outcomes of viewer enjoyment of media content. Most scholars seem to agree that enjoyment of media is associated with pleasure seeking behavior. However, scholarship on enjoyment has also demonstrated that media enjoyment is a conglomeration of factors, rather than a simple reaction. Based on scholarship exploring other factors of enjoyment, this research focuses on the role of NFC in anticipated enjoyment.

Investigating media enjoyment requires scholars to examine response emotions to media content. Oliver (1993) explored the concept of emotions in response to media entertainment through examining the concept of metaemotions. Metaemotions refer to the appraisals of emotional reactions regarding enjoyment and sad responses (Oliver, 1993). This research broadened the discourse around affective response emotions, allowing scholars to extend the conversation of enjoyment to encompass other emotions. Building on the discourse of enjoyment as an affective response emotion, Vorderer and Hartman (2009) conceptualize enjoyment as a primary emotion triggered in response to a user's involvement with the media. They conducted research on entertainment and enjoyment to explore emotional responses to media, such as pleasure. They found media is deemed entertaining if it satisfies "a user's need to maintain a physiological and psychological balance" (Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009, p. 544). If media content proves too challenging, complex, or stimulates an unpleasant sensory experience, then the viewer will consider the content unappealing, becoming disinterested. For example a viewer high in NFC may enjoy the complex morality of the characters in *Mad Men* whereas viewers low in NFC may find the content too cognitively challenging. Deciphering the moral scale of each character may prove too tasking for a viewer low in NFC.

Vorderer and Hartman (2009) offer one conceptualization of enjoyment, however enjoyment has been conceptualized in other ways. Conceptualizing enjoyment furthers research on media entertainment through determining the extent to which enjoyment is applicable. Nabi and Kremar (2004) conceptualize enjoyment as attitude through a model of media enjoyment-as-attitude. The article defines enjoyment as more than a reaction,

offering a reflection of a reaction to the entire media experience (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004).

The researchers further conceptualize enjoyment as an attitude composed of affective, cognitive, and behavioral factors, which react and influence one another. Focusing on affective and cognitive factors, this study explores NFC's influence on affect towards characters and anticipated enjoyment.

Additional media enjoyment research draws from uses and gratifications and disposition theories. Denham (2004) proposed a set of three factors in media enjoyment. He suggests that media enjoyment is a function of social norms, viewing situations, and program content. Denham argues that social content influences a viewer's response to media content. Therefore, social content may provide the opportunity for viewers to engage with media content in a specific way. This opportunity relates to a viewer's motivation for this particular media selection. The way in which a viewer engages with and interprets media content often reflects social norms (Denham, 2004). Variations in readings and interpretations of media highlight the influence of individual differences of viewers on media consumption. In addition to social norms, content and viewing situations are a function of viewer enjoyment (Denham, 2004). He elaborates on the complication of enjoyment produced by social concerns, by addressing the influence of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups (Denham, 2004). If viewing content in social situations complicates enjoyment, then viewing in isolation may produce a more pure form. In this case, an isolated viewer may provide a more honest response. The article explains how media viewers belonging to different social groups have diverse experiences of enjoyment. Ultimately, this article expands the discourse around media

enjoyment as more than a function of content. In relation, this study examines the interaction effect of character morality, a component of television content, and NFC on anticipated enjoyment.

To further extend the conceptualization of entertainment as experience, Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfield (2004) offer a complex model of entertainment. The model structures enjoyment at the center of entertainment as a result of media users and media products meeting specific prerequisites. Through the discussion of the complexity of the entertainment experience the researchers stress importance of a media user meeting at least one prerequisite to be entertained. Vorderer et al. define the user prerequisites as: suspension, empathy, parasocial interaction/ relationship, presence, and interest. The researchers contend that suspending disbelief enables a viewer to enjoy a fictional narrative. By suspending disbelief a viewer is able to perceive "unreal" fictional events as "real." Another condition described by the researchers is empathy, which is referred to as the requirement that media users care about the characters. In addition to being a prerequisite to enjoyment, empathy is a prerequisite to liking or disliking a character. Thus, empathy directly relates to a viewer's affective disposition towards a character. The condition of empathy then relates to the condition of parasocial relationships. The researchers explain the importance of parasocial relationships in fostering and triggering media consumption. Another condition described by the researchers is presence or a viewer's ability to be transported by the media. In order to experience presence a user must be willing to be present in the entertainment. The final prerequisite as defined by the researchers is interest in a specific topic, problem, or knowledge domain. A viewer is

more likely to enjoy media content if it appeals to a viewer's interest. To further explain the complexity of media entertainment the researchers identify prerequisites that media must meet; the prerequisites are: technology, design, aesthetics, and content. Enjoyment is produced through a media users interaction with these conditions. Vorderer et al describes a users interaction with the media as enabling the user to select and modify their media experience. Based on the model, explanations of media effects and viewers' preference for entertainment can be derived. Expanding the model further, the researchers address media contents interaction with user prerequisites. The complex model of entertainment can be used to examine the success and popularity of media products or certain components, such as television shows.

In accordance with expanding the discourse of media enjoyment Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, and Organ (2010) extended their conceptualization of enjoyment as a form of need satisfaction (Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010). The study produced a broader conceptualization of enjoyment to represent the satisfaction of a comprehensive set of functional needs. Need satisfaction explains why audiences watch certain types of media entertainment. Additionally, Tamborini et al. (2010) contributes to entertainment research through offering a broader range of needs than those offered before. Enjoyment as a form of need satisfaction enables NFC, in this study, to be explored as a predictor in viewer anticipated enjoyment.

In this research, anticipated enjoyment is conceptualized as the extent to which a participant believes he or she might receive pleasure from viewing a television show. Given the complexity in the conceptualization of enjoyment across various studies, this

study will focus in on a specific set of components of enjoyment associated with pleasure. Anticipated enjoyment is derived from a participant's complete assessment of the television plot, including genre, characters, outcomes of characters, and structure. Based upon a participant's assessments anticipated enjoyment refers to how enjoyable, exciting, interesting, and boring they expect the television show to be after reading the fictitious plot. Content characteristics present in the fictitious plot including complexity, crime/drama, and emotionality allow viewer's to predict their anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. Ultimately, anticipated enjoyment can be defined as a participant's level of satisfaction that is met based upon his or her affective and cognitive reception of the television plot as an entity. This study focuses on those affective components.

Other research on media selection is rooted in uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which discusses how users select media that will satisfy their needs. UGT research began around the early 1940s', when Katz (1973) suggested that audience members are active media consumers. UGT research has explored various viewing motivations, including information-seeking, entertainment-seeking, needs satisfaction, and escapism (Ruggiero, 2000). Drawing from UGT, researchers have explored individual differences in television viewing motives and content selection factors.

In the last decade scholars have further expanded uses and gratifications through conceptualizing entertainment and examining predictors of content selection. Scholars, such as Oliver and Raney (2011) have moved beyond traditional definitions of enjoyment as gratification to include additional motivations. They conceptualized entertainment selection to include motives associated with affective and cognitive responses. Through

this lens, they suggest viewers select entertainment to satisfy hedonic and eudaimonic motivations. Ultimately, the research provides evidence that viewers select entertainment for motivations other than pleasure. In addition, Oliver and Raney (2011) broaden entertainment selection motivations to examine the complexities of affective and cognitive factors.

In examining predictors of content selection and genre viewing, Hawkins et al. (2001) explored three types of predictors (individual's gratifications, expertise with genres, and NFC). Although results indicated that NFC did not support the hypothesis, the researchers suggested that a limitation may be that there is not mentally stimulating content on television (Hawkins et al., 2001). Since 2001 the rise of smart television has occurred, thus suggesting that current television content may be mentally stimulating.

Recent research has discussed smart television or "intellectual entertainment" as explored by Latoree and Soto-Sanfiel (2015). Intellectual entertainment, as defined by Latoree and Soto-Sanfiel, describes a type of media that offers challenges, mental exercises, and well-specified problems to be solved by the viewer (Latorre & Soto-Sanfiel, 2015). This article offers a lens to examine the relationship between viewers' emotion and cognition in selecting and processing entertainment media. Latoree and Soto-Sanfiel argue that intellectual entertainment satisfies a viewer's intrinsic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Latoree & Soto-Sanfiel, 2015). Overall, a viewer's selection of media entertainment is complex, however scholars' appear to agree that selection occurs as a response to satisfy a need and typically for enjoyment purposes.

Affective Disposition Theory

Media effects scholars have also theorized about the content and viewer characteristics that predict enjoyment. The theory of media enjoyment that includes morality specifically is affective disposition theory (ADT), which suggests enjoyment is driven by moral evaluations of characters. ADT explains that entertainment viewers attach an emotion to various characters within a narrative. A viewer's experience is affected by his or her disposition towards a character. Enjoyment of media content is a function of a viewer's affective disposition (i.e. whether they "like or "dislike") toward a character and the outcomes experienced by that character in the unfolding narrative (Raney, 2004, p. 350). In other words if a viewer likes *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, then they will experience maximum enjoyment when Walter White is rewarded for his actions. This in turn enables viewers to determine their belief of the good and bad characters in a narrative.

ADT was first proposed by Zillmann and Cantor (1972) and has been continually expounded upon over the last several decades. Zillmann (1996) identified the seven main steps in forming a disposition towards a character: perception, moral judgment, affective disposition, anticipation and apprehension, perception and assessment, response to outcome/emotion, and moral judgment. These seven steps assist a viewer in approving or disapproving a character's action and ultimately determining to what characters to form attachments. A viewer uses these seven steps to assess if a character is good or bad. Once a viewer forms an attachment to a character they want to continue to like the character they have selected. A viewer's enjoyment is dependent on these attachments. The

outcomes produced by a characters actions influence a viewer's enjoyment, therefore indicating that a viewer's enjoyment level is highest when positive and negative outcomes are respectively assigned to good and bad characters (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Further extending the research on viewer dispositions and responses to character outcomes Zillmann (2000) suggested that the viewer's moral judgment of a character enables them to justify any negative outcomes ascribed to the character. Ultimately, Zillmann proposed that viewers weigh negative outcomes against the morality or immorality of the character. In addition, media producers can manipulate a viewer's experience of enjoyment through assigning either positive or negative outcomes to a character.

ADT was expanded and applied to other genres, such as comedy, drama, tragedy, violence, and sports (Raney, 2006). Although the applications to genres differ, they all relate to the viewers affective disposition towards a media character. To highlight the cohesion of disposition theories Raney (2006) developed six principles that are shared amongst all applications of disposition theories. His principles discuss media enjoyment, affective dispositions to characters, and media selection. The principles offer insight to understand the process in which people enjoy media content and characters. In his principles, Raney acknowledges that despite the lack of agreement on what enjoyment is and if it is synonymous to appreciation, all disposition-based theories are concerned with enjoyment or appreciation of media content (Raney, 2006, p. 144). He further explains that affect, like enjoyment and appreciation, is an emotional response to content. Emotional responses to content guide a viewer's disposition-formation process to media

characters (Raney, 2006, p. 145). Raney explains that individual differences in emotional responses influences the variance in the disposition-formation process. However, in addition to emotional responses, psychological factors influence disposition-formations (Raney, 2006, p. 145). He discusses that regardless of how a viewer's disposition to a character is formed, a viewer's enjoyment is driven by their feelings toward a character.

Raney (2006) further elaborates on dispositions by explaining that affective affiliations toward characters are formed and maintained on a continuum. Therefore, viewers can form affective dispositions to characters based on a scale from extreme positive through indifference to extreme negative affect (Raney, 2006, p. 146). Regardless of the polarity, dispositions are influenced by a viewer's evaluation of conflict outcomes between characters (Raney, 2006, p. 147). Enjoyment of the outcome depends on whether a viewer favors the victorious character or not. As a result, viewers expect liked characters to be awarded good outcomes and disliked characters to be awarded bad outcomes. Raney suggests that in order for a viewer to maximize enjoyment in all outcome situations a viewer may implement justice considerations (Raney, 2006, p. 147). Therefore, a viewer may interpret a characters actions or outcomes as justified in order to maintain their preferable evaluation of that character. A viewer's individual differences influences emotional responses, character-disposition formation and maintenance, and justice considerations. In the last principle, Raney briefly addresses these individual differences in terms of emotional responsiveness, personal experiences, basal morality, and other psychological and social-psychological factors (Raney, 2006, p. 148). He explains that individual differences are key factors in the process of media enjoyment. In

combination with ADT, producers can apply Raney's principles to develop characters with strong dispositions and influence viewers' responses. Moreover, this study could extend ADT to comprise that a viewers' enjoyment is driven by their tendency to cognitively evaluate a main character's morality.

Moral Ambiguity and the Rise of "Smart" Television

As previously noted, television characters seem to be growing increasingly morally complex and ambiguous. In addition to research conducted on morally ambiguous characters, moral ambiguity has become a prevalent theme in media enjoyment research. The popularity of this type of character depiction has transcended genres, appearing in almost every type of television show or film. Morally ambiguous characters in television shows have generated mass discussion in popular culture. Both articles, Why *Moral ambiguity is so popular on TV and the big screen* by Kandra Polatis and Arzhang Zafar's article *Top 7 Morally Ambiguous Television Protagonists* identify examples of shows with at least one morally ambiguous character, such as *Boardwalk Empire* (crime), *Breaking Bad* (drama), *The Dark Knight* (Action), *Girls* (comedy), and *The Hunger Games* (Adventure).

The prevalence of morally ambiguous characters is reflected in the film nominations for award ceremonies. As detailed in a USA today article, the majority of films nominated for the 2007 Academy Awards show featured morally ambiguous characters (Wolszczyna, 2008; Karkowiak & Oliver, 2012). Although Wolszczyn (2008) discusses a past award show, it can be inferred from present-day popular culture articles that the trend of morally ambiguous characters has continued to rise. Recent Academy

Award nominees, such as *Nightcrawle*r (2014), *Inherent Vice* (2014), *Foxcatcher* (2014), and *Maleficent* (2014) all feature morally ambiguous characters. With the rise of morally ambiguous characters, popular culture has simultaneously observed the rise of "smart" television programming. Morally ambiguous characters appear to be a common factor in smart or intelligent television. *Mad Men, True Detective, House of Cards,* and *Hannibal* are all critically acclaimed "intelligent television shows" featuring a morally ambiguous protagonist (O'Rourke, 2014).

Other popular culture media outlets have praised *Mad Men, True Detective, House of Cards, Hannibal, Dexter,* and *The Sopranos* for being smart television shows (Gilligan, 2010; What Culture, 2014). Although, there is not documented correlation, it can be deduced that the profusion of morally ambiguous characters in intelligent television is not a coincidence; rather these two aspects complement one another to form a distinct genre produced for a specific taste culture. Henceforth, this study predicts that viewers high in NFC will have greater levels of anticipated enjoyment of morally ambiguous characters than viewers low in NFC.

Moral Disengagement

In order to explore the introduction of complex television characters, researchers have examined why viewers continue to enjoy media when the ADT formula is complicated. Through the lens of the social psychology theory, every individual has adopted and internalized a set of moral or ethical standards and utilizes them to assess the appropriateness of an action for a given situation. Moral disengagement explains the process used to decide when ethical standards do not apply in a specific situation or

context (Raney, 2004). Research on affective dispositions and emotions provided the groundwork for Raney's application of Bandura's (1986) concept of moral disengagement. Bandura developed the social psychology theory to assess an individual's use of moral disengagement when analyzing an action in a certain context (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, an individual does not always perceive a behavior as unethical because they morally disengage. For example, when *Mad Men*'s Don Draper commits infidelity a viewer may morally disengage to sustain his positive disposition for Don throughout the entire show. Therefore, according to ADT viewers must morally disengage to continue enjoying morally ambiguous or complex scenarios in television.

However, Raney (2004) used the theory to examine viewers' assessment of the conduct of media characters. The study examined how viewers form and maintain dispositions toward characters in order to preserve feelings of enjoyment (Raney, 2004). Focusing on the idea that individuals want to enjoy and continue to enjoy watching films and television, the study explored character liking, moral evaluations, anticipated selection, and anticipated enjoyment. Although an individual has his or her own moral code, they can not use it as a strict guide when viewing media because it is a given that the characters they like will engage in actions that conflict with their own beliefs. In order to prevent cognitive dissonance from occurring, people spend more time evaluating TV characters according to their own dispositions toward those characters rather than through true moral reasoning (Raney, 2004). Thus, a viewer must morally disengage, or extend the boundaries of what is morally acceptable because the viewer likes the character and wants to continue to like the character (Raney, 2004).

As previously stated, ADT assists viewers in forming dispositions towards a character, thus enabling viewers to identify characters as either good or bad. As a result we tend to want to continue to like the characters we like, therefore when a character engages in an action that counters a viewer's moral code the viewer is prompted to morally disengage (Raney, 2004). Raney applied moral disengagement to ADT in order to address how media viewers avoid cognitive dissonance when evaluating television characters (Raney, 2004). A viewer morally disengages to maintain or preserve his or her perception of a character; this allows viewers to enjoy fictional entertainment scenarios that they would deem morally wrong in reality. This enables a viewer to "suspend their disbelief" in order to continue enjoying the content (Raney, 2004, p.356). In addition to moral disengagement, Raney's revision included a proposition that viewers perceive characters with established dispositional valences. Therefore, viewers maintain their positive disposition towards characters by perceiving characters' actions as morally sound (Raney, 2004). Utilizing dispositional valences, similar to schemas, is another strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Bandura identified eight mechanisms that an individual might utilize to produce moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). These mechanisms or strategies in combination with other key factors help analyze individuals' deployment of moral disengagement. Two of the mechanisms are pertinent to consider: individuals might justify immoral behavior and individuals might contrast their behavior with even more unethical examples (Bandura, 1986). Viewers may justify the character's immoral behavior or juxtapose it to other characters' actions in order to continue liking a specific character.

This exemplifies Raney's (2004) proposition that "viewers also at times judge characters to be good and moral because they like them" (Raney, 2004, p. 357).

A viewer often engages in moral disengagement when viewing morally ambiguous characters. Moral ambiguity is understood as an instance when it is unclear as to whether an individual or action is right or wrong, or in the case of characters good or evil. To further clarify moral ambiguity Karkowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2014) distinguish morally ambiguous characters from anti-heroes and villains by stating that:

Unlike traditional hero characters, MACs often behave in immoral ways; however, they also have redeeming qualities that differentiate them from villains. Examples of these characters include Dexter Morgan, a likeable serial killer who only targets other killers and who works for the police department as a blood spatter expert; Walter White, a chemistry teacher who starts to cook methamphetamines in order to provide for his family; Tony Soprano, a mob boss who is a loving family man, and countless others (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2014, p.1).

These redeeming qualities may explain why morally ambiguous characters have risen in popularity; viewers find morally ambiguous characters more realistic and are more apt to identify with them. In addition, consequence of actions can result in perceived character ambiguity; negative actions resulting in positive consequences or positive actions resulting in negative consequences can create character ambiguity. Thus, assessment of character ambiguity is not limited to the actions the characters engage in, it includes consequences inflicted upon the character.

Krakowiak and Oliver's (2012) research on morally ambiguous characters compared to good and bad characters identifies viewers' responses to certain factors (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Overall the study found that "morally ambiguous characters are equally as affectively and cognitively enjoyed as good characters because they are realistic, moderately liked, transporting, and suspenseful" (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p. 75). Results indicated that affective dispositions, perceived realism, transportation, suspense, affective enjoyment, and cognitive enjoyment were all strongly correlated. These results support Zillmann's (1996) hypothesis that individuals monitor the morality of characters' actions over time and adapt their attitudes based on their judgments of these actions. The research also revealed that attractive characters are often judged to be more good, than bad (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). This suggests that viewers have higher affective and cognitive enjoyment when viewing content with moral and morally ambiguous characters than immoral characters. In accordance, this study predicts that viewers with high NFC will have greater levels of anticipated enjoyment when reading the plot synopses featuring a moral or morally ambiguous main character character than an immoral main character. Narratives that are more affectively and cognitively enjoyable, as well as feature more realistic characters are more transporting (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Narrative genres promote greater levels of identification because they transport the audience (Cohen, 2001). It can be inferred that morally ambiguous characters depicted in narrative genres could cause greater levels of identification. Transporting narratives can change the viewers' attitudes or beliefs, therefore if a

narrative has morally ambiguous characters it is likely for the viewers' attitudes or beliefs to be influenced (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012, p.14).

Another aspect to consider is the link between perceived realism and moral disengagement. Perceived realism can also be conceptualized as the degree to which mediated content is perceived to be representative of social reality (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Transportation increases perceived realism and character liking (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Morally ambiguous characters increase perceived realism and are liked equal to good characters. "Perceived similarity between the viewer and character mediates the relationship between identification and moral disengagement, which in turn leads to greater affective enjoyment of a narrative" (Tsay, & Krakowiak, 2011, p. 2). Perceived similarity is associated with perceived realism, thus perceived similarity increases transportation, which increases perceived realism and character liking (Tsay, & Krakowiak, 2011; Cohen, 2001). Individuals are more transported into narratives when they like the main characters (e.g. character liking); individuals like characters they perceive to be similar to and are realistic (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012).

In addition, the research conducted by Karkowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2014) examines the connection between morally ambiguous characters and social comparisons. Results reveal that individuals whose vices were made salient in a morally ambiguous character felt more positive affect and enjoyment (Karkowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 2014). The research indicates that viewers may be more prone to drawing social comparisons with morally ambiguous characters. Factoring in social comparison suggests that the inclusion of morally ambiguous characters may increase the ability of the audience to

relate to the characters, thus increasing the enjoyment and degree of moral disengagement.

Further expanding ADT and moral disengagement; Raney (2004) included research on conceptualizing dispositions. The study discussed how viewers build story schemas to help them perceive and interpret media. Viewers activate preconceived schema structures when encountering succeeding texts, thus influencing a viewers cognitive processing of the narrative. Therefore, when watching a television program a viewer is likely to activate a pre-existing schema if he or she has already viewed this type of narrative. Thus, classifying a character's actions as amoral or moral aids in sustaining and creating emotional arousal in a viewer (Raney, 2006). In other words, viewers gain more enjoyment when they are able to define a good or bad character. Story schemas save a viewer cognitive functioning as well as assist the viewer in categorizing a character as good or bad (Raney, 2004). Through this process viewers can form initial character interpretations with minimal moral considerations, similar to forming a stereotype or standard expectation.

Need for Cognition

However, some viewers may enjoy the cognitive processing required to assess morally complex characters. Need for cognition (NFC) is conceptualized as the "tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors" (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984, p. 306). Originally, NFC referred to problem solving and social environment, however recent research on NFC suggests it can be applied to television viewing in numerous ways. For example, scholars have addressed expanding

the conceptualizations of media effect responses. Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ (2010) explored the extent to which media enjoyment fulfills needs, including NFC. It can be argued that NFC falls under the broader conceptualization of needs satisfaction.

In accordance with need satisfaction, Henning and Vorderer (2001) explored viewers' motivation to watch television for psychological escapism in relation to NFC. The researchers contended that individuals with a lower NFC would watch more TV, because watching TV relieves the pressure of having to think. The experiment addresses total TV viewing time, however it does not address TV content. Henning and Vorderer's (2001) exploration of individual differences suggests NFC could affect other aspects of viewers' motivation for viewing TV. Unlike Henning and Vorderer (2001), this study explores morality of the main character, a subsection of television content.

As discussed in Oliver and Raney (2011) "eudaimonic happiness is conceptualized in terms of personal expressiveness, self-realization, and personal development" (Oliver & Raney, 2011, p. 987). The article discusses eudaimonic happiness as referring to a viewer's means of experiencing meaningfulness. In addition, Cohen, Stotland, and Wolfe (1995) discuss "need for cognition as a need to structure relevant situation in meaningful, integrated ways" (p. 291). Based on the conceptualization of meaningfulness, NFC could be classified under a motivation for personal development.

While most research on NFC does not focus on intelligence, Woo, Harms, and Kuncel (2007) explored the correlation between the Typical Intellectual Engagement

scale and the Need for Cognition scale. The researchers argue that the overlap in scales indicate the scales ability to measure personality characteristics specifically related to intelligence. If these constructs "are directly targeted at individual differences in the extent to which a person engages in intellectual (or cognitive) activities," then it can be argued that the relationship between NFC and intelligent television need to be explored (Woo et al., 2007, p.1636). Viewers with low NFC may engage differently with television content designed for a more intelligent audience.

As discussed previously, NFC refers to an individuals' enjoyment of effortful cognitive activity and enjoyment of media content can predict an audience members' content selection. Therefore, NFC may predict viewing of television content. Research conducted by Petty, Brinal, Loersch, and McCaslin (2009) provides an overview of NFC. The researchers state that individuals with high levels of NFC perceive thinking as enjoyable. Furthermore, Petty, et al. (2009) contends individuals with high levels of NFC tend to be aware of the process in which they form judgments. This suggests that viewers with high levels of NFC will be more aware of their judgments of the main character in a television show.

This Research

Given the breadth of media selection and enjoyment studies, ADT, and related studies on morally ambiguous characters, this study attempts to examine the effect of the morality of a main television character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) on anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. The study also explores NFC as a factor in liking of the main character.

27

Overall, research on media entertainment concurs that media selection occurs as a response to satisfy enjoyment purposes. Although various factors influence a viewer's media selection, research on ADT agrees that a viewer's enjoyment is driven by moral evaluations of a character. Therefore a viewer's enjoyment is dependent on their perceptions of morality of the character. Theoretical predictions surrounding enjoyment of characters suggests morally ambiguous characters are equally enjoyed as good characters (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Therefore morally ambiguous and moral characters are enjoyed more than immoral characters. Research suggests morally ambiguous characters are distinct from moral and immoral characters (Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, it can be suggested that morally ambiguous characters are distinct because they are more complex. Evaluating the moral complexity of ambiguous characters can cause cognitive dissonance (Raney, 2004). However, viewers with high levels of NFC tend to enjoy effortful cognitive practices (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). It seems reasonable, then that NFC will influence a viewer's anticipated enjoyment, anticipated selection, and character liking. In light of this research as a whole, this study predicts that there will be an interaction between the morality of the main character and an individual's NFC. Specifically, individuals with high levels of NFC will be more likely to select, enjoy, and have positive affective dispositions toward television content and characters that are morally ambiguous, compared to those with low NFC. Considering factors of enjoyment of morally ambiguous characters, enjoyment and selection of media, and NFC the following predictions were made:

H1: Anticipated enjoyment will vary based on the potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral).

H2: Anticipated selection will vary based on the potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral).

H3: Character liking will vary based on the potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The hypotheses were tested in an experiment that manipulated the morality of the main character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) in a television show synopsis to examine its effect on anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. The experiment also explored NFC as a factor in character liking and, ultimately, anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. An experimental design was chosen so that conclusions about causality could be drawn.

Participants

Two hundred and twelve people participated in this study and were recruited from Mechanical Turk. Mechanical Turk is an extension of Amazon where users aged 18 and older can create a worker account in order to complete tasks or surveys posted by requester users. Users with a worker account receive monetary compensation through Mechanical Turk for each task completed (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013 for a thorough review of Mechanical Turk as a sampling method). Modeled off of Goodman et al. (2013), participants were required to have an approval rate of at least 95% (i.e. at least 95% of a participant's past Mechanical Turk submissions were approved by requesters). Participants were required to meet the age requirement (18years) for a worker account. In order to collect a sample representative of the U.S. population participants were required to be a U.S. resident. To ensure a demographically diverse sample reflective of the U.S. population no other criteria were set in place.

Of the 212 participants 42.9 % ($n = 91$) were male and 57.1 % ($n = 121$) were female. Participants were aged between 18 and 73, ($M = 39.5$, $SD = 13.66$). One participant did not indicate his or her age. Of participants surveyed 86. 9 % ($n = 185$) identified as White, 2.8% ($n = 6$) identified as Hispanic or Latino, 6.6% ($n = 14$) identified as Black or African American, 0.5% ($n = 1$) identified as Native American or American Indian, 6.1 % ($n = 13$) identified as Asian/ Pacific Islander, and 1.4% ($n = 3$) identified their race as other. Of participants surveyed 10.8% ($n = 23$) identified their political orientation as very liberal, while 5.2% ($n = 11$) identified as very conservative ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.71$).

Treatment of Participants

In order to ensure ethical treatment of participants, an Institutional Review Board approved this study before data collection began. An informed consent document that explained the study and any risks or discomforts and potential benefits with completing the study was provided to each participant. In addition, it explained their rights as a participant. The consent document detailed that the researchers would protect confidentiality and that participation in the study was voluntary, thus participants were allowed to withdrawal consent to participate at any time without penalization.

Study Design

Manipulation. Three original television plot synopses were created for this study (see Appendix). Three versions, each featuring a moral, morally ambiguous, or immoral main character named Brooks, were created. The show, titled *Southern Justice* follows Harrison Brooks, a seasoned detective from a small town outside of Savannah, Georgia.

The television plot depicts Brooks as a Savannah native who maintains good relationships with his friends and family. The plot thickens when Brooks has been accused of murder. As the case is investigated, secrets of Savannah locals are revealed. His involvement in the murder and subsequent actions were manipulated to create three morality conditions (moral, morally ambiguous, and immoral):

Moral. In the "moral" character condition, Brooks is described having a purely moral conscience; he performs the duties of a good detective by exposing a fellow officer (Everett Sloan) for engaging in illegal actions with the Sheriff. When Sloan discovers Brooks has reported his actions to the town's Sheriff, Sloan murders the Sheriff and frames Brooks in order to prevent Brooks from exposing his illegal actions.

Morally ambiguous. In the "morally ambiguous" character condition, Brooks is described as having good and bad behaviors. He and fellow officer (Sloan) work with the Sheriff to make money selling illegal arms and leaking confidential information, but only to provide for their families who live rural lifestyles. In this condition Brooks has a change of heart and attempts to end his involvement in the crime ring. When the Sheriff blackmails Brooks by threatening to expose him, he murders the Sheriff only after the Sheriff uses force and blackmail to prevent Brooks and Sloan from exposing his illegal actions.

Immoral. In the "immoral" character condition, Brooks is described as having a purely immoral conscience; he exploits his position as a detective and conspires with an illegal arms ring. While he makes money selling illegal arms, he leaks confidential detective information to the illegal arms ring. Eventually, the Sheriff finds out about the

activities Brooks has been involved in. Brooks then kills the Sheriff in cold blood and frames Sloan for the murder.

The synopses were designed to be similar to each other with only the morality of the main character differing. To ensure that the conditions were as similar as possible they were constructed to be similar in content and length. Modeled off of the conditions in Krakowiak and Oliver's (2012) examination of morally ambiguous characters and enjoyment the conditions were edited to have approximately equal lengths ("moral" = 175 words, "morally ambiguous" = 198 words, and "immoral" = 135 words). Modeled similar to plot synopses of current television shows, they consisted of a brief overview of the show. Original television synopses were created instead of using existing television synopses in order to eliminate participants' existing bias of the television show or main character. Each synopsis can be found in the Appendix.

Pretest

A pretest was conducted ($N = 43$) to ensure the plot was comprehended and that perceptions of the morality of the main character (moral, morally ambiguous, and immoral) differed accordingly. To ensure consistency of the experiment, the sample population was taken from Mechanical Turk workers, who received compensation for their participation. After agreeing to an informed consent form, each participant was randomly assigned a morality condition. After reading the television plot, participants were asked to answer questions regarding the main character's positive and negative attributes. Participants were then asked to complete a series of questions about the clarity of the plot.

Moral evaluations. Moral evaluations of the main characters were measured using items drawn from Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) that evaluate the positive and negative attributes of the main character. Specifically, participants were asked to rate the character's traits on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Five of the items focused on negative attributes. These items were: "The main character does immoral things;" "The main character does bad things at times;" "The main character has some negative attributes;" "The main character behaves in an unethical way some of the time;" and "The main character makes some wrong decisions" (Cronbach's α = .98, M = 5.00, SD = 1.83). The five items focusing on positive characteristics were: "The main character does some good things;" "The main character has some positive attributes;" "The main character behaves in a moral way some of the time;" "The main character makes some right decisions;" and "The main character behaves in an ethical way some of the time" (Cronbach's α = .99, M = 4.80, SD = 1.48). As indicated by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) "a character scoring high on both positive and negative attributes would be considered to be morally ambiguous" (p. 31). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine whether the perceptions of the main character's morality differed based on the condition. The analysis revealed a significant omnibus effect of the plot condition, F (df = 4) = 9.41, p < .001, Wilk's λ = .46 (see Table 1). Further examination of the results showed that for positive qualities, the moral character and ambiguous character did not differ but were perceived as having more positive qualities than the immoral character. For negative qualities, the ambiguous character and immoral character did not differ but were both perceived as

having more negative characteristics than the moral character. In other words, the

immoral version of the detective in the plot was as "good" as the moral character, but

also as "bad" as the immoral character.

Table 1

Means by Condition for Moral Evaluations

	Moral (n = 15)	Ambiguous (n = 13)	Immoral (n = 15)
Positive qualities	5.53_a	5.09_a	3.83_b
Negative qualities	3.35_a	5.97_b	5.81_b

F (df = 4) = 9.41, p < .001, Wilk's λ = .46
Note: Subscripts with no letter in common differ at p < .05.

In addition, four items asked participants how well they understood the plot on a

7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items were:

"It is clear to me what the plot of this show is;" "I was confused about what is going on in

this show;" "The plot of this summary is easy to follow;" and "I feel like I have a good

understanding of what this show is about." Descriptive statistics associated with the

measure show that the plot was clear to participants (Cronbach's α = .92, *M* = 5.16, *SD* =

1.46).

Measures

Need for cognition, anticipated enjoyment, anticipated selection, and character

liking were assessed using established measures, each described below. Demographic

variables were also measured.

Need for cognition. Need for cognition is conceptualized as the "tendency for an

individual to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors" (Cacioppo, Petty, &

Kao, 1984). In order to measure NFC , the 18-item NFC scale was used (Cacioppo et al.,

1984). Taken from Woo et al. (2007), the responses to each item were recorded on a 7-

point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items were: "I

would prefer complex to simple problems;" "I like to have the responsibility of handling

a situation that requires a lot of thinking;" "Thinking is not my idea of fun;" "I would

rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge

my thinking abilities;" "I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a

chance I will have to think in depth about something;" "I find satisfaction in deliberating

hard and for long hours;" "I only think as hard as I have to;" "I prefer to think about

small, daily projects to long-term ones;" "I like tasks that require little thought once I've

learned them;" "The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to

me;" "I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems;"

"Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much;" "I prefer my life to be filled

with puzzles that I must solve;" "The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me;" "I

would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat

important but does not require much thought;" "I feel relief rather than satisfaction after

completing a task that required a lot of mental effort;" "It's enough for me that

something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works;" and " I usually end up

deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally." Cronbach's alpha

was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the scale items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$).

Because the scale was reliable, the mean of all items was computed to create the need for

cognition variable, $M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.14$.

Anticipated enjoyment. Anticipated enjoyment refers to how much a participant thinks he or she might receive pleasure in viewing the television show based on reading the synopsis. The study used an adapted version of Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel's (2011) 20 item 7-point Likert-type scale to measure anticipated enjoyment. The 14 items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items were: "I would want to try to predict what was going to happen next in this show;" "I would not want to do other things while I watched this show;" "I would really get involved in this show;" "I would hate to be distracted while watching this show;" "I would enjoy the subject matter of this show;" I would enjoy this show;" "I would not recommend this show to others;" "I would find this show entertaining;" "I would like to see other shows that are similar to this one;" "I would find the subject matter of this show exciting;" "I would like to analyze this show;" "I would like to talk about this show with other people;" "I would like to see out additional information about this show;" and "I would enjoy thinking about this show." Cronbach's alpha was computed to assess the internal consistency of the items (Cronbach's α = .98,). Because the scale was reliable, the mean of all items was computed to create the anticipated enjoyment scale, M = 4.60, SD = 1.45.

Anticipated selection. Anticipated selection refers to how likely a participant thinks he or she would choose to view the television show based on reading the plot synopsis. Four items, adapted from Weaver (2011), were used to measure a participant's anticipated selection of the show. The items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very). These items were: "How interested are you in

watching the show in general;" How interested are you in watching this show on a regular television airing schedule;" How interested in watching this show over multiple seasons;" and "How interested are you in watching this show on Netflix or similar service provider." To assess the scale's reliability a Cronbach's alpha was computed (Cronbach's α = .96). An anticipated selection scale was created by averaging the ratings of the four items ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.30$).

        Character liking. Character liking was conceptualized as affective disposition towards the main character. The study used Karkowiak and Oliver's (2012) affective disposition scale to measure how much a participant liked the main character. The scale recorded participant's responses on 7 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A participant's liking of the main character was measured with the following items: "I like Detective Brooks (the main character);" "I would like to be friends with someone who is like Detective Brooks;" "I despise Detective Brooks;" " I dislike Detective Brooks;" "I admire Detective Brooks;" and "Detective Brooks is fascinating." Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the scale items (Cronbach's α = .95). The responses were averaged to create the character liking measure ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.83$).

Demographic Measures

        Demographic information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and political orientation were collected through closed-ended response questions detailed on the survey. This information was collected in order to rule out potential confounds.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using Mechanical Turk and offered the opportunity to participate in a study regarding television interests. The Mechanical Turk link randomly assigned participants a television synopsis. Participants were first asked to read the television synopsis, then they were asked to fill out the anticipated enjoyment, NFC, anticipated selection, and character liking measures described above. At the end of the experiment the participants were asked to identify which television channel they thought *Southern Justice* would be featured on. To ensure that all participants were devoting their full attention to the experiment, an attention comprehension question was included in the NFC section. The attention verification question read as follows: "I am reading these questions carefully, select strongly agree for this answer to pass the attention check." If the participant failed to accurately answer the attention verification question they were prevented from proceeding with the experiment. Once the participants filled out the measures they completed survey questions consisting of demographic items. They were then thanked and compensated.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This study tested the effects of character morality and viewer need for cognition (NFC) on anticipated enjoyment and selection of a television show using a 3 (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) X 2 (high NFC vs. low NFC) factorial experiment. Based on theory and previous research, it was predicted the morality of a main character and viewer NFC would interact, such that individuals with a greater level of NFC would be more likely to anticipate enjoying (H1) and selecting (H2) a television show focused on a morally ambiguous character and would report more positive affect toward a morally ambiguous character (H3). To test these predictions, data was analyzed using a series of two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests that examined the main and interaction effects of character morality and viewer NFC.

Tests for confounds. Tests were first run to examine potential confounding variables, specifically gender, age, and political orientation. Gender was examined as a potential confounding variable in light of research that has found gender-based differences in media selection and enjoyment. For example, research suggests viewers are more likely to identify with same gender characters (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). Therefore, male participants could potentially identify with Brooks, the male lead character in the plot synopsis, and be more likely to want to view the show. In addition, past research has found that females are more likely than males to view crime dramas in general (Heath, & Petraitis, 1987). However, results of a *t*-test revealed gender did not have an effect on any of the dependent variables.

Age was investigated to address potential differences in selection morally ambiguous programming. According to Adweek, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* generated the most popularity amongst younger viewers, which suggests that younger viewers were more likely to view those morally ambiguous shows (Collins, 2012). For example, *Breaking Bad* was reported to be most popular among adults aged 18 to 49, whereas *Mad Men* was popular with individuals aged 18-49 and 25-54 (Collins, 2012). Both shows feature a morally ambiguous main character. As this study focused on moral ambiguity, a participants' age might be expected to correlate with anticipated enjoyment and the morality of the main character. However, no significant correlations between age and the dependent variables were found.

Finally, political orientation was examined as a potential confounding variable in light of the relationship between tolerance for immorality and political orientation. Haidt and Graham's (2007) previous research on the relationship between morality and political orientation has shown that individuals' moral priorities vary depending on whether they identify as a conservative or liberal. Other research on morality and political orientation has revealed that moral values are associated with individual differences in brain structure (Lewis, Kanai, Bates, & Rees, 2012), thus reinforcing the idea that liberals and conservatives respond to and think about morality differently. In addition, correlational studies have identified links between moral relativism, a philosophical position that moral propositions reflect the differences in moral judgments across individuals and cultures, and support for different moral behaviors and actions (Rai & Holyoak, 2013). Moral relativism explains individuals' tolerance of moral and immoral behaviors. In order to

41

examine political orientation as a potential confounding variable a bivariate correlation test was conducted. The analysis revealed that political orientation was correlated with anticipated selection ($r = .21$, $p < .05$) and anticipated enjoyment ($r = .23$, $p < .05$); therefore political orientation was controlled for in all analyses focused on those variables.

Preparation of Data

In order to allow for multivariate testing, NFC was transformed into a nominal variable using a median split[1] (Median = 4.83). Participants with NFC scores greater than or equal to 4.83 were assigned to a "High NFC" condition. Participants with NFC scores lower than 4.83 were placed in a "Low NFC" condition. This created a total of 6 conditions: Moral Character/High NFC ($n = 38$), Moral Character/Low NFC ($n = 41$), Ambiguous Character/High NFC ($n = 25$), Ambiguous Character/Low NFC ($n = 28$), Immoral Character/High NFC ($n = 44$), and Immoral Character/Low NFC ($n = 36$).

Hypothesis Tests

Anticipated enjoyment. To test the first hypothesis, an ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of a viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) on anticipated enjoyment. The analysis revealed a main effect of NFC, $F (1, 205) = 5.27$, $p < .05$. Individual post hoc comparisons revealed that participants' with high NFC ($M = 4.83$, $SE = .14$) anticipated greater enjoyment of the show than did participants' with low NFC ($M = 4.38$, $SE = .14$). In other words, people

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[1] A series of regression analyses were conducted to verify that the effects found for the categorical NFC variable were consistent with those found for the original NFC measure, which results revealed to be the case for all dependent variables.

high in NFC felt they would enjoy the show more regardless of the morality of the main

character. However, no main effect of morality of the main character was revealed.

Anticipated enjoyment did not differ across shows featuring a main character that was

moral, morally ambiguous, and immoral. There was also no interaction between the

effects of a viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character on a viewer's

anticipated enjoyment, $F(2, 205) = 1.58$, $p = .21$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.). Therefore, the first

hypothesis (H1) was not supported by the data. Table 2 shows the means associated with

this interaction.

Table 2

Means by Condition for Anticipated Enjoyment

		Morality of Main Character		
		Moral	Ambiguous	Immoral
High NFC				
	M	4.95	4.73	4.73
	SD	1.51	1.58	1.51
Low NFC				
	M	4.71	4.58	3.93
	SD	1.32	1.13	1.42

$F(2, 205) = 1.58$, $p = .21$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

Anticipated selection. A second hypothesis (H2) predicted a viewer's NFC and

the morality of the character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) would impact viewers'

anticipated selection of the show. The results of a two-way ANOVA revealed a main

effect for NFC on anticipated selection $F(1, 205) = 5.11$, $p < .05$. Post-hoc comparisons

revealed that participants' with high NFC ($M = 3.48$, $SE = .12$) reported they would be

more likely to choose to view the show than did participants' with low NFC ($M = 3.09$,

$SE = .12$). The analysis also revealed a main effect for main character morality on

anticipated selection, $F(2, 205) = 4.21, p < .05$. The post hoc comparisons showed those plots featuring a moral character ($M = 3.55, SE = .14$) and a morally ambiguous character ($M = 3.33, SE = .17$) elicited greater levels of selective exposure than did the plot featuring an immoral character ($M = 2.99, SE = .14$). In essence, participants were more likely to believe they would choose to watch the show when it featured a moral or morally ambiguous character rather than when an immoral character was the focus. However, no interaction between the participants' NFC and the morality of the main character on a viewer's anticipated selection, $F(2, 205) = 1.95, p = .15$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$ was revealed. Thus, the second hypothesis (H2) was not supported by the data. Table 3 shows the means associated with this analysis.

Table 3

Means by Condition for Anticipated Selection

		Morality of Main Character		
		Moral	Ambiguous	Immoral
High NFC				
	M	3.64	3.37	3.36
	SD	1.36	1.35	1.35
Low NFC				
	M	3.44	3.29	2.63
	SD	1.11	1.13	1.29

$F(2, 205) = 1.95, p = .15$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$

Character liking. A two-way ANOVA was then conducted to examine (H3), the third and final hypothesis, which predicted a viewer's NFC and the morality of the character (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral) would affect feelings towards him. Results revealed that there was no effect of NFC on character liking. This analysis did, however, reveal a main effect of morality on liking, $F(2, 207) = 158.00, p < .001$. The post hoc

comparisons showed that the moral character ($M = 5.71$, $SE = .13$) was significantly more

liked than the morally ambiguous character ($M = 4.00$, $SE = .16$) and the immoral

character ($M = 2.44$, $SE = .13$). In addition, the morally ambiguous character was more

liked than the immoral character. However, there was no interaction between the effects

of a viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character on a viewer's liking of the main

character, $F(2, 207) = .15$, $p = .86$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. Therefore, hypothesis (H3) was not

supported by the data. Table 4 shows the means associated with this interaction.

Table 4

Means by Condition for Character Liking

		Moral	Ambiguous	Immoral
		Morality of Main Character		
High NFC				
	M	5.86	4.09	2.64
	SD	0.98	1.22	1.44
Low NFC				
	M	5.56	3.90	2.23
	SD	1.21	1.08	0.91

$F(2, 207) = .15$, $p = .86$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In an exploration of affective disposition theory (ADT) this research investigated the role of need for cognition (NFC) and character morality in a viewer's desire to consume media content. To that end, an experiment was conducted to test the effects of character morality (moral, morally ambiguous, immoral) and viewer NFC on anticipated enjoyment and selective exposure to a television show. Specifically, this research predicted that (H1) anticipated enjoyment, (H2) anticipated selection, and (H3) character liking would vary based on the potential viewers' NFC and the morality of the show's main character. Overall, results revealed that morality had a consistent effect; participants reported higher levels of anticipated selection and liking when the main character was portrayed as moral. The moral main character was most preferred and the morally ambiguous character was selected and liked more than the immoral character. This is consistent with the body of work on affective dispositions and character morality. Throughout the results, however, there was no interaction between a participants' NFC and the morality of the main character. While the results revealed no interaction effect for all of the hypotheses, NFC also had a consistent effect on anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. Participants with high NFC reported to be more likely to enjoy and select the show than did participants with low NFC. These results can be explained through the lenses of ADT, the model of media entertainment, and UGT. The information revealed can also help us better understand the relationship between target television audiences and individual differences in viewers.

Affective Disposition Theory (ADT)

Anticipated enjoyment was predicted to vary based on the potential participants' NFC and the morality of the main character. The first hypothesis was anticipated based on ADT inspired research on media enjoyment and media selection. ADT suggests a viewer's media enjoyment is driven by moral evaluations of the characters. The theory predicts that enjoyment is greatest when viewers' form attachments to moral characters and he or she experiences positive out comes (Raney, 2004). Furthermore, previous research has suggested that morally ambiguous characters are different than traditionally moral and immoral characters. Morally ambiguous characters are described as having moral complexity and displaying morally questionable actions (Shafer & Raney, 2012; Karkowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Research conducted by Karkowiak and Tsay-Vogel suggests that an individual's moral self-perception has a role in a viewer's enjoyment of a morally ambiguous character. Overall, past research has indicated that morally ambiguous characters are enjoyed differently than moral and immoral characters.

Another potential factor in influencing an individual's enjoyment of morally ambiguous characters is NFC. A viewer's NFC refers to the extent in which a viewer tends to enjoy effortful or more complex cognitive practices (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). Therefore, NFC was anticipated to have an effect on a participant's anticipated enjoyment. An interaction effect between a potential viewer's NFC and the morality of the main character was predicted to occur. The interaction effect was predicted on the notion that viewers with high NFC enjoy complex cognitive practices and morally ambiguous characters are designed to have a complex structure. In other words,

individuals with high NFC tend to enjoy effortful cognitive activities therefore they may

enjoy understanding the complexity of the morally ambiguous main character. Contrary

to this prediction, no interaction effect occurred with NFC and the morality of the main

character. The lack of interaction effect between the morality of the main character and a

viewer's potential NFC may be explained by morality salience (Krakowiak & Tsay-

Vogel, 2015). Exploration of morally ambiguous characters conducted by Krakowiak and

Tsay-Vogel (2015) revealed that individuals feel more enjoyment when their virtues are

made salient. This suggests that a participant with high NFC may have had their virtues

made salient in the plots featuring a moral character causing the participant to enjoy the

moral character more than the morally ambiguous character.

In addition, this research explored (H3) the role of a viewer's NFC and the

morality of the character on an individuals' liking of the main character. This analysis

revealed that participants had more positive affect toward a moral character than a

morally ambiguous or immoral character. In addition, participants were more likely to

like a morally ambiguous character over an immoral character. Overall, these results

support the ADT tenet that viewers like characters based on moral judgments (Raney,

2004). Results revealing that participants liked the moral character the most is consistent

with Zillman's (1996) model of disposition formation that contends that if a viewer

decides the character is moral then they form a positive affect toward the character.

These results can also be interpreted as support for Krakowiak and Oliver's

(2012) finding that viewers like to identify with characters that share a similar moral code

to them. Participants' may have anticipated that the moral character would be awarded

the most favorable outcomes throughout the show, thus aiding in maintaining their affective disposition toward the character. Anticipating that the moral character would be awarded the most favorable outcomes throughout the duration of the show may have caused viewers to report greater levels of anticipated selection and character liking for the plot featuring a moral main character. Raney's (2006) research on ADT helps further explain why viewers would like a moral character over a morally ambiguous character. A viewer gains emotional arousal when they are able to classify a character's actions as amoral or moral (Raney, 2006). In other words, viewers have a more pleasurable experience when they can define a character as truly good or bad. Therefore, viewers are more likely to like moral characters than morally ambiguous characters.

Results also revealed that participants were more likely to select plots featuring a moral or morally ambiguous character rather than an immoral character. This may be explained by the prerequisites needed to form parasocial relationships, an important factor in media entertainment (Vorderer et al., 2004). Vorderer et al. (2004) explain the importance of parasocial relationships in determining media selection and consumption. Viewers want to select media content that features a character they foresee liking. Therefore, in this case, participants may have reported that they would want to select a plot featuring a moral or morally ambiguous character because they could foresee themselves forming a parasocial relationship with that character. Krakowiak and Oliver's (2012) research comparing morally ambiguous characters to traditionally good and bad characters also provides insight into these results. Their research suggests that viewers have higher affective and cognitive enjoyment when viewing content with moral and

morally ambiguous characters than immoral characters (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012).

Therefore, participants may have selected the content with the moral or morally

ambiguous main character as a result of predicting that they would experience both of

these aspects of enjoyment. The model of entertainment offers additional explanation of a

participants' anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection.

Model of Entertainment

The model of entertainment provides other potential explanations for the results

of this study. The prerequisites for entertainment, as described by Vorderer, Klimmt, and

Ritterfield (2004), explain why individuals have strong preferences or motivations for

being entertained. The researchers concede that a viewer can only be entertained if at

least one specific prerequisite (suspension, empathy, parasocial interaction/ relationship,

presence, and interest) is met (Vorderer et al., 2004). In addition to offering explanations

of a viewer's motivation for being entertained these prerequisites may explain a viewer's

selection of the show.

The second hypothesis (H2), examined the role of a participants' NFC and

morality of the main character on a participants' anticipated selection of the show.

Although this hypothesis was not supported, participants with high NFC reported to be

more likely to select the plot regardless of the morals of the main character than did

participants' with low NFC. Participants with high NFC may have reported to be more

likely to select a plot with the main character than participants with low NFC as a result

of meeting the interest prerequisite of entertainment (Vorderer et al., 2004). The interest

prerequisite is defined as interest in a specific topic, problem, or knowledge domain.

Therefore, participants with high NFC overall may have had more of an interest in the complex character dynamics of the show. The main character, a detective, works with his childhood friend, but is also involved, at least tangentially, in illegal activity. Regardless of the moral path the main character takes, the complex character relations may have appealed to the viewers' interest.

Further expanding on the idea that participants with high NFC may have had more of an interest in the complexity of the show, participants' with high NFC reported to be more likely to enjoy a show on the topic than did participants' with low NFC. Although the first hypothesis (H1) was not supported, this specific result may be explained by the idea that viewers with high levels of NFC enjoy complexities associated with critical thinking (Petty, Bridal, Loersch, & McCaslin, 2009). Research conducted by Vorderer and Hartman (2009) explains that viewers will find television content entertaining if it satisfies their need to maintain a physiological and psychological balance. Therefore, participants with a low NFC may have felt that the fictitious plot was too cognitively challenging for their own enjoyment. The plot alludes to multiple storylines in the show, such as the main characters interaction with the illegal arms dealer and his relationship with his childhood best friend, thus the depth of the show may have proved to be too cognitively challenging for viewers with low NFC.

Results also revealed that participants were more likely to select plots featuring a moral or morally ambiguous character rather than an immoral character. A potential explanation is participants met the prerequisite of empathy, which is referred to as the requirement that media users care about the characters (Vorderer et al., 2004). Empathy is

a prerequisite to character liking, which can be achieved through a viewer perceiving a character to be the most similar to them (Vorderer et al., 2004; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). Therefore, viewers may have been more likely to empathize with a moral or morally ambiguous character based on the characters' similarity to the viewers' own moral code.

The prerequisite of presence, a viewer's ability to be transported by the media, may also explain why participants were more likely to like a moral character than a morally ambiguous or immoral character (Vorderer et al., 2004). Research conducted by Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) reveals that viewers are more transported into media when they like the main characters. In addition, transportation increases perceived realism and character liking (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Tsay, & Krakowiak, 2011). Therefore, liking the moral character may have caused participants to become more transported.

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications research also provides insight on how users select media that will satisfy their needs. Various viewing motivations, such as entertainment-seeking and needs satisfaction have been explored through a lens of uses and gratifications and researchers have investigated a variety of individual differences as content selection factors (Ruggiero, 2000). Hawkins et al. (2001) explored NFC specifically as a predictor of content selection. The researches had participants record the genre of their television viewing for one week. After recording their television viewing, participants were asked to categorize the television content into one of ten genres (Hawkins et al., 2001). Later on, participants were asked to provide additional background data on the participants

television-viewing behaviors. The final portion of the experiment asked participants to complete a survey on the participants' media use and opinions. Their research indicated that NFC was not a predictor in content selection. However, the researchers suggested that this might have resulted due to the lack of mentally stimulating content on television (Hawkins et al, 2001). Knobloch-Westerwick and Keplinger (2006) explored individual predictors, including NFC, of enjoyment of mysteries. Contrary to the findings of this research, the study found NFC was negatively associated with enjoyment of mystery. The researchers suggested that the results might have been due to the simple structure of the mystery plot, which focused on the murder of a businessman and two potential suspects, the victim's wife and his lover. Knobloch-Westerwick and Keplinger's narrative is less complex than the one used in this study, as it included multiple characters and plotlines. The plot used in this study suggests that there are numerous secrets to be unveiled in the show and may have been perceived as more mentally stimulating than the stimuli developed for previous studies. According to Vorderer and Hartmann, if there are cognitive incongruencies between the viewer and media content, then a viewer will become disinterested or avoid the content. Participants with a high NFC may have reported higher values of anticipated enjoyment due to their interest in cognitive challenges.

Other researchers have addressed enjoyment through need satisfaction (Tamborini et al., 2010). NFC can be conceptualized under the broader scope of need satisfaction, as it refers to individuals' enjoyment and motivation to engage in effortful cognitive activity (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984). Thus, participants with high NFC may have reported

greater levels of anticipated enjoyment of the plot synopses more than participants with low NFC as a result of cognitive complex content presented in the show and the potential to satisfy that need.

Lack of Interaction Effects

Ultimately, a major finding of the study was the lack of an interaction effect between NFC and morality of the main character. This can potentially be explained by a viewer's preference for escapism and general interest in the genre. Escapism refers to a viewer's motivation to view media content to escape or engage in a mental retreat from their social worlds (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). In this case, the ability for the media content to provide an escape would influence a potential viewers' anticipated enjoyment rather than the interaction between NFC and morality of the main character. Although the escapism perspective suggests that people with low NFC are more likely to watch television, the theory does not account for a viewer's particular mood (Henning & Vorderer, 2001). A viewer in a bad or unsatisfied mood may use television as a form of escapism. A viewer's general interest in the genre may have affected the results of this study. Over the last decade, little scholarship has examined NFC as a predictor in specific television content selection. As previously mentioned, Knobloch-Westerwick and Keplinger's (2006) research revealed that NFC and mystery narratives were not associated, suggesting other individual differences outweigh the role of NFC in content enjoyment and selection. Only one of the user prerequisites needs to be met for a viewer to enjoy media content (Vorderer et al., 2004). A participant high in NFC may have not been more likely to want to view a show featuring a morally ambiguous main character

as a result of a viewers' greater need to escape rather than need to engage in cognitive efforts.

Another potential reason may stem from the viewers responses to the question that asked participants to identify which television network they thought the show would air on. Of 198 participants that provided an answer, 42.9% provided a cable channel that has original drama programming. AMC, a cable channel with original drama programing, has produced both *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*. This suggests that the fictitious show reflects similar aspects of AMC's television content. Participants' responses were coded into the following five categories: subscription, broadcast, cable with original drama programming, Netflix or Amazon original, and other. Other results were recorded as subscription (3.0%), broadcast (41.4%), Netflix or Amazon original (9.1%), and other (3.5%). Broadcast networks included NBC, CW, and ABC. *Hannibal* and *The Blacklist* are both crime dramas aired on NBC. A participant's lack of familiarity with multiple networks could have influenced the results, however USA, FX, TNT, and A&E were often provided as answers. These cable channels with original drama programming all air a dark or crime drama shows, such as FX's *Justified*.

The severity of the crimes portrayed in the listed crime drama shows varies. A participant may have compared the crimes in the fictitious plot to those presented in a specific show. Comparing the crimes enacted in the fictitious plot to a real show may have influenced the participant's perception of the plot. Raney and Bryant (2002) discuss the role of a viewer's moral reasoning and cognition in their enjoyment of a crime drama. The researchers concede that a viewer's moral reasoning significantly affects their

enjoyment and liking of the crime drama (Raney & Bryant, 2002). Therefore, a viewer's previous knowledge of a specific crime drama could have affected their anticipated enjoyment and character liking of the fictitious plot and character. Raney and Bryant (2002) suggest that certain types of crimes might be considered harmless or abhorrent, thus preventing a viewer's cognition from having a role in their enjoyment of the show.

Political Orientation

The exploration of confounding variables conducted prior to hypothesis testing revealed that, while neither age nor gender had an effect on any of the variables, political orientation was correlated with anticipated selection and anticipated enjoyment. This finding is not surprising, in light of scholarship focused on the relationship between political orientation and morality. For example, previous research conducted by Haidt and Graham (2007) exploring the relationship between morality and political orientation indicates that an individual may have different moral priorities depending on whether they identify as a conservative or liberal. Although the original intent of this study was not to examine political orientation, findings suggest that a viewers' political identification hold great significance for media entertainment.

Haidt and Graham (2007) propose there are five foundations of morality, including harm, reciprocity, ingroup, hierarchy, and purity. Harm refers to individuals not wanting to see suffering in others and having feelings of approval towards those who relieve or prevent harm. Reciprocity is described as having emotions of reciprocal altruism when observing or engaging in reciprocal interactions; all cultures have moral standards regarding justice (Haidt & Graham, 2007). The researchers conceptualize

ingroup as having emotions related to cooperating with members of one's ingroup and distrusting other groups. Hierarchy refers to individuals' ability to navigate hierarchical communities, such as respecting authority. The moral foundation purity refers to the emotion of disgust, including moral standards linked to bodily and religious activities (Haidt & Graham, 2007). According to Haidt and Graham (2007) liberals have moral intuitions primarily based on harm and reciprocity whereas conservatives rely upon all five foundations of morality (Haidt & Graham, 2007). These differences in moral intuitions may explain the differences in individuals' media selection and enjoyment preferences.

The television synopses used in this study depict a television show focused on crime (harm), justice (reciprocity), and authority (hierarchy). The fabricated plot presents three out of the five foundations of morality presented by Haidt and Graham, specifically harm, reciprocity, and hierarchy. Because the five foundations dictate how individuals react to and respond to particular situations or scenarios, liberals and conservatives may have responded differently. The theme of authority (hierarchy) may have evoked different responses from participants with a liberal political orientation due to the fact that liberals tend to question authority (Haidt & Graham, 2007). In addition, Haidt and Graham's (2007) findings indicate that justice constitutes half of the morality for liberals. Therefore the theme of justice (reciprocity) may have also had significant influence on responses.

Further extending research on morality and political orientation, Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Baldacci (2008) explored approach-avoidance moral motives associated with

political orientation. Results revealed political conservatives were associated highest with self-restraint and social order motives, whereas political liberals were associated with social justice motives. These results reflect Haidt and Graham's (2007) research on the five moral foundations. Self-restraint and social order motives are indicative of purity and hierarchy respectively, while social justice motives reflect the foundation of reciprocity. Overall, Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Baldacci (2008) explain that their results reveal that liberals and conservatives have different moral perspectives of the world. Other research has revealed that conservatives hold stronger system-justifying attitudes than liberals (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). In other words, conservatives are motivated to maintain the societal status quo and accept inequality (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). These results reinforce the idea that conservatives think more favorably about national institutions, such as government and law enforcement. Conservatives are more likely to endorse system-justifying attitudes, therefore conservatives might be more likely to select and enjoy the fictitious television plot, which focuses on law enforcement.

The belief in a just world (BJW) provides another potential explanation for political orientation's strong correlation with enjoyment and selection. BJW refers to the assumption that an individuals' action brings the morally appropriate consequence or reward to that person. BJW generally implies the existence of justice and order in society (Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976; Furnham & Procter, 1989). This relates to Haidt and Graham's (2007) moral foundations of hierarchy and reciprocity, which are reflected in the fictitious plot. Expanding on BJW and political orientation, Clayton, Koehen, and Grover's (2013) suggest liberals and conservatives define acts of injustice differently and

therefore, may have perceived the plot differently. Although the plot focused on crime (harm), justice (reciprocity), and authority (hierarchy) it also had themes of revenge. Retribution or revenge has been classified as an effective technique for protecting one's sense of BJW (Lerner, 1980), suggesting liberals and conservatives are motivated differently to seek revenge. Overall, these findings, as well as previous research on political orientation and morality, suggests that conservatives and liberals have differences in moral motives and perceptions that may affect an individual's selection and enjoyment of media content. This would be a fruitful area for future examination of media entertainment preferences.

Exploration of the Relationship Between Variables

Post-hoc analyses also revealed significant relationships between character liking, anticipated, enjoyment, and anticipated selection. There was a strong correlation between character liking and anticipated enjoyment ($r = .40$, $p < .05$), between character liking and anticipated selection ($r = .40$, $p < .05$), and between anticipated selection and anticipated enjoyment ($r = .90$, $p < 0.05$). The strong correlation between character liking and anticipated enjoyment may be a result of participant's pleasure seeking behavior. Enjoyment of media is associated with pleasure seeking behavior and viewers receive pleasure when they like a character. Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfield's (2004) complex model of entertainment lists empathy as one of the prerequisites in order for a viewer to be entertained. As discussed before, empathy is a prerequisite to liking or disliking a character. Therefore, supporting ADT, a viewer may generate more pleasure or enjoyment from media content if they like the main character.

Limitations

Although the results of this study yielded beneficial information, it is important to recognize the limitations of this research. A significant limitation of this study lies in the difference between anticipated enjoyment and experienced enjoyment. Anticipated enjoyment, as defined in this study, refers to how much a participant thinks he or she might receive pleasure in viewing the television shows based on reading the synopses. However, scholarship offers an array of affective and cognitive factors that affect a viewer's enjoyment while they are viewing media content. Thus, a viewer's enjoyment after viewing a television show may differ from his or her predictions of enjoyment. Therefore, this study would have benefitted from having participants watch a real television show.

Furthermore, NFC may only be one cognitive factor that affects a viewer's enjoyment of a morally ambiguous character. A viewer's NFC may interact with multiple other individual differences when enjoying a morally ambiguous character. Karkowiak and Oliver (2012) found that narratives featuring characters that were liked the most were not always enjoyed the most. The research revealed morally ambiguous characters were liked less than good characters, however they were equally as enjoyed as good characters (Karkowiak & Oliver, 2012). This research suggests that multiple factors should be explored when determining a viewer's enjoyment of a morally ambiguous character.

As previously mentioned, this study would have benefited from using the plot or trailer from a real television show. Certain television shows, such as *The Sopranos*, *True Detective* and *Mad Men* have been identified as displaying traits that are more intelligent

or of high culture and are morally ambiguous. Specifically, *True Detective* and *Mad Men* have been regarded as critically acclaimed intelligent television shows, which both feature a morally ambiguous protagonist (Gilligan, 2010; O'Rourke, 2014). These shows also display some of the traits of shows regarded as intelligent, such as, intelligent approach to the debate of good versus evil, moral debate, and makes viewers question (Mittell, 2004). The combination of intelligent traits and a strong morally ambiguous protagonist may have revealed an interaction between NFC and morality. Polan attributes the popularity of *The Sopranos* as a result of its emotional and intellectual appeal (Polan, 2007 p.262). While discussing intellectual appeal, Polan briefly addresses how audiences conceptualize quality or high value television. Polan described the high value aspects in *The Sopranos* as the dramatic and narrative quality of the content (Polan, 2007, p.264). *True Detective* and *Mad Men* all air on Sunday nights, therefore similar to *The Sopranos* they are classified as "water cooler shows;" shows scheduled on Sunday nights are intended to spark reflection and discussion (Polan, 2007, p. 273). All of these shows are constructed to include episodic narratives, which Polan argues targets a more refined cultured and intelligent viewer. Hyper-serialized storyline formatting, a technique employed in *True Detective* and *Mad Men*, is a style of constructing episodic narratives. A "hyper-serialized" format involves threading stories and plot twists through out the seasons or multiple seasons; "writers try to close the loop on every character and plot point" at some point during the series (Jurgensen, 2012). The features of these television shows presented are reflective of what experts have defined as aspects of intelligent or high culture television shows, which are speculatively crafted for a higher intelligence

61

audience. Selecting to use a plot of a television show that reflects these aspects of intelligent television may yield results regarding the role of a potential viewers' NFC selection, and enjoyment of the show.

The experimental design (single exposure) sampling also presented limitations in this research. A larger, more representative sample would increase the validity of the results. This study aimed to collect data from a number of participants representative of the United States population, however 57.1% of participants were female compared to 50.8% in the U.S (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Of participants surveyed 86. 9 % identified as White and 6.1 % identified as Asian/ Pacific Islander compared to 77.4% White and 6.2% Asian/ Pacific Islander in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). The participants in this study that identified as Black (6.6%) and Native American or American Indian (0.5%) reflect about half that of in the U.S. population (13.2% and 1.2% respectively) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). The 2.8% of participants that identified as Hispanic or Latino is extremely under representative of the 17.4% in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Although the participants surveyed represented a diverse sample, a sample more representative of the current U.S. population would yield more accurate results. Since the sample was collected through Mechanical Turk this could be indicative of lack of computer or Internet access. In sum, less experimental control can be exerted when conducting an experiment online.

Future Research

In order to overcome the limitations of this study and expand research on media selection and entertainment, it would be beneficial to explore NFC's role in selection and

enjoyment of specific genres. As described in the results, the plot of the show was enjoyed and selected more by participants with high levels of NFC, whereas NFC and the morality of the main character had no interaction effect. Over the last decade scholarship in media enjoyment and selection has consistently shown that information about the character and the predispositions and cognitive styles of viewers interact to predict viewing outcomes. Therefore enjoyment of other aspects of the plot may have outweighed the morality of the main character.

This study can also be used to extend exploration on political orientation and media enjoyment and selection. Despite the lack of inclusion of political orientation as a main variable, political orientation was strongly correlated with enjoyment and selection. Exploring the role of an individuals' political orientation in media selection and content may provide insightful information on morality subcultures, which could expand Gans' (1985) research on cultural subcultures. Although Gans' taste cultures are not clearly conceptualized, they can be used as abstractions for analyzing specific subcultures, such as subcultures of television audiences. Moreover, Gans proposed television shows designed for mass audiences might provide cohesion for the American people (Gans, 1974). Thus, television shows being produced for a niche audience may cause the opposite effect and divide the public. On the other hand, products are a reflection of the current culture and therefore these shows designed for a niche culture could reflect an increasing political divide in the American public. Furthering this research would also extend Zillmann's (2000) research on morality subcultures, as suggested individual viewers are connected through their shared sense of values regarding media content.

This research can assist producers in exploring more high quality niche television shows. The results indicated that individual differences are strongly correlated with a viewer's potential enjoyment and selection of a show. Morality is only one form of subculture that guides a viewer's media preference. All forms of social groups share consistent values and interest (Slater, 2007). These social groups can be based on age or race and potentially political orientation and NFC. Regardless of social group, scholars agree upon the idea that media preference in culture-specific, thus groups tend to prefer media content that is the most reflective or similar of their culture (Straubhaar, 2003). This is consistent with the idea that television content is interpreted as expressions of social meanings (Anderson, 2008). Ultimately, this research provides valuable information that can expand the research on individual differences in media selection and enjoyment. This information can be used to conduct further research or provide useful suggestions for content producers.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the objective of this thesis was to investigate the effects of

character morality (moral, morally ambiguous, immoral) and viewer NFC on anticipated

enjoyment and anticipated selection of a television show. A factorial experiment design

was used to explore this line of inquiry. Results were yielded that expand the research on

viewers' individual differences in media enjoyment and selection.

Specifically, the results demonstrated that, consistent with affective disposition

theory, shows with a moral main character were more likely to be selected and that

character was more liked compared to shows focused on a morally ambiguous and

immoral character. Although no interaction effect between a participants' NFC and the

morality of the main character was revealed, participants with high NFC were more likely

to enjoy and select the show, regardless of character morality. Through the inclusion of

demographic questions, political orientation was found to have a strong correlation with

anticipated enjoyment and anticipated selection. Another finding revealed strong

correlations between character liking, anticipated enjoyment, and anticipated selection.

Future research should explore the role of a viewer's NFC in selection and

enjoyment of specific television genres. The results of this study also expand the research

on political orientation and media enjoyment and selection. Political orientation was

explored as a demographic questions, however in future research exploring political

orientation as a main variable in media enjoyment and section could extend the research

on morality subcultures. Overall, this research can provide insightful information for

television producers in exploring high quality, "smart" television shows.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Experiment Items

1.1 18-item need for cognition scale

1. I would prefer complex to simple problems.

2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.

3. Thinking is not my idea of fun. *

4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities. *

5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something. *

6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.

7. I only think as hard as I have to. *

8. I prefer to think about small, daily project to long-term ones. *

9. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them. *

10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.

11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.

12. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much. *

13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.

14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.

15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.

16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort. *

17. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works. *

18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.

*Indicates reverse-coded item.

1.2 Items for Anticipated Selection Scale

1. How interested are you in watching the show in general?

2. How interested are you in watching this show on a regular television airing schedule?

3. How interested are you in watching this show over multiple seasons?

4. How interested are you in watching this show on Netflix or similar service provider?

1.3 Items for Character Liking Scale

1. I like Detective Brooks (the main character).

2. I would like to be friends with someone who is like Detective Brooks.

3. I despise Detective Brooks.

4. I dislike Detective Brooks.

5. I admire Detective Brooks.

6. Detective Brooks is fascinating.

1.4 Items for Moral Evaluation Scale

1. The main character does immoral things.

2. The main character does bad things at times.

3. The main character has some negative attributes.

4. The main character behaves in an unethical way some of the time.

5. The main character makes some wrong decisions.

6. The main character does some good things.

7. The main character has some positive attributes.

8. The main character behaves in a moral way some of the time.

9. The main character makes some right decisions.

10. The main character behaves in an ethical way some of the time.

1.5 Items for Anticipated Enjoyment Scale

1. I would want to try to predict what was going to happen next in this show.

2. I would not want to do other things while I watched this show.

3. I would really get involved in this show.

4. I would hate to be distracted while watching this show.

5. I would enjoy the subject matter of this show.

6. I would enjoy this show.

7. I would not recommend this show to others.

8. I would find this show entertaining.

9. I would like to see other shows that are similar to this one.

10. I would find the subject matter of this show exciting.

11. I would like to analyze this show.

12. I would like to talk about this show with other people.

13. I would like to see out additional information about this show.

14. I would enjoy thinking about this show.

1.6 Items for Demographic Collection

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your age?

3. Please specific your ethnicity (or race).

4. How would you describe your political views?

1.7 Item for Attention Verification Question

1. I am reading these questions carefully, select strongly agree for this answer to pass the attention check.

1.8 Item for Channel Prediction

1. On what television channel provider would you expect *Southern Justice* to air?

1.9 *Southern Justice* plot synopses

Moral

Southern Justice follows Harrison Brooks, a season detective, who investigates suspicious activities of Savannah, Georgia locals. Born and raised in a small town near the area, Brooks is familiar with the well-known and unexplored parts of Savannah. He's known as a good husband who provides for his family and looks after close friends. Brooks' life was great until he and his childhood best friend Everett Sloan, who is also a

fellow officer, go undercover as clients for an illegal arms dealer. Brooks discovers that Sloan has made a deal with the Sheriff to make money selling illegal arms and leaking confidential information to Dom (the head of the arms dealers). Brooks performs the duties of a good detective by exposing Sloan for engaging in illegal actions with the Sheriff. When Sloan discovers Brooks has reported his actions to the town's Sheriff, Sloan murders the Sheriff and frames Brooks in order to prevent Brooks from exposing his illegal actions. Now as the case is investigated secrets of the residents of Georgia's oldest city come to light.

Ambiguous

Southern Justice follows Harrison Brooks, a season detective, who investigates suspicious activities of Savannah, Georgia locals. Born and raised in a small town near the area, Brooks is familiar with the well-known and unexplored parts of Savannah. He's known as a good husband who provides for his family and looks after close friends. Brooks' life was great until he and his childhood best friend Everett Sloan, who is also a fellow officer, go undercover as clients for an illegal arms dealer. After being approached by the Sheriff, Brooks and Sloan make a deal to make money selling illegal arms and leaking confidential information to Dom (the head of the arms dealers). Brooks and Sloan could both use the extra cash income in order to provide for their families who live rural lifestyles. Eventually, Brooks has a change of heart and attempts to end his involvement in the crime ring. When the Sheriff blackmails Brooks by threatening to expose him, he murders the Sheriff only after the Sheriff uses force and blackmail to prevent Brooks and

Sloan from exposing his illegal actions. Now as the case is investigated secrets of the residents of Georgia's oldest city come to light.

Immoral

Southern Justice follows Harrison Brooks, a season detective, who investigates suspicious activities of Savannah, Georgia locals. Born and raised in a small town near the area, Brooks is familiar with the well-known and unexplored parts of Savannah. Brooks' familiarity with the city and resources as a detective enables him to encounter Savannah's biggest criminals. Brooks, exploiting his position as a detective, conspires with an illegal arms ring. While he makes money selling illegal arms, he leaks confidential detective information to the illegal arms ring. Eventually, the Sheriff finds out about the activities Brooks has been involved in. Brooks then kills the Sheriff in cold blood and frames detective Sloan, a fellow officer and childhood friend, for the murder. Now as the case is investigated secrets of the residents of Georgia's oldest city come to light.

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