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# Navigating Morality in Parasocial Relationships. Exploring the Dynamics of Affective Disposition, Moral Foundations, and Expectancy Violations in Mediated Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

The morality of a media character's behavior and its influence on viewers' parasocial relationships (PSRs) are analyzed based on different theoretical perspectives on media entertainment and psychological theories. Affective disposition theory is used to explain the relationship between moral judgments and character liking. Viewers' connections with media characters are analyzed in the context of longer-term PSRs. Accordingly, morality is treated as a multidimensional construct that consists of care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and purity. These five moral domains are applied to viewers' moral foundations and to the behaviors of media characters. Additionally, viewers' moral expectations and their influence on viewers' PSRs are considered based on the expectancy violations theory. In an experimental study, the morality of a character's behavior was manipulated (moral vs. ambiguous vs. immoral), and the effect on viewers' PSRs based on their moral foundations and moral expectations in the five moral domains was analyzed. The results show that while moral behavior generally strengthens viewers' PSRs, different effects emerge when viewers' moral foundations and expectations are considered. The different patterns that emerged between the five moral domains underline the importance of a multidimensional approach to morality in this mediated setting.

Viewers of media content observe media characters and evaluate their behavior based on moral judgments, which results in affective dispositions

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toward the media characters. It is generally assumed that if characters behave morally, viewers develop positive feelings toward them, whereas if they behave immorally, viewers develop negative feelings toward them (ADT; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). In addition to viewers' affective dispositions during real-time viewing experiences, viewers can also develop friend-like connections with media characters (Dibble et al., 2016). Viewers can develop these parasocial relationships (PSRs) with media characters also beyond media exposure, for example, when they think about them in their everyday lives (Giles, 2002). PSRs are a long-term construct compared to the short-time oriented mere affective disposition described in ADT (Dibble et al., 2016). Often, PSRs are analyzed in the context of morally positive characters like classical movie heroes, viewers' favorite media characters, or the protagonists of a show (for an overview, see Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Schramm et al., 2022). Viewers can form positive bonds with all kinds of media characters, including morally diverse media characters such as morally ambiguous media characters, anti-heroes, or villains (e.g., Bonus et al., 2021; Brodie & Ingram, 2021; Oliver et al., 2019). Analyzing morally diverse media characters expands the existing research on viewers' PSRs with different characters.

Although media characters can be categorized as good or bad, research suggests that a more nuanced consideration of morality is necessary (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). In psychology, according to moral foundation theory (MFT), individuals' morality is divided into five moral domains: care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and purity (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). This multidimensional perspective on morality has been applied to media characters (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). When analyzing viewers' relationships with media characters in the context of morality, it is essential to include this multidimensional perspective in two ways. First, viewers' moral foundations must be considered along the five moral domains. Second, the media characters' behaviors must be measured among the five moral domains and not just categorized into moral or immoral behaviors. A viewer who highly values loyalty might evaluate characters who betray their families more negatively than a viewer who values loyalty less and probably reacts less strongly to this betrayal. The study follows this multidimensional approach to the morality of MFT and includes the five moral domains on both sides: viewers and characters.

Additionally, this study uses the concept of expectancy violations based on the expectancy violations theory (EVT) to explain viewers' expectations toward media characters. In interpersonal contexts, EVT explains how individuals form expectations of others based on previous behavior and social norms (Burgoon, 2015). These expectations shape interactions and relationships in social situations. The concept of expectancy violations that potentially influence relationships has also been applied to viewers' expectations and relationships toward media characters or persona in a mediated

setting (e.g., Bonus et al., 2021; Matthews & Bonus, 2023). A viewer might react more negatively to a character who violates moral standards related to fairness if the character used to behave fairly in similar situations than they would to a character who has constantly acted unfairly and the viewers already were desensitized to the unfairness of the character's actions. Regarding the second character, the viewer has already developed the expectation that the character will act unfairly, so despite the immorality, the unfair behavior confirms the viewer's expectations rather than violating them. This process of viewers' expectations toward media characters is included in this study. Thus, the impact of viewers' moral expectations of the media character on the relationship between the characters' morality and the viewers' PSRs with them is in focus.

Accordingly, with ADT, PSRs, MFT, and expectancy violations from EVT, this study uses different psychological and media entertainment theories and concepts to analyze the relationship between a character's morality and viewers' PSRs. ADT explains the relationship between viewers' positive or negative feelings toward media characters and viewers' moral judgments of the character (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). By analyzing viewers' PSRs with these media characters, the study contributes a longer-term perspective than covered with affective dispositions in ADT (Klimmt et al., 2006). Following MFT, a multidimensional perspective on morality is taken to facilitate consideration of the five moral domains of care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and purity in relation to viewers' moral foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2008) and the behavior of a media character (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). Based on EVT, viewers' expectations of a media character are integrated (Burgoon, 2015), with the question of morality evaluations and their possible effects on outcomes, such as PSRs with these characters. With that, the study expands the existing literature and contributes to the analysis of the role of morality for media characters and viewers' relationships with them. Morality and morally questionable media characters are prevalent in today's media content, and media users meaningfully relate to such media characters, which potentially influences the users' attitudes, values or future behaviors. Thus, better understanding the relationship between morality, moral standards or expectations in the relationship between audience members and media characters is crucial for understanding the implications of this prevalence on audience members and individuals in general.

### ***Affective dispositions and parasocial relationships (PSRs) with media characters***

Viewers' affective dispositions toward media characters are considered crucial drivers of their enjoyment. ADT describes how viewers of media content experience suspense and enjoyment (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

Viewers' feelings toward media characters can be classified on a continuum from very negative to very positive affects. These affective dispositions result from viewers monitoring the characters' behaviors and categorizing them as moral and immoral behaviors (Raney, 2004; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Viewers tend to like characters they evaluate as morally good and dislike characters they perceive as acting immorally (Zillmann, 2006). Viewers' feelings of suspense and enjoyment result from their moral judgment and subsequent affinity for media characters. Generally, viewers enjoy media content when morally good characters who are liked experience positive outcomes and morally evil characters who are disliked are confronted with adverse outcomes (Zillmann, 2006).

In addition to viewers' affective dispositions during media exposure, viewers might develop relationships with media characters beyond media exposure. PSRs can develop and change intensity after media exposure, for example, if a viewer thinks about a character in daily life (Dibble et al., 2016). Viewers' PSRs describe the one-sided emotional connections they may form with a media character despite the fact that a media character cannot directly speak with or react to the viewer (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs exceed mere affinity for a media character and describe viewers' perception of being friends with, sharing personal stories with, or emotionally supporting the media character (Tukachinsky, 2011). PSRs are often compared to social friendships (Dibble et al., 2016; Gleich, 1996)—like social relationships, PSRs may vary in intensity, change over time, and result in parasocial breakups (Klimmt et al., 2006). Viewers develop PSRs with all kinds of media characters, including nonfictional figures such as news presenters (e.g., Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985) or influencers (e.g., Du et al., 2023; Reinikainen et al., 2020) and fictional characters such as movie protagonists (e.g., Bonus et al., 2021; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). PSRs are important to consider when analyzing viewers' involvement with media characters, as they are influential on different outcomes of media exposure. Generally, PSRs are associated with media involvement (Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013) and with persuasive outcomes such as viewers' attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). In the context of morality and media characters, these possible influences on viewers' attitudes and behaviors are especially relevant. For example, it raises the question of whether PSRs with immoral characters lead to viewers' adapting such attitudes of immoral behavior being acceptable or if viewers' PSRs with moral characters increases the morality of their behaviors. Thus, PSRs play a crucial role in viewers' relationships in the context of morality in media characters' behaviors.

The relationship between a character's morality and viewers' affinity for these characters has been analyzed in the realm of ADT research (e.g., Grizzard et al., 2023; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Raney, 2011; Tamborini et al.,

2018). However, fewer studies have focused on the connection between a character's morality and viewers' longer-term PSRs with these characters. It is essential to differentiate between constructs. Viewers' affective dispositions describe their affinity for a media character limited to the viewing period (Zillmann, 2006). Viewers' PSRs often outlast media exposure and may influence viewers beyond the immediate exposure (Dibble et al., 2016; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Besides the affective component of liking a character, PSRs describe how viewers cognitively process the character, for example, how they focus on the character, what they think about the character, and how they connect with the character (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, viewers can form PSRs with media characters they dislike, offering a broader spectrum of media characters to analyze (Bonus et al., 2021; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). It has been suggested that, concerning the moral behavior of different types of media characters, for example, villains, heroes (Bonus et al., 2021), and morally ambiguous media characters (Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020), immoral behavior generally weakens viewers' PSRs intensities. Based on these results, we assumed the following:

**H1:** Moral behavior by media characters strengthens viewers' PSRs with them, while ambiguous and immoral behavior weakens them.

### ***Moral foundations theory***

Morality is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and dividing characters or individuals as good or bad does not do justice to it. Using MFT, morality can be explained from a theoretical psychological perspective. MFT describes how humans evaluate specific behaviors based on globally valid moral values (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). These moral judgments can be divided into the five moral domains of care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (Haidt, 2001). In contrast to harm, an individual's instinct to care for others and protect them is described in the domain of *care*. *Fairness*, as opposed to cheating, describes an individual's tendency to treat everyone equally and penalize cheating. An individual's solidarity with friends or family is *loyalty*, which is contrasted with betrayal. The opposite of subversion, *authority*, refers to an individual's compliance with authoritative instances. The disgust felt in response to revolting things, as the opposite of sanctity, is *purity* (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Even though questions of morality are treated differently among cultures, these five domains have been demonstrated to be global—all cultures value loyalty over betrayal, respect over subversion, and so on (Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020).

This multidimensional perspective on morality was also applied to viewers' mediated relationships with media characters. In the model of intuitive morality and exemplars, the relationship between viewers' morality (according to the five moral domains) and their perceptions of media characters is integrated (Tamborini, 2012). Thereby, the five moral domains are used to analyze morality in the mediated context. Consequently, especially in research on morally ambiguous media characters, the five moral domains have been applied to better understand the appeal of these characters (e.g., Eden et al., 2011; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013). If viewers have strong sensibilities in a particular moral domain, they might react in a more pronounced way to the same behavior of a media character. A viewer who strongly values fairness might negatively react to a media character who mistreats others, for example, through a decreased liking or PSR with this character. In contrast, a viewer who places less value on fairness might react rather indifferently to the same action, not resulting in any punishment for the character in their relationship or on the viewers' evaluation of the character's morality. Thus, viewers' moral foundations should be included when analyzing the influence of a character's moral behavior on viewers' PSRs.

**RQ1:** How do moral, ambiguous, and immoral behaviors of a media character influence viewers' PSRs, and what role do viewers' moral foundations play in this relationship?

### ***Expectancies and expectancy violations***

Viewers' expectancies toward a media character are crucial for their evaluations after (im)moral behaviors of the media character (Bonus et al., 2021; Matthews & Bonus, 2023). In interpersonal communication, EVT predicts and explains how people respond to the unexpected behaviors of their social partners (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Based on EVT, expectations are "cognitions about the anticipated communication behavior of specific others" (Burgoon & Walther, 1990, p. 236). These expectations are formed by the characteristics of the other person, the characteristics of the relationship between the two individuals, and the characteristics of the context (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). The expectations that one person holds for another person can be violated, such as if one communication partner acts outside the realm of what the other communication partner would have expected. Positive and negative *confirmations* of expectations predict more favorable outcomes than a person might think, positive and negative *violations* predict less favorable outcomes than expected (Burgoon, 2015). People hold a range of acceptable behaviors for others, and only behaviors



outside this range are considered expectancy violations (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). These moral expectancy violations can harm interpersonal relationships.

Despite the differences between two-sided social relationships and one-sided parasocial relationships, these expectations toward a communication partner can also be applied to the mediated setting between audience members and media characters (e.g., Bonus et al., 2021; Cohen, 2010; Matthews & Bonus, 2023). Cohen (2010) showed that imagined expectancy violations could harm relationships with friends and media figures. In the context of PSR, moral violations are especially harmful (Cohen, 2010). In another study, viewers' PSRs with the main characters of *Star Wars* were assessed before the release of a new movie. The effect of moral expectancy violations committed by the characters in the new movie on viewers' PSRs was analyzed, and positive and negative expectancy violations were differentiated (Bonus et al., 2021). Positive violations describe characters acting more morally than the viewers expected, while negative violations describe characters acting more immorally than expected. For all characters, immoral behavior weakened the participants' PSRs with them. When considering moral expectancy violations, different patterns emerged between heroes and villains. First, when assessing the same characters, some viewers reported positive expectancy violations, while others reported negative expectancy violations. This result indicates that some viewers may perceive the behavior of a character as more immoral than they expected, while others may perceive the same behavior to be more moral than they expected. Second, although this was not the case for all characters, these expectancy violations sometimes had the same effects on PSR intensity. For example, while positive expectancy violations led to stronger PSRs with villain Kylo Ren, positive and negative expectancy violations weakened viewers' PSRs with hero Luke Skywalker (Bonus et al., 2021). In a series of studies, Matthews and Bonus (2023) re-analyzed morality expectancy violations for heroes and villains and demonstrated that when a villain engaged in the same activity than a hero, it was perceived as being more moral, unexpected, and positively affective. However, when villains or heroes performed immoral behavior, viewers showed similar adverse reactions. Thus, positive expectancy violations by a villain, in particular, seem to lead to an unexpectedly positive response (Matthews & Bonus, 2023). These results underline the importance of assessing viewers' moral expectations toward media characters when analyzing their PSRs.

Overall, these studies suggest that viewers have moral expectancies toward media characters and that moral expectancy violations and confirmations have different effects on viewer affinity toward characters and viewers' PSRs with them. These findings are respected for the second research question of this study. Viewers' moral expectations are considered



with regard to the relationship between the morality of media characters and viewers' PSRs.

**RQ2:** How do moral, ambiguous, and immoral behaviors of a media character influence viewers' PSRs, and what role do their moral expectations play in this relationship?

This study focuses on the role of a character's (im)moral behavior in viewers' PSRs. Thereby, different theoretical perspectives are integrated. ADT explains the relationship between moral behavior and affective dispositions toward media characters. PSRs expand this perspective by considering more long-term relationships between viewers and media characters. By assessing morality for viewers and characters as multidimensional phenomena following MFT, a more nuanced analysis of morality is possible. Additionally, viewers' expectations toward a media character based on previous mediated encounters are assessed to further shed light on the relationship between morality and viewers' PSRs with media characters. Due to the lack of existing empirical research, only one hypothesis is derived, and MFT and expectancy violations based on EVT are integrated with two non-directional research questions.

## Method

### *Research design and procedure*

An experimental study was conducted online to answer the research questions and hypothesis. Participants were recruited on the platform Prolific and received a financial incentive (\$2.75). In a screening survey, viewers who had watched all three existing seasons of *The Umbrella Academy* were identified and later invited to the study. In an online survey, participants first indicated their moral foundations (Graham et al., 2011, 2013). Then, the focus was on Klaus, one of the show's protagonists. Participants rated how moral they perceived his behavior to be in the current seasons, as well as their PSRs with him. The participants were asked about their moral expectations in each of the five moral domains for and preexisting PSRs with Klaus. After answering these questions, they were randomly assigned to read one of three experimentally manipulated written scenarios that described Klaus's actions after the end of the last season. The scenarios were manipulated so that he behaved (a) purely morally, (b) purely immorally, or (c) morally ambiguously. Then, participants rated their general perception of Klaus's behavior regarding the five moral domains and their PSRs with him. The study's design was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Management, Economics and Social

Sciences of the University of Fribourg in March 2023 (Application No. 2023-03-02). The study was preregistered, and the data and material are openly available on OSF: <https://osf.io/u5h9p/>.

### ***Stimulus details and experimental manipulation***

These data were collected as part of a project that included a handbook Möri & Fahr (in print) chapter about *The Umbrella Academy*. Worldwide, the show was very popular. For example, after the release of the third season, the show was on the top of the streaming ranking with 2.5 billion minutes watched (Hailu, 2022; Nielsen, 2022). The plot of the show revolves around the seven Hargreeves siblings, superheroes trained at the Umbrella Academy by their adoptive father, Reginald. The siblings are foretold to protect the world from an imminent apocalypse. The focus of the handbook chapter was on viewers' affinity for all seven Hargreeves siblings, viewers' perceived morality, and their PSRs. Accordingly, participants were surveyed about their experiences with all seven Hargreeves siblings. With seven distinct Hargreeves siblings as the protagonists, the show offers the perfect opportunity to analyze viewers' preferences and PSRs with morally diverse media characters in a popular TV show. To further integrate MFT and expectancy violations, the study was expanded to include an experimental component, which is the basis of this article.

Three written scenarios, all available on OSF, were used for the experimental manipulation. Klaus was chosen as the protagonist for the scenario because he is integral to the story's plot, viewers generally like him, and there is no confusion about different timeline versions of him, as is the case with Ben, for example. Only participants who watched all three seasons were included as participants in the study. Thus, they might have developed different relationships with each of the seven siblings. To avoid confoundment in the experimental study, Klaus was used as the protagonist of the scenario for all participants. Viewers' preexisting PSRs were assessed to control their influence on viewers' PSRs after having read the scenario.

The written scenarios begin after a brief summary of the events that occurred at the end of the third season. After landing in the new timeline without their supernatural powers, the Hargreeves siblings are again threatened by the Sparrow Academy. They make a joint plan for how to deal with this attack. In all scenarios, one short paragraph corresponds to Klaus's behavior regarding each of the five morality domains. This behavior is manipulated to appear moral, immoral, or ambiguous according to the five dimensions. In the moral version, Klaus encourages the other members, sticks to the joint plan, and invests everything in winning against the threat together with his siblings. In the immoral version, Klaus only cares about himself, goes behind his siblings' backs, and tries to ensure that only he has

a chance to win in the final battle. In the ambiguous version, Klaus somewhat includes his siblings in the plan but focuses primarily on his personal advantage. In all three versions, the scenario ends as the final battle against the Sparrow Academy begins. The successful manipulation of the three versions was validated in a pretest (see the pretest on OSF) and reexamined in the treatment check, as shown below.

## Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (e.g., *do not agree at all*) to 5 (e.g., *fully agree*). All items used are available on OSF.

### Viewers' moral foundations

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) is a multidimensional approach to measuring morality that assesses the participants' moral foundations. High scores represent more pronounced moral beliefs (Graham et al., 2011, 2013). The MFQ assesses five moral domains: care ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ,  $\alpha = .67$ ), fairness ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ ), loyalty ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ,  $\alpha = .76$ ), authority ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ), and purity ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Viewers' moral expectancies

Viewers' moral expectancies were measured with an adapted version of the Character MFQ (CMFQ-X; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020), as done in another study (Bonus et al., 2021). For example, viewers were asked if they thought that Klaus would "cause someone to suffer emotionally" (care), "treat people equally" (fairness), "betray his group" (loyalty), "disobey orders from a superior" (authority), or "do something disgusting" (purity). The items are based on the MFT domains: care ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), fairness ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ), loyalty ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ), authority ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ), and purity ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ,  $\alpha = .73$ ).

### Parasocial relationships

Viewers' PSRs with the media character were analyzed using Tukachinsky's (2011) parasocial friendship scale. The thirteen items cover the subdimensions of communication and support. Viewers' PSRs, for example, "I think Klaus could be a friend of mine," were assessed before ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ) and after ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ) they read the scenario.

### **Character's morality**

Based on a previous study (Matthews & Bonus, 2023), the viewer's general perception of the characters' morality was assessed using two items. This was completed before ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ , Spearman Brown's  $= .80$ ) and after ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ , Spearman Brown's  $= .97$ ) the participants read the scenario. To assess the viewers' perceptions of the characters' morality in a more nuanced manner, the validated CMFQ-X (Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020) was used with the prompts written in the past tense, for example, "Klaus was cruel," or "Klaus acted unfairly." It measures five moral domains: care ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ), fairness ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), loyalty ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ), authority ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ), and purity ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ,  $\alpha = .62$ ).

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited on the platform Prolific after a prescreening survey to ensure that they had watched previous seasons of *The Umbrella Academy* and were familiar with the plot and the characters. In total, 512 participants completed the study. The participants were between 19 and 77 years old ( $M = 39.78$ ,  $SD = 13.52$ ). Of the total number of participants, 46% were female, 18% were students, and all were living in the United States.

### **Equivalence tests**

Equivalence tests were applied to determine whether the participants' randomized assignment to the three experimental groups was successful. The results, as seen in Table 1, show that the three groups do not differ significantly regarding the level of PSRs and the five moral dimensions. Therefore, the randomized assignment of the participants to the experimental groups was successful.

### **Treatment test**

A treatment check assessed whether the participants confronted with the immoral scenario rated Klaus as more immoral than the readers of the ambiguous and moral scenarios did. Viewers' existing PSRs with Klaus before reading the scenario were introduced as a control variable to control only for the experimental effect. The treatment check indicated that the manipulation was successful, as seen in Table 2. Independent from viewers' PSRs before reading the scenarios, the differences regarding general morality and the five moral domains were significant between all three groups. After reading the scenario, participants in the moral group evaluated Klaus as the most moral, both in general and across all five moral domains. The

**Table 1.** Equivalence test for the three experimental groups in the key variables PSRs with Klaus and their moral expectations of Klaus before the experiment.

	Moral <sup>a</sup>			Ambiguous <sup>b</sup>			Immoral <sup>c</sup>			Equivalence Tests					
										Moral vs. Ambiguous		Moral vs. Immoral		Ambiguous vs. Immoral	
	M	SD		M	SD		M	SD		t	df	p	t	df	p
Pre-existing PSRs	3.27	.96		3.15	.94		3.30	.98		.68	338	.751	.19	340	.425
Moral Expectations															
in care	3.40	.91		3.28	.97		3.17	.96		.69	336	.753	1.78	339	.962
in fairness	3.58	.91		3.45	.90		3.43	.92		.82	338	.792	1.01	340	.844
in loyalty	3.57	.99		3.48	.93		3.50	.93		.39	336	.650	.19	338	.576
in authority	2.14	1.00		2.21	.97		2.02	.93		-.19	338	.574	.67	338	.748
in purity	2.30	.95		2.43	.92		2.35	.89		-.79	338	.786	-.00	338	.500

<sup>a</sup> $n = 172$ , <sup>b</sup> $n = 170$ , <sup>c</sup> $n = 170$ . Equivalence tests were run as two one-sided tests procedure (TOST) all with a lower bound =  $-.05$ , an upper bound =  $.05$ , and  $\alpha = .05$  based on Lakens et al. (2018) and with the R-package “TOSTER” (Caldwell, 2024).

**Table 2.** Analysis of the experimental manipulation.

	Moral <sup>a</sup>		Ambiguous <sup>b</sup>		Immoral <sup>c</sup>		<i>F</i> (2,486)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
General Morality	4.12	.87	2.98	.95	2.06	.94	211.94	<.001
Care	4.31	.88	3.81	.93	2.82	.85	121.17	<.001
Fairness	4.35	.80	3.36	.88	2.29	.90	234.85	<.001
Loyalty	4.49	.76	3.22	1.02	1.76	.94	364.17	<.001
Authority	3.93	.98	3.15	.94	2.03	.85	174.38	<.001
Purity	3.93	.71	3.50	.73	2.89	.81	79.07	<.001

Viewers' preexisting PSR with Klaus were entered as covariates to control only for the experimental effect. The differences between the three experimental conditions are significant for all analyses and were calculated with Tukey Post-Hoc tests with Bonferroni corrections. <sup>a</sup>*n* = 172, <sup>b</sup>*n* = 170, <sup>c</sup>*n* = 170.

readers of the immoral scenario rated him overall and in all five moral domains as the most immoral.

## Results

To answer H1, univariate analyses of variance with a Tukey post-hoc test were conducted. Concerning the research questions, viewers' moral foundations (RQ1) and expectations (RQ2) of Klaus were included in the relationship between moral behavior and PSRs. To do so, linear regressions were calculated with the R-packages lmer and lme4 (Bates 2015). In all models, viewers' PSRs were the dependent variable. Viewers' existing PSRs with Klaus before reading the scenario were introduced as a control variable. This allowed us to measure the effect of specific experimental conditions on viewers' PSRs. In each model, the viewers' (RQ1) foundations and (RQ2) expectancies in one domain, the experimental condition, and an interaction effect between both independent variables were introduced.

In the first step, the relationship between Klaus's moral behavior and viewers' PSRs was tested, while controlling for viewers' preexisting PSRs with Klaus before reading the scenario. The analysis,  $F(2,158) = 136.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , showed that participants reading the moral scenario developed the strongest PSRs with Klaus ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $n = 172$ ), followed by the readers of the ambiguous scenario ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ,  $n = 170$ ). The readers of the immoral scenario indicated the weakest PSRs with Klaus ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $n = 170$ ). A Tukey post-hoc test with Bonferroni correction showed that the differences between the three groups were significant; thus, the first hypothesis was confirmed.

In the next step, viewers' moral foundations were added to the model to explain the effect of (im)moral behavior on PSRs (RQ1). Regarding the effects of viewers' moral foundations on care and fairness, the analyses showed the same pattern (Table 3, visualizations on OSF). Regarding viewers' moral foundations related to care and fairness, there was no effect of

**Table 3.** Influence of viewers’ moral foundations on the relationship between the morality of the character’s behavior and viewers’ parasocial relationships.

	E	SE	t	p
<b>Care</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	−.31	.54	−.57	.566
Moral Behavior	−.13	.56	−.24	.813
Ambiguous Behavior * Care Viewer	.25	.13	1.86	.064
Moral Behavior * Care Viewer	.37	.14	2.65	.008
<b>Fairness</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.62	.54	1.15	.252
Moral Behavior	.21	.55	.39	.701
Ambiguous Behavior * Fairness Viewer	.02	.14	.13	.900
Moral Behavior * Fairness Viewer	.29	.14	2.10	.036
<b>Loyalty</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.70	.29	2.44	.015
Moral Behavior	1.69	.29	5.72	<.001
Ambiguous Behavior * Loyalty Viewer	−.00	.10	−.05	.962
Moral Behavior * Loyalty Viewer	−.13	.10	−1.27	.204
<b>Authority</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.74	.28	2.60	.010
Moral Behavior	1.76	.30	5.92	<.001
Ambiguous Behavior * Authority Viewer	−.02	.09	−.18	.859
Moral Behavior * Authority Viewer	−.14	.10	−1.48	.139
<b>Purity</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.59	.25	2.38	.018
Moral Behavior	1.69	.24	6.93	<.001
Ambiguous Behavior * Purity Viewer	.03	.09	.39	.698
Moral Behavior * Purity Viewer	−.13	.08	−1.52	.130

In all models, viewers’ preexisting PSR with Klaus were entered as covariates to control only for the experimental effect. As the independent variable is categorical with three groups (immoral, ambiguous, moral), the moral and ambiguous behavior scenarios were always compared to the immoral one. Care:  $F(6, 505) = 100.7, p < .001, R^2 = .54$ . Fairness:  $F(6, 505) = 100.7, p < .001, R^2 = .54$ . Loyalty:  $F(6, 505) = 101.1, p < .001, R^2 = .54$ . Authority:  $F(6, 505) = 99.15, p < .001, R^2 = .54$ . Purity:  $F(6, 505) = 99.47, p < .001, R^2 = .54$ .

Klaus’s im(moral) behavior on PSRs. For viewers who strongly valued care and fairness, Klaus’s moral behavior led to even stronger PSRs with him. For viewers who strongly valued care and fairness, Klaus’s immoral behavior did not influence the intensity of their PSRs.

Another pattern was found in relation to the three moral domains of loyalty, authority, and purity. The morality of Klaus’s behavior influenced viewers’ PSRs, regardless of their moral sensitivities regarding loyalty, authority, and purity. When Klaus behaved morally, it strengthened the viewers’ PSRs, regardless of the viewers’ foundations related to loyalty, authority, and purity. Thus, the morality of Klaus’s behavior did not generally influence the strength of viewers’ PSRs with him. Viewers’ PSR intensity depended on viewers’ moral foundations and differed between the three experimental scenarios with Klaus acting immoral, moral, or ambiguous.

To answer the second part of the research question (RQ2), viewers’ moral expectations of Klaus were assessed in order to understand the relationship between the morality of Klaus’s behavior and the viewers’



PSRs with him. The regression analysis showed that viewers' moral expectations influenced the relationship between Klaus's behaviors and the strength of viewers' PSRs with him (Table 4). Two different patterns were observed for the five moral domains. First, for care, fairness, and loyalty, the same effect was found. High moral expectations of how Klaus would behave in terms of care, fairness, and loyalty strengthened the positive effect of moral behavior on viewers' PSRs. Viewers who expected Klaus to act with care, fairness, and loyalty had stronger PSRs with Klaus after reading the ambiguous and moral scenario compared to those who read the immoral behavior scenario. In the immoral behavior scenario, Klaus acted immorally in care, fairness, and loyalty, which resulted in weaker PSRs. Second, another pattern was found for viewers' moral expectations of authority and purity. When viewers had moral expectations about Klaus's behavior regarding authority and purity, this did not influence the effect of his (im)moral behavior on their PSRs with him. The direct effects of behavior—moral or immoral—on PSRs remained, meaning that regarding authority

**Table 4.** Influence of viewers' moral expectations toward Klaus and their influence on the relationship between the morality of his behavior and viewers' parasocial relationships.

	E	SE	t	p
<b>Care</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	-.16	.30	-.54	.587
Moral Behavior	.35	.30	1.19	.238
Ambiguous Behavior * Expectations	.25	.09	2.89	.004
Moral Behavior * Expectations	.29	.09	3.35	<.001
<b>Fairness</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	-.22	.33	-.67	.506
Moral Behavior	.06	.32	.19	.846
Ambiguous Behavior * Expectations	.25	.09	.281	.005
Moral Behavior * Expectations	.36	.09	4.03	<.001
<b>Loyalty</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.08	.31	.26	.794
Moral Behavior	.46	.31	1.48	.140
Ambiguous Behavior * Expectations	.17	.09	1.99	.047
Moral Behavior * Expectations	.25	.08	2.90	.004
<b>Authority</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.58	.20	2.87	.004
Moral Behavior	1.42	.20	7.25	.004
Ambiguous Behavior * Expectations	.05	.08	.61	.543
Moral Behavior * Expectations	-.04	.09	-.51	.612
<b>Purity</b>				
Ambiguous Behavior	.71	.23	3.15	.002
Moral Behavior	1.69	.22	7.50	<.001
Ambiguous Behavior * Expectations	-.00	.06	-.05	.963
Moral Behavior * Expectations	-.15	.09	-1.64	.102

In all models, viewers' preexisting PSR with Klaus were entered as covariates to control only for the experimental effect. As the independent variable is categorical with three groups (immoral, ambiguous, moral), the moral and ambiguous behavior scenarios were always compared to the immoral one. Model evaluations: Care:  $F(6, 505) = 104.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .55$ . Fairness:  $F(6, 505) = 107.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .55$ . Loyalty:  $F(6, 505) = 104.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .55$ . Authority:  $F(6, 505) = 98.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .53$ . Purity:  $F(6, 505) = 99.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .54$ .

and purity, immoral behavior weakened viewers' PSRs intensity with Klaus, regardless of viewers' moral expectations of him.

## Discussion

This study analyzed the relationship between the moral behavior of a media character and viewers' PSRs by combining different theories from media and psychology. ADT was used to explain the connection between viewers' affective dispositions toward media characters and the morality of a character's behavior (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). To expand existing knowledge about morality and affinity for a character, viewers' longer-term and friend-like connections with a media character in the form of PSRs were analyzed (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). Accordingly, morality was analyzed regarding the five moral foundations of care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and purity (Haidt & Joseph, 2008). Over time, viewers may develop expectations of a media character based on the character's previous behaviors. Thus, viewers' moral expectations were assessed based on the concept in social relationships described in EVT (Burgoon, 2015). To combine these theoretical perspectives, an online experiment was conducted with viewers of the popular TV show *The Umbrella Academy* and with Klaus. In this science-fiction and adventure show, Klaus is one of the seven Hargreeves siblings, who are the protagonists of the show and try to prevent the world from an apocalypse by using their supernatural powers. Thereby, questions of morality and the Hargreeves' (im)moral behaviors are central to the show's plot. The popularity of the show and the prevalence of the topic of morality underline the relevance of understanding media users' processing of these media characters, as PSRs are influential on viewers' attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The results showed that the media characters' moral behavior led to stronger PSRs for audience members. His immoral behavior led to the weakest PSRs, and ambiguous behavior to PSR intensity between the other two groups. This result for H1 confirms earlier findings that underscore the importance of moral behavior for different character tropes, such as villains and heroes, and morally ambiguous media characters (Bonus et al., 2021; Grizzard, Huang, et al., 2020). This positive relationship between moral behavior and viewers' positive PSRs also aligns with ADT (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). According to ADT, characters' moral behavior increases viewers' affective dispositions toward them. This general affinity for a media character might result in PSRs over time, which is attributable to the positive influence of moral behavior on PSRs. In future studies, it would be important to expand on these findings by analyzing the outcomes of these PSRs in the context of morality, for example, on viewers' future attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors in real-life. Do viewers get

habituated to immoral behaviors through PSRs with immoral media characters, and how does this desensitization influence their acceptance of immoral behaviors in real-life or their own behaviors? In this context, viewers' moral disengagement—the process by which people accept behaviors they would normally judge to be immoral (Raney, 2004)—should additionally be considered. For example, by comparing viewers' moral disengagement for fictional behaviors of media characters they have PSRs with versus their moral disengagement for real-life behaviors.

Viewers' moral foundations were assessed to further explore the relationship between the morality of characters' behaviors and viewers' PSRs with them (RQ1). Interestingly, different patterns emerged for the five moral domains. The morality of Klaus' behavior strengthened the viewers' PSRs with him, regardless of their moral foundations in loyalty, authority, and purity. However, for viewers' moral foundation in care and fairness, the general influence of Klaus's moral behavior on their PSRs disappeared. Only for viewers who strongly valued care and fairness did Klaus' positive behavior strengthen their PSRs with him, which suggests that the morality of a media character's behavior does not generally influence the strength of viewers' PSRs with them. Rather, this degree of influence depends on viewers' moral foundations and can differ for immoral, moral, and ambiguous behavior in each moral domain. This underlines the importance of considering morality as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, as done in MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2008) and also in the mediated setting (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). However, these results could also be highly specific for Klaus. For example, authority and purity are not moral domains associated with his overall morality on the show. Thus, it could explain the differences between these moral domains and care and fairness for the particular situation of the character Klaus in *The Umbrella Academy*. Future studies should, thus, further explore the role of moral foundations in the relationship between moral behavior and viewers' PSRs to see if these patterns are stable among other characters, or if they are specific to Klaus or the specific show, the specific genre or content.

In this study, viewers' moral expectations of the media character were assessed to analyze their influence on the relationship between a character's behavior and viewers' PSRs (RQ2). Differences emerged between viewers' expectations across the five moral domains. For viewers with high moral expectations of care, fairness, and loyalty, the morality of a character's behavior increased viewers' PSRs, which aligns with the findings about expectancy violations in the realm of EVT research. However, regardless of viewers' moral expectations of the media character in relation to authority and purity, moral behavior increased viewers' PSRs. This result suggests that viewers' expectations in authority and purity do not influence the relationship between moral behavior and viewers' PSRs in either way, not

by increasing nor by decreasing viewers' PSRs. This finding for this particular case in the mediated setting, in turn, contradicts the assumptions for expectancy violations in social interactions and relationships (Burgoon, 2015).

Overall, the results underline the importance of differentiating between the five moral domains and of not analyzing morality as a unidimensional construct, as has already been proven for the mediated setting in other studies (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020; Tamborini, 2012). For example, Eden et al. (2015) showed that heroes and villains differ according to the moral domains they uphold or violate. While viewers perceived heroes as violating authority and purity, villains were perceived to violate all moral domains, especially purity. This aligns with this study's results. In this study, for viewers' moral foundations and moral expectations, authority and purity had the same effect on the relationship between morality and viewers' PSRs. The other three moral domains—care, fairness, and loyalty—seem to have different effects on the relationship between morality and viewers' PSRs. However, it could be that violations of purity and authority are only less relevant due to the mediated setting of both studies or due to viewers' activation of story schemas. It is possible that the relationship between morality domains and PSRs are additionally influenced by story schemas that viewers activate when consuming media content, and which are based on previous experiences with similar media content (Raney, 2004). Thus, future research would be needed to further explore the role of these five moral domains in viewers' relationships with different media characters, in different settings, and with different kinds of morality violations.

Besides integrating the findings of the experimental study into the existing literature, the results also lead to further implications. The study only focused on short-term consequences and cannot answer questions about possible long-term effects of these processes resulting from media exposure. Additionally, the study only analyzed the relationships between morality, PSR, and moral expectations for one particular media character in one specific TV show, so the following assumptions should not be generalized based only on this study's findings. However, through the increased prevalence of media characters acting immorally or morally ambiguous, and their popularity among viewers, it is important to understand viewers' PSRs with such characters, as their PSRs potentially influence their attitudes or future behaviors. One implication of the findings is, for example, that audience members with moral foundations that align with the media character can strengthen their PSRs and, through that, possibly their attitudes and future behaviors (Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The audience's attention could be increased through media characters acting out of the norm and violating viewers' expectations of their behaviors. Violations of viewers' expectations and immoral behaviors can result in cognitive

dissonance in audience members who try to dissolve this dissonance by ending their PSRs or, for example, by distancing themselves from their moral standards through moral disengagement (Raney, 2004). For media producers, the findings implicate that they can increase audience members' emotional connections and entertainment (following ADT) through stories and characters with core solid moral values (following MFT) or characters who consistently act so that they do not violate possible expectations that could result in decreased PSRs with them.

At the same time, characters' violating certain expectations could also benefit the audience's perception of suspense and entertainment. By creating likable, relatable, and meaningful media characters, media producers can increase viewers' PSRs with these media characters, which, in turn, can make the audiences more susceptible to persuasive strategies. This becomes significant, for example, in the context of ambiguous or immoral media characters, which could promote anti-social behaviors when audiences meaningfully connect with them through PSRs. However, it seems that especially the moral domains of care and fairness are important to increase viewers' PSRs with these characters. Media producers could use this finding and create media characters consistently acting with care and fairness. To create suspense and complex characters, the media characters can still violate possible viewer expectations in purity or authority, as they were shown to be less relevant in the context of mediated PSRs with a fictional media character from a science-fiction series. When building on that, media characters acting immoral in purity or authority, or inconsistently acting (im)moral in these moral domains could create engagement or entertainment without the negative effects on viewers' involvement with them.

This study has some limitations that necessitate discussion. First, the relationship between the morality of a character's behavior and viewers' PSRs was analyzed using only one specific character. As the experimental study was run in the context of another research project, a protagonist from *The Umbrella Academy* was chosen. Only viewers of this specific show were included in the study. Thus, the sample was limited and biased due to the self-selection of the participants who decided to watch the show. Additionally, the results are not generalizable. It is possible that in another context, other patterns would emerge for the five moral domains. The model of intuitive morality and exemplars (Tamborini, 2012) suggests that audience members might have different intuition saliences, meaning that their salience for each moral domain differs. This salience can depend, for example, on media content (Tamborini, 2012). It could be that the show's content influenced which moral domains were salient for the viewers and, subsequently, which moral violations they punished more strongly than others. As *The Umbrella Academy* focuses on the Hargreeves siblings as one big family, it seems plausible that moral domains like care and

loyalty are prevalent. The show's protagonists all have supernatural powers to fight the world's apocalypse. In this fight against others, it is possible that immoral behavior concerning authority is accepted, as it also was shown for movie heroes in another study (Eden et al., 2015). The prevalence of fight scenes might activate saliences for purity; however, with their supernatural powers, viewers might probably be less strict regarding morally pure behavior. Further studies are needed to determine whether the same results for the influence of the five moral domains on PSRs emerge in another setting for viewers with other intuition saliences.

Second, only the overall effects of immoral, ambiguous, and moral behavior in the five moral domains were analyzed. In each of the three scenarios, the media character either followed, violated, or behaved ambiguously in relation to each of the five moral domains. Thus, a more complex design is needed to measure the five moral domains and the characters' behavior in each domain. To do so, an experimental design that assesses all possible combinations of moral, ambiguous, or immoral behavior for each of the five domains separately is necessary. For example, in one scenario, the character might act morally in terms of care, fairness, and purity but act immorally in authority and ambiguously in loyalty. This would also better approximate real and more complex media characters who rarely act in entirely moral or immoral ways (Eden et al., 2011; Greenwood et al., 2021).

Third, this study integrated viewers' expectations of a media character according to EVT (Burgoon, 2015) without a direct measurement of viewers' perception of expectations being violated. In the experimental setting, the morality of the characters' behavior was manipulated, and the effect of this moral behavior on PSRs was assessed. It would be interesting to see whether viewers who have expectations of the media character also indicate perceiving a moral violation and how strongly this would affect viewers' subsequent PSRs. In another study, all participants were confronted with the same movie but indicated different expectations and perceptions of the violations committed by the media characters. Some participants indicated that the character behaved more morally than expected, while others evaluated the same character as having behaved more immorally than expected (Bonus et al., 2021). Thus, an additional consideration of viewers' perceptions of the degree to which their expectations were confirmed or violated would be fruitful in future studies. Aligning with that, the concept of moral disengagement could be included (Raney, 2004). Moral disengagement could be useful to explain the relationship between moral expectations and the perception of a character's behavior. Thus, combining viewers' moral expectations, their perception of their expectations being confirmed or violated, and their level of moral disengagement could be an interesting endeavor for future studies.

Fourth, all three groups were confronted with an experimental manipulation (immoral, ambiguous, or moral behavior), and they were not

compared to a possible control group. As the participants were presented with questions before reading the experimentally manipulated scenario, it is possible that these questions about their moral expectations toward Klaus activated their sensitivity to the topic of morality, and influenced the way they subsequently consumed the scenario. However, as all participants were confronted with the same questions, no differences between the experimental groups in these factors emerged, so that this should not have influenced the differences found for the different (im)moral behaviors on viewer PSRs.

Taken together, the study expands the existing literature in several ways. First, the relationship between the morality of character behaviors and viewers' PSRs was analyzed. As the media content analyzed was a TV show consisting of three ten-episode seasons, viewers had time to develop PSRs with the characters between viewing sessions (Dibble et al., 2016). By expanding viewers' connections to a media character from mere character affinity during a single media exposure to longer-term, friendship-like PSRs, this study contributes to the literature. Second, exploratorily, viewers' moral foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2008) and expectations (Burgoon & Jones, 1976) toward the media character in each of the five moral domains were included to further analyze the relationship between the morality of character behavior and viewers' PSRs with them. Thereby, MFT (Haidt & Joseph, 2008) and expectancy violations based on EVT (Burgoon & Jones, 1976), two psychological concepts were combined with media theories that pertain to affective dispositions (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977) and PSRs (Klimmt et al., 2006; Tukachinsky et al., 2020). The results of the experimental study underscore the importance of considering morality as a multidimensional construct in a mediated setting (Eden et al., 2015; Grizzard, Fitzgerald, et al., 2020). Further research is needed to analyze whether moral violations by media characters in the domains of purity and authority and viewers' moral foundations in purity, authority, and loyalty have a less significant impact on viewers' PSRs.

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## Open scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data, Open Materials and Preregistered. The data and materials are openly accessible at <https://osf.io/u5h9p/> and <https://osf.io/nm4wr>.



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