

# Psychology of Popular Media

## **Rating Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains: Machiavellianism, Grandiose Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Sadism Predict Admiration for and Perceived Similarity to Morally Questionable Characters**

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## BRIEF REPORT

## Rating Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains: Machiavellianism, Grandiose Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Sadism Predict Admiration for and Perceived Similarity to Morally Questionable Characters

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Heroes, antiheroes, and villains in fictional narratives differ in the quality of their moral character. The current study examined whether Machiavellianism, grandiose narcissism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism predict ratings of admirability of and similarity to these three archetypal characters in the same study, expanding on literature that has typically examined personality predictors for ratings of only a single character type. Participants ( $N = 473$ ) rated the admirability of and their similarity to 25 fictional heroes, antiheroes, and villains from popular media and also to first-person paragraph descriptions of hero, antihero, and villain archetypes. All four personality traits were positively associated with perceived admirability of and similarity to antiheroes and villains but to different degrees, with psychopathy and sadism showing the strongest results. The ratings for heroes were less consistent, with a positive correlation of narcissism with similarity to fictional heroes but negative or nonsignificant correlations for all other associations. The results suggest that antagonistic personality traits correspond to audience perceptions of morally problematic characters.

**Public Policy Relevance Statement**

Antagonistic personality traits have previously been associated with enjoyment of morally questionable fictional characters, but the reasons underlying this association remain unclear. This study used both familiar fictional characters from popular media and descriptions of character archetypes to demonstrate that admirability of and perceived similarity to antiheroes and villains could be due in part to opinions of views, values, and motivations of these types of characters.

**Keywords:** dark triad, Machiavellianism, grandiose narcissism, psychopathy, antiheroes

**Supplemental materials:** <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000571.supp>

Admirable characters are a staple of fictional media. Audiences are drawn to archetypal heroes: characters who are praiseworthy overall and whom people might wish to emulate (Cohen et al., 2015). More broadly, people enjoy characters who remind them of themselves (Kuzmičová & Bálint, 2019), and this can extend to archetypal

antiheroes, whose behavior and values exhibit more ambiguous morality. People generally dislike morally reprehensible archetypal villains, but they still tend to prefer villains whose characteristics resemble their own (Krause & Rucker, 2020).

In the present study, we build on work establishing preferences for characters based on perceived similarity of personality characteristics (Brown, 2015), which adds another dimension to morality-based theories of fictional involvement like affective disposition theory (Zillman & Cantor, 1977). We hypothesized that higher levels of antagonistic personality traits predict greater perceived similarity to and admirability of antiheroes. Jonason et al. (2012) suggest that antihero characters are fictional representations of those high in the dark triad: a personality constellation of Machiavellianism, grandiose narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). In place of “dark,” we call these antagonistic personality traits (for rationale see Kay & Arrow, 2022). Machiavellianism is characterized by manipulateness and cynicism (Christie & Geis, 1970), grandiose narcissism by self-centrism and self-aggrandizement (Miller et al., 2017; Raskin & Hall, 1979), and psychopathy by impulsivity and a lack of remorse (Hare, 1996). Everyday sadism—the enjoyment of everyday acts of cruelty

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The study data and materials can be found at [https://osf.io/wdx84/?view\\_only=c4c9e6ed4f604b17b70b1acd20b1aeff](https://osf.io/wdx84/?view_only=c4c9e6ed4f604b17b70b1acd20b1aeff).

Elliott K. Doyle served as lead for writing—original draft. Cameron S. Kay served as lead for data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and visualization. Holly Arrow served as lead for resources and supervision. Elliott K. Doyle, Cameron S. Kay, and Holly Arrow contributed equally to writing—review and editing. Cameron S. Kay and Holly Arrow contributed equally to project administration and conceptualization.

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(Buckels et al., 2013)—was recently added to this constellation as a fourth antagonistic trait (Chabrol et al., 2009).

Three past studies have found associations between antagonistic traits and appreciation of nonhero characters. Greenwood et al. (2021) found that Machiavellianism and psychopathy were positively associated with parasocial engagement (imagined intimacy and friendship) and wishful identification with one's favorite (or, at least, a familiar) antihero. They also found that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were positively associated with similarity to that antihero. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2021), likewise, found that higher Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were positively associated with positive engagement and identification with villains. Finally, Black et al. (2019) found that Machiavellianism was associated with liking for villainous characters (the other Antagonistic Triad traits were not measured). No prior research on the relationship between antagonistic traits and character archetypes has, to our knowledge, addressed perceptions of heroes, included all three character morality archetypes while distinguishing clearly between them, or included everyday sadism. Our study does.

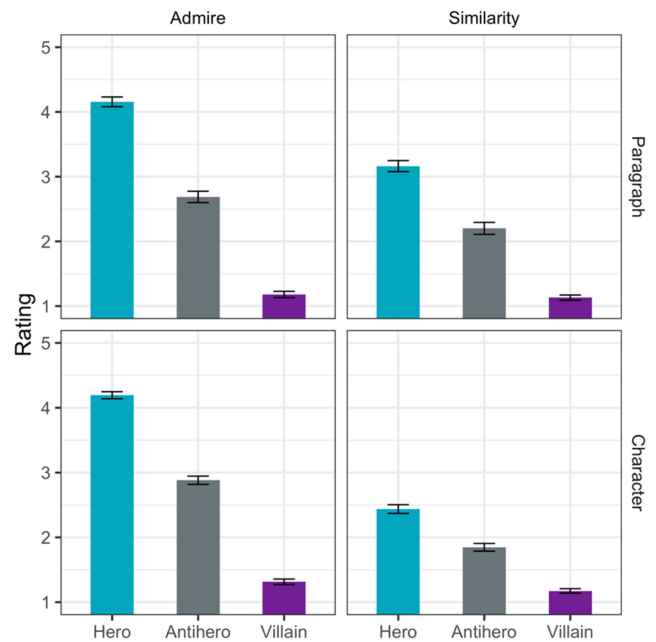
Further, our study offers methodical contributions to the measurement of participant affinity for the archetypes of interest, to which the three studies mentioned take two different approaches. Greenwood et al. (2021) used a single self-selected antihero character, which guaranteed that participants were well acquainted with the specific target they were rating. The downside with this approach is that participants chose different targets, and perceptions of the chosen targets were highly variable, as "one person's hero is another person's villain and vice versa" (p. 171). Instead, we developed a preselected list of antiheroes, heroes, and villains to be rated and averaged across ratings of characters within each category. Conversely, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2021) and Black et al. (2019) used decontextualized items to assess liking of villainous and "dark" characters, respectively. The downside to this approach is that it loses some of the ecological validity provided by assessing archetypal qualities presented in the form of whole characters. We instead had participants separately rate stripped-down archetypal descriptions that presented character personalities and values outside of any specific narrative context. In using both an array of existing popular culture characters and archetype description paragraphs, we were able to examine whether the associations of the antagonistic personality traits with the ratings of the archetypes differed between the two methods.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

A total of 499 undergraduate students from a large North American university in the Pacific Northwest were recruited. After excluding participants who straightlined large portions of the survey ( $n = 7$ ), showed low response variability ( $n = 3$ ), and/or sped through the survey ( $n = 16$ ), the sample comprised 473 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.78$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.34$ ). A sample of this size would be able to detect a slight-to-moderate correlation ( $r = .15$ ; Funder & Ozer, 2019; Gignac & Szodorai, 2016) 90.66% of the time that such an effect existed. Participants were mostly female (70.40%), with 27.91% male and 0.85% genderfluid. Participants were mostly White (62.37%), with a smaller number being mixed race (12.90%), Hispanic/Latinx (9.09%), and Asian (8.25%).

**Figure 1**  
Mean Admirability of and Perceived Similarity to Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

### Fictional Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains

Participants were shown the photos, names, and brief descriptions of 11 fictional heroes (e.g., Mulan from Disney's *Mulan*), seven fictional antiheroes (e.g., Harley Quinn from *DC Comics*), and seven fictional villains (e.g., Dolores Umbridge from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*; see the Appendix for a complete list of characters and for the character selection procedure). Participants rated their familiarity with each character on a 5-point scale. Responses for any character with whom the participants reported having less than moderate familiarity were dropped.

### Hero, Antihero, and Villain Paragraphs

After responding to the personality measures (see the Measures section), the participants responded to 140-word paragraphs written from the perspective of an archetypal hero, antihero, and villain (see the Appendix)<sup>1</sup> that avoided visual, narrative, and other signifiers that might influence participant perceptions.

## Measures

### Antagonistic Personality Traits

The participants completed the Mach-IV (Christie & Geis, 1970), a 20-item measure of Machiavellian tactics, views, and morality

<sup>1</sup> Paragraphs were written based on definitions of heroes, antiheroes, and villains used in the literature review of this article. A reading-level analysis was conducted to ensure they all were comparably likely to be understood by a reader who has at least a seventh-grade education (Flesch readability scores = 70–80).

**Table 1**  
Zero-Order Correlations of Antagonistic Traits With Admirability of and Similarity to Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains

Trait	Paragraph description of character						Rating of fictional characters					
	Admirability			Similarity			Admirability			Similarity		
	Hero	Antihero	Villain	Hero	Antihero	Villain	Hero	Antihero	Villain	Hero	Antihero	Villain
Machiavellianism	-.09 <sub>a12</sub>	.27** <sub>b12</sub>	.21** <sub>b12</sub>	-.18** <sub>a1</sub>	<b>.37**</b> <sub>b12</sub>	.26** <sub>c1</sub>	-.16** <sub>a12</sub>	.16** <sub>b1</sub>	.22** <sub>b1</sub>	-.21** <sub>a1</sub>	.26** <sub>b1†</sub>	<b>.28**</b> <sub>b12</sub>
Narcissism	-.01 <sub>a1</sub>	.20** <sub>b1</sub>	.17** <sub>b1</sub>	.12* <sub>a2</sub>	<b>.30**</b> <sub>b1</sub>	.25** <sub>b1</sub>	-.06 <sub>a1</sub>	.14* <sub>b1</sub>	.14* <sub>b1</sub>	.08 <sub>a2</sub>	.23** <sub>b1</sub>	.18** <sub>ab1</sub>
Psychopathy	-.09 <sub>a12</sub>	<b>.31**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	.28** <sub>b23</sub>	-.09* <sub>a3</sub>	<b>.46**</b> <sub>b3</sub>	<b>.37**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	-.20** <sub>a2†</sub>	.22** <sub>b1</sub>	<b>.32**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	-.08 <sub>a3</sub>	<b>.41**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	<b>.37**</b> <sub>b3</sub>
Sadism	-.11* <sub>a2</sub>	.29** <sub>b2</sub>	.29** <sub>b3</sub>	-.12* <sub>a13</sub>	<b>.42**</b> <sub>b23</sub>	<b>.38**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	-.16** <sub>a2</sub>	.21** <sub>b1</sub>	<b>.31**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	-.10* <sub>a3</sub>	<b>.37**</b> <sub>b2</sub>	<b>.35**</b> <sub>b23</sub>

Note. Bold formatting indicates correlations of .30 or above. Different subscripted letters in a row indicate the correlations for the heroes, antiheroes, and villains within the response category were significantly different at  $p < .05$ . Different subscripted numbers in a column indicate the correlations for Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism were significantly different at  $p < .05$ . A subscripted dagger indicates the correlation for the fictional characters composite was significantly different than the corresponding correlation for the paragraph at  $p < .05$ .

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

( $\alpha = .73$ ); the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-13 (Gentile et al., 2013), a 13-item measure of narcissistic leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism, and entitlement/exploitativeness ( $\alpha = .79$ ); the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-Short Form (Paulhus et al., 2016), a 29-item measure of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial psychopathy ( $\alpha = .88$ ); and the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels & Paulhus, 2014), a 28-item measure of physical, verbal, and vicarious everyday sadism ( $\alpha = .88$ ). All personality measures were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Perceived Admirability and Similarity**

Participants were asked “How admirable is this person?” and “How similar are you to this person?” (both 5-point scales; 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *completely*) for each character paragraph and fictional character.<sup>2</sup>

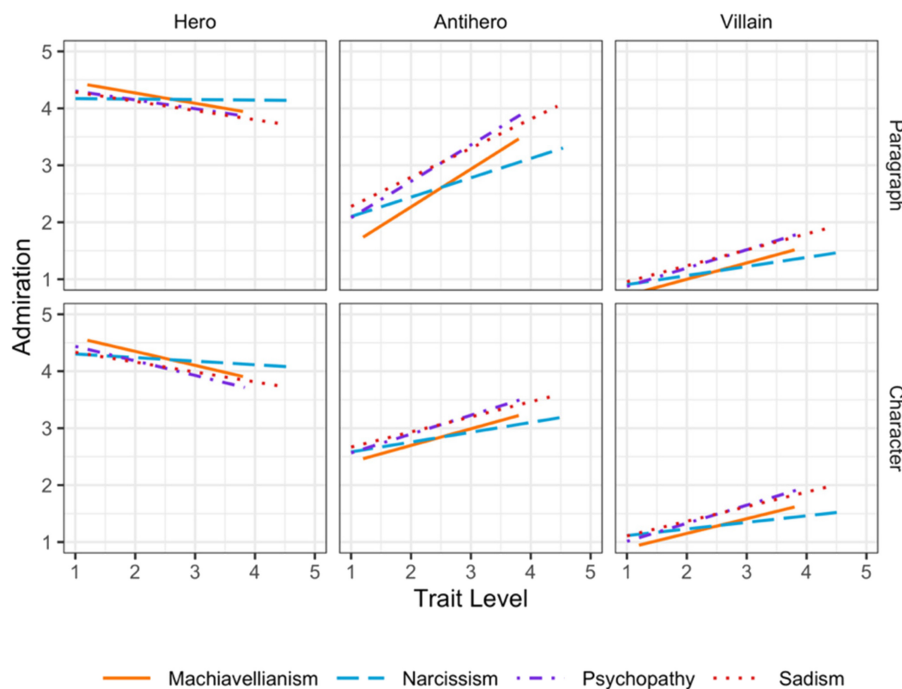
Composites for characters created by averaging the admirability ratings of the fictional heroes ( $\alpha = .85$ ), antiheroes ( $\alpha = .67$ ), and villains ( $\alpha = .74$ ) showed sufficient reliability, as did composites created by averaging the similarity ratings of the fictional heroes ( $\alpha = .91$ ), antiheroes ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and villains ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

**Results**

The admirability of heroes, antiheroes, and villains replicated standard distinctions, with heroes most admirable, villains least

<sup>2</sup> Single-item measures were used to maximize face validity and efficiency, given that participants were evaluating a relatively large number of characters.

**Figure 2**  
Associations for Admirability Ratings Across Antagonistic Traits and Stimuli



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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admirable, and antiheroes moderately admirable. Average perceived similarity showed the same differentiation, and the patterns replicated across the two types of stimuli (Figure 1). See the online supplemental materials for full descriptives and for analyses of variance comparing average admirability of and similarity to the archetypes for both fictional characters and the paragraph descriptions.

To examine the associations of the four antagonistic traits with admirability of and similarity to heroes, antiheroes, and villains, we calculated zero-order correlations (Table 1; see the full correlation table in the online supplemental materials). The results supported the hypothesized positive relationship of all four traits with admiration of ( $r = .14-.31$ ) and similarity to ( $r = .23-.46$ ) antiheroes. The relative strength of the associations was mostly comparable between the two stimuli.

For the villain stimuli, antagonistic traits were positively correlated with admirability ( $r = .14-.32$ ) and similarity ( $r = .18-.38$ ). The only significant difference in correlations for antiheroes and villains (see subscripted letters in Table 1) was a weaker association of Machiavellianism with similarity to the villain ( $r = .26$ ) than the antihero ( $r = .37$ ) paragraph. Again, the relative strength of the associations was comparable between the two stimuli.

For the hero stimuli, correlations of antagonistic traits were non-significant ( $r = -.09-.08$ ) or weakly negative ( $r = -.09-.21$ ) with a single significant weak positive relation between narcissism and similarity to the hero paragraph ( $r = .12$ ). Almost all were significantly different from the similarity and admirability ratings for antiheroes and villains. As with the antiheroes and villains, the associations across the stimuli type were generally comparable.

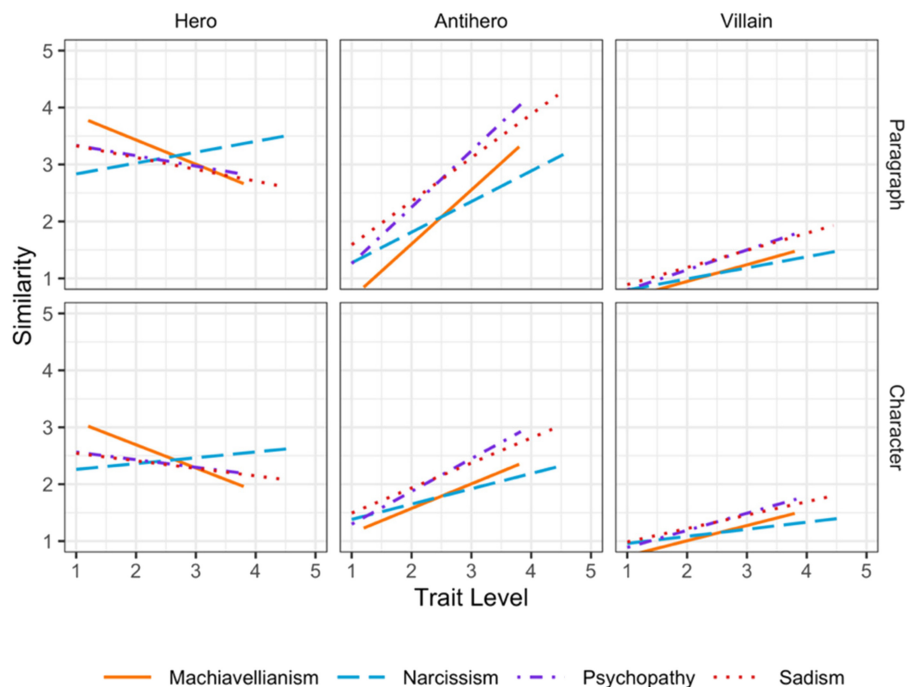
Comparing across the four antagonistic traits (see the subscripted numbers in Table 1), psychopathy and sadism consistently show the strongest positive correlations for similarity and admirability ratings of antiheroes and villains, with Machiavellianism and narcissism weaker. For heroes, Machiavellianism had the most negative similarity ratings (paragraph  $r = -.18$ , character  $r = -.21$ ) and narcissism the most positive (paragraph  $r = .12$ , character  $r = .08$ ). See Figure 2 for a depiction of the correlations for the admirability ratings and Figure 3 for a depiction of the correlations for the similarity ratings.

## Discussion

Overall, our results support the claim that the characteristics of antiheroes can be interpreted as representations of antagonistic personality traits (Jonason et al., 2012), although narcissism seems to have the weakest connection. Moreover, the greater perceived admirability of and similarity to antiheroes shown by participants higher in the antagonistic triad replicate the findings of Greenwood et al. (2021), who found that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were positively associated with similarity to a favorite (or, at least, a familiar) antihero character. The associations between the antagonistic traits and admiration for villains also replicate the findings of Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al. (2021) and Black et al. (2019), who linked these traits to liking and positivity toward villainous characters.

Our study differed from the studies cited by including three types of characters—heroes, antiheroes, and villains—rather than a single type. Greenwood et al.'s (2021) study, however, did ask the participants to rate their chosen antihero on a 0–100 scale from villain to hero (p. 169) and found that this measure was inversely related to wishful identification and parasocial interaction. The clear

**Figure 3**  
*Associations for Similarity Ratings Across Antagonistic Traits and Stimuli*



*Note.* See the online article for the color version of this figure.

differentiation of both perceived admirability and similarity among heroes, antiheroes, and villains in our study (Figure 1) aligns with this finding.

Our study also included two types of stimuli for the three character types, and the results were broadly similar for ratings based on archetypal paragraph descriptions and an array of familiar fictional characters. Although there were few significant differences for the individual stimulus type–trait associations tested, there was an overall pattern that paragraph descriptions seemed to generate higher correlations than the fictional character ratings for antiheroes. Why? Existing characters are embedded in plot, intercharacter relationships, and other factors that could influence opinions of them and make perception data noisier; the archetype descriptions may have allowed for a stronger signal about opinions of underlying views, values, and motivations. However, we again want to caution that the majority of the individual associations were not significant.

Do people higher in antagonistic traits find morally ambiguous characters such as antiheroes admirable in part because they perceive them to be similar to themselves? We did not test this directly. However, the ratings of the admirability of and similarity to the heroes, antiheroes, and villains were substantially correlated for the same type of stimuli (paragraph:  $r_s = .50-.68$ ; character:  $r_s = .30-.67$ ) and across the types of stimuli ( $r_s = .13-.29$ ; see the online supplemental materials for the full array of correlations).

### Limitations and Future Directions

Admirability and similarity are often but not always associated with identification with fictional characters. Because we did not measure identification, we cannot draw any conclusions about whether antagonistic personality traits are associated with the depth of self-character overlap involved in identification. Further research that gathers more detailed information about the array of traits in complex characters that elicit feelings of similarity/dissimilarity, admirability/disapproval, and identification may help us further understand the key elements of favored antiheroic or villainous characters that people consume recreationally.

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(Appendix follows)

## Appendix

### Stimuli

#### Hero Paragraph

In a world of selfishness and corruption, I try my best to stand up for what is right and to serve others. Like anyone else, I have temptations and faults, but I try to do whatever it takes to rise above my weaknesses and stay strong. Some see me as a hero. I think I'm just a person trying every day to make myself better. Courage is about facing your fears and finding an internal source of strength. If you don't have a strong moral code, how can you live a good life and help others? I treasure my friends, but I am willing to face danger alone. Nothing makes me prouder than having young people look up to me as a role model, flawed though I am. I am willing to face any challenge or danger to protect others.

#### Antihero Paragraph

Although I often act in a way that could be considered off-putting or objectionable, people like having me on their side because I help

them succeed. Some consider my methods immoral or, at best, morally ambiguous, but I usually have good intentions. I'm not going to let someone else's rules stop me from doing what is right. People may see me as selfish, but I am extremely loyal to my people, and I am fearless in protecting them from harm. I only hurt people who deserve it. Many consider me to be a loner, but that's just because I don't like to rely on others. I like to solve problems and make my own decisions. I am a complicated person, for sure, but the challenges of my past have made me who and what I am. I have no regrets.

#### Villain Paragraph

Some people consider me to be evil. I think I'm just misunderstood. I care about wealth and status and I get what I want. If you have something to offer, we might be compatible. If you want to take revenge on someone or perhaps solve a problem that involves hurting people, I can

**Table A1**  
*Hero, Antihero, and Villain Stimuli*

Fictional characters	Percent antihero endorsement	Villain–hero rating mean
<b>Heroes</b>		
Wonder Woman (DC Comics)	0.00	93.41
Leia Organa Solo ( <i>Star Wars</i> )	0.00	92.20
Hercules (Disney's <i>Hercules</i> )	0.00	92.13
Superman (DC Comics)	0.00	92.06
Yoda ( <i>Star Wars</i> )	0.00	91.40
Hermione Granger (J. K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> )	0.00	91.37
Mulan (Disney's <i>Mulan</i> )	10.00	91.75
Harry Potter (J. K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> )	10.00	91.37
Captain America (Marvel Comics)	11.11	91.94
Black Panther (Marvel Comics)	12.50	92.20
Luke Skywalker ( <i>Star Wars</i> )	13.33	90.31
<b>Antiheroes</b>		
Dexter Morgan ( <i>Dexter</i> )	100.00	55.00
Robin Hood (English folklore)	94.12	73.00
Jack Sparrow ( <i>Pirates of the Caribbean</i> )	93.33	65.93
Deadpool (Marvel Comics)	93.33	69.53
Severus Snape (J.K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> )	88.89	62.94
Walter White ( <i>Breaking Bad</i> )	82.35	44.76
Harley Quinn (DC Comics)	80.00	36.40
<b>Villains</b>		
Hades (Disney's <i>Hercules</i> )	0.00	9.57
Lord Voldemort (J. K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> )	5.56	5.06
Dolores Umbridge (J. K. Rowling's <i>Harry Potter</i> )	5.56	9.17
Cruella de Vil (Disney's <i>One Hundred and One Dalmatians</i> )	6.25	8.63
Joker (DC Comics)	17.65	13.65
The Wicked Witch of the West from L. Frank Baum's <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> )	18.75	15.38
Hannibal Lecter ( <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> )	20.00	14.90

*Note.* These 25 characters were selected from a list of 53 fictional characters administered to a pilot sample ( $N = 152$ ). Over 50% of the pilot participants had at least a passing familiarity with each of the characters used as stimuli in the present study. Initially, 32 characters were selected; independent undergraduate coders ( $\text{Range}_{N\text{-per-character}} = 5\text{--}20$ ,  $M_{N\text{-per-character}} = 15.72$ ,  $SD_{N\text{-per-character}} = 3.28$ ) categorized whether these 32 characters were antiheroes or not according to the definition “a morally complex protagonist whose actions range on a continuum from good to bad, in contrast with clearly moral heroes and clearly immoral villains” (Janicke & Raney, 2018, as cited in Greenwood et al., 2021), and rated them on a 0–100 villain-to-hero scale. Characters were included as antiheroes if at least 80% of coders classified them as antiheroes ( $36.40 \leq M_{\text{villain--hero}} \leq 73.00$ ), heroes if 20% or fewer coders classified them as antiheroes ( $M_{\text{villain--hero}} \geq 90.13$ ), and villains if 20% or fewer coders classified them as antiheroes ( $M_{\text{villain--hero}} \leq 15.38$ ). Of the initial 32 characters, seven were omitted because of ambiguous categorization.

(Appendix continues)

help you out. Hurting people is something that I really enjoy. I don't let laws or rules or morality get in my way, unlike some hypocrites who are just like me but pretend otherwise. Some people consider me emotionally or physically abusive. Whatever. I admire strength, not weakness. Weakness is pathetic. Yes, I have a criminal history. But unlike some losers, I know how to get away with my so-called "crimes"

and stop my enemies in their tracks. You won't find me rotting in a jail cell.

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