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Almost Villains? A Mixed-Method Examination of White Audiences' Racial and Moral Categorization of Media Characters

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ABSTRACT

Morally ambiguous characters (MACs) have been found to appeal to audiences despite their conflicting motivations and behaviors. However, the race of a MAC may shift audiences' categorization process and subsequent responses to these characters. This mixed-method study examines how White audiences (n = 361) react to characters of different moral saliences and racial backgrounds. Quantitative and qualitative results revealed that White audiences held some favoritism toward Asian and Black characters, yet were more rigid with White characters. These unexpected results contextualize how advantaged groups may utilize unique strategies to maintain group status and deal with a deviant ingroup member.

As entertainment media evolves, the role of protagonist, or the central character the audience follows, is no longer limited to heroes. Morally ambiguous characters (MACs), who possess both positive and negative attributes or may commit heinous crimes for sympathetic reasons (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015), may appeal to audiences despite their seemingly negative attributes (Shafer & Raney, 2012). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), audiences may categorize characters into ingroup and outgroup members and then utilize external cues, such as media content, to maintain a positive group identity (Turner et al., 1979). Combined with identification, or audiences assuming the character's worldview via media narratives (Cohen, 2001), SIT may explain why audiences are resonating with characters with complex and sometimes contradictory motivations.

Several studies have examined the perception of MACs, but an area of neglect is how the race of a character may alter audiences' categorization and identification processes. Many of the prior studies often examined White characters and White audiences (e.g., Cohen et al., 2018; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011), ignoring how race may override the aforementioned processes. This is especially pertinent as racial minorities are often depicted infrequently and negatively (Dixon, 2019), which may subsequently increase White audiences' negative perceptions and behaviors toward racial minority groups (Mastro, 2015; Ramasubramanian, 2011) and result in avoidance of racially diverse media content (Erigha, 2019, 2021). Thus, this study seeks to expand on previous work by exploring how racial categorization may shift audiences' connections to MACs by adding

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the race of the characters as a manipulation. Moreover, the context of this study provides the opportunity to discern if an advantaged group, under threatening circumstances (i.e., exposure to a deviant ingroup member), may utilize certain strategies to maintain a positive group and self-concept, as SIT originally outlined strategies for devalued groups to navigate threat, but did not distinguish between disadvantaged groups and groups who may be situationally disadvantaged but still hold significant power (Brown, 2000).

Using a mixed-method design, we examine the intersections of moral salience (i.e., morally ambiguous vs morally bad) and race (i.e., White vs Black vs Asian) and their subsequent effects on White audiences' identification, perceived morality, and moral disengagement for media characters. This study extends theory by revealing some of the ways that race and moral salience interact for audiences' perceptions of a character's morality and actions, and how advantaged groups may favor outgroup members and ostracize deviant ingroup members as a means for protecting their group identity.

The Narratives of Morally Ambiguous Characters

Morally ambiguous characters (MACs) are those who have redeeming qualities despite their immoral actions, distinguishing them from their heroic and villainous counterparts (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015). For example, these may be characters who have good intentions despite their harmful actions, or those who are truly "gray" on the moral spectrum (i.e., neither truly good nor bad).

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), audiences may categorize others as ingroup and outgroup members based on shared characteristics and seek to maintain a positive perception of their ingroup as it is related to their own self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 2001, 2004; Turner et al., 1979). Liking a character who is morally gray is seemingly contrary to SIT, as it means associating oneself with negative characteristics; however, it may be the complex and ambiguous nature of the MACs that many viewers may (consciously or unconsciously) find appealing. Both morally good and morally ambiguous characters present traits audiences may see within themselves and that are realistic to how people behave, in contrast to morally bad characters (MBCs), who are typically seen as outsiders or deviants (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). This distinction allows audiences to identify with certain characters over others (Cohen et al., 2018; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) and perceive the morality of these selected characters favorably (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2019).

Indeed, MACs are well-received by audiences, as suggested by the similar rates at which audiences select media content that depicts MACs versus more traditional heroes (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2018). Even with the possibility of MACs committing immoral actions and conflicting with the audience's group image, audiences may morally disengage, or justify, these immoral actions (Bandura et al., 1996) to protect and maintain a positive group image and thus a positive self-concept (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Thus, according to SIT, audiences may identify with MACs as they represent complex characters who are still redeemable despite some negative actions, and thus have an overall net positive to one's perception of self.

H1: White participants will generally prefer morally ambiguous characters (MACs) over morally bad characters (MBCs).

Race and Moral Ambiguity

However, research regarding MACs has the same problem as entertainment media in general – a lack of diversity. According to the Hollywood Diversity Report, movies with diverse casts fare well at the box office (Ramón et al., 2025), yet there are persistent beliefs that White audiences are supposedly resistant to these films for reasons such as unfamiliarity, discrimination, and personal preference (Erigha, 2019, 2021). Some studies have attempted to uncover White audiences' preferences with mixed results (e.g., Joyce & Harwood, 2020). Given the popularity of MACs in entertainment media relative to other character types, examining White audiences' biases toward certain character types may allow for a better understanding of what exactly audiences seek, especially when prior works regarding moral ambiguity are limited with respect to race.

Indeed, previous works examining MACs have predominantly examined White audiences viewing White (or assumed to be White) characters, thereby neglecting the potential effect of race. For example, Sanders and Tsay's-Vogel (2016) usage of the major franchise *Harry Potter* not only evokes familiarity for the audiences who have consumed the movies or the books, but also limits the scope of the characters being examined, as all of the characters were White British men (although the villainous character is depicted as physically less human and more snake-like). Even when studies examine more explicit cultural differences, such as nationalities (e.g., Israeli vs Spanish in study 1 from Cohen et al., 2018), racial differences may elicit more distinctive social categorization, and thus, greater differences in outcomes. Traditionally, entertainment media have underrepresented and negatively represented minority groups whilst broadly and frequently representing White characters (Benshoff & Griffin, 2021; Dixon, 2019). As race is a major signifier of differences, such that membership in certain groups is likely to elicit positive or negative connotations for social comparisons to other racial groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), exposure to racial minority characters may elicit unfavorable responses informed by previous depictions, whereas White characters may be perceived without additional influences.

Of particular interest is whether or not this holds for all combinations of race and moral salience. Characters of color are not a monolith, and stereotype differences between racial minority groups may elicit a variety of responses amongst White audiences. For example, Black American men in entertainment media are typically depicted as immoral and more physically threatening, and Asian American men are typically depicted as "model minorities" (i.e., smart yet docile) or, less frequently, "yellow peril" (i.e., foreign criminals; Dixon, 2019; Mok, 1998; Ramasubramanian, 2011). Moreover, according to Zou and Cheryan (2017), these racial groups are also seen as *lesser* than White Americans in different ways, such that Asian individuals are perceived to be superior because of their educational prowess, but foreign and non-American, whereas Black individuals are perceived as more American yet inferior. It is possible that the presence of a racial minority character may activate particular beliefs about how that group should function, especially regarding morality. Though there may be biases evoked when perceiving characters of these racial minority groups, it is unclear from previous studies if White audiences react to these characters of these backgrounds differently, with consideration of their moral salience.

RQ1: How will White audiences react to an outgroup character (Black versus Asian) of a particular moral salience (MAC vs MBC)?

Additionally, the interaction of race and moral salience has potential consequential differences for White characters even when exposed to an ingroup member. Though audiences are likely to favor MACs (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016), it is not clear how advantaged groups like White Americans would react to an ingroup MBC and how they might seek to maintain a positive group identity. According to SIT, there are three prominent strategies to counter group devaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 2001, 2004; Turner et al., 1979). The first strategy is *individual mobility*, which is when an individual seeks to reject their original group in favor of joining a more advantaged group. The second strategy is *social creativity*, or when members of the devalued group attempt to redefine the characteristics or situation that prompted the group devaluation in the first place. And lastly, the final strategy is *social competition*, defined as attempts to change the status quo. Though all groups may face *social identity threats*, or messages that devalue one's group (Branscombe et al., 1999; Steele et al., 2002), the strategies presented in SIT primarily focus on disadvantaged members and how they may navigate their lower social status; in other words, SIT does not necessarily account for how advantaged groups may respond (Brown, 2000). Because advantaged groups are usually the most favorable group and at the highest social standing (as seen in Zou & Cheryan, 2017), there is no greater advantaged group that an already advantaged individual may join, and changing the status quo would threaten their group's placement in the hierarchy. Therefore, strategies such as individual mobility and social competition would not be appropriate or viable for advantaged group members.

In this case, social creativity, or redefining threatening circumstances (Tajfel & Turner, 2001, 2004; Turner et al., 1979), may be the most viable option for advantaged groups like White Americans. To support this, we draw connections from the ingroup favoritism literature. In this case, distinctions between ingroup and outgroup may lead to ingroup favoritism and indirectly result in outgroup ostracization and dismissal (Turner et al., 1979). Evidence for this is seen with findings such that strong racial identification promotes empathy toward ingroup members yet hinders empathy for outgroup members (Fourie et al., 2017), and that people may have different empathy capacities for those they perceive as outgroup members (Arceneaux, 2017). Furthermore, ingroup favoritism relates to intragroup ethnocentrism (i.e., group self-centeredness and self-importance), and intragroup ethnocentrism may be increased after cultural exposure to other groups (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). While people may not hate outgroups, they will likely prefer and prioritize their ingroups, thus affecting how they consume narrative media that has outgroup members. Thus, social creativity may hold true, such that White audiences will be more protective of White characters in entertainment media.

H2: Participants will prefer White characters over Black and Asian characters, particularly the White morally ambiguous character.

Methods

The current study is a concurrent embedded mixed-method design, as it primarily focuses on quantitative measures with supplemental qualitative information that helps to expand upon quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2017). We utilize a 2×3 between-subjects experimental design supplemented with a thematic analysis to examine the effects of moral

salience (MAC vs MBC) and race (White vs Black vs Asian) on White audiences' perceptions and evaluations of a character. While the experimental design measures differences amongst key measures (i.e., identification, perceived morality, and moral disengagement), the thematic analysis of participants' open-ended responses allows for greater exploration of participants' perceptions and feelings toward the character.

Sample

As many of the prior studies have primarily focused on White participants viewing White characters, we specifically targeted White audiences to remain consistent with previous studies, whilst adding the newer element of racial categorization and expanding on advantaged group members' strategies when presented with threatening ingroup contexts. These participants were recruited from a West Coast university student recruitment pool (SONA) primarily consisting of students from introductory communication courses.

We initially collected responses from 466 participants. However, 26 participants did not identify as White, 62 did not complete the attention check (with 28 not completing any measures post exposure to the manipulation), 15 failed the attention check, and 2 responses were from the same participant ID. Our final total for this study was 361 White participants who were randomly assigned one of six manipulations. These manipulations were either the morally bad ($n = 182$) or the morally ambiguous ($n = 179$) character and one of three racial groups (White $n = 119$; Black $n = 124$; Asian $n = 118$). Participants were, on average, 19.75 years old ($sd = 1.63$), liberal leaning ($\bar{x} = 3.19$, where 1 is very liberal and 7 is very conservative), and the majority identified as women ($n = 281$; 77.8%).

Procedure

Participants took the online survey via Qualtrics, roughly 20–30 minutes in length. After providing their consent, participants were asked five questions about their typical entertainment media consumption. Then, participants were randomly assigned one of six possible combinations of a short vignette (approximately 350 words) paired with a character photo and description. After exposure to one of the six manipulations, participants responded to items related to identification ($n = 10$), perceived morality ($n = 11$), moral disengagement ($n = 13$), and one attention check item. Participants were then asked to respond to two open-ended questions. The last section of the survey included five demographic questions.

Measures

Character's Race

Three racial groups (White, Black, and Asian) were examined as manipulations for this experiment. All faces were those of young males to control for age and gender stereotypes. The features of the racial minority characters were chosen based on what would have the strongest effects on racial categorization. For the Black salience, a darker-skinned man was selected as those with a darker skin tone and more Afro-centric features (e.g., broader nose and afro-textured hair) were more criminalized than those with lighter skin tones and more Euro-centric features (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). For the Asian salience, media depictions of Asian Americans are often sparse, and the diversity within Asian groups is often erased

(Dixon, 2019; Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020). As non-Asians generally perceive South and Southeast Asians as less Asian than East Asians (Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020), an East Asian face was selected.

In the manipulation check, White participants ($n = 122$) were randomly assigned a picture of one character to categorize as White, Black, Asian, or other (fill-in option). We conducted a chi-square test to see if the photos elicited certain racial perceptions (e.g., if the Black character was seen as Black by White audiences). Indeed, characters were distinguishable by race, X^2 (6, n = 122) = 240.03, $p < .001$, such that the Black character was perceived as Black 40 out of 40 times (100%), the Asian character as Asian 40 out of 41 times (97.56%), and the White character as White 39 out of 41 times (95.12%). In the experiment, these images were used in conjunction with a short description of their physical traits (i.e., "Race" American in their early twenties; See Appendix).

Morality Salience

Participants were randomly assigned one of two vignettes (MAC vs MBC) that were created with the same setting and base story. They were told the vignette was an introduction to an incomplete story that they would react to using survey items and open-ended questions (see Appendix for vignettes). In essence, the main character is a young man living in an alternative reality where humans have superpowers, and those with "dangerous" powers are heavily monitored and restricted by the government. The main character generally aims to avoid detection but lacks financial opportunity and participates in gang activity for survival. During one of these events, he is caught in a crime, murders someone, and is now on the run. The open-ending in the narrative allowed participants to come up with their own narrative arc for the character in the open-ended responses.

The difference between the MAC vs MBC vignette is approximately 105 words, where the morally ambiguous scenario provides greater context for the character's feelings and motivation, and suggests that the murder was an accident. MACs tend to be more complex as they are defined by their immoral actions and good intentions or their tendency to fall in the middle of the morality spectrum, while MBCs tend to lack good intentions or nuanced motivations (Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). This serves as justification to add more words to the MAC vignette, thereby adding more depth of characterization for the MAC.

In the manipulation check, White participants ($n = 121$) were randomly assigned a vignette describing a MAC ($n = 66$) or MBC ($n = 55$) and asked on a 7-point Likert type scale (1 *not at all*; 7 *very much*): (1) if they understood the character's perspective, (2) if they believed the character had other options, (3) if they believed the character was a victim of circumstance, and (4) if they view the character's action as acceptable. We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to ensure moral salience was accurately perceived by White participants. Generally, there was a main effect of salience for the perception of the character being different for the outcomes based on the moral salience, $F(4, 116) = 3.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .11$. The MACs were more understandable, $F(1, 119) = 3.89$, $p = .003$, $\eta p^2 = .07$, and perceived to be the victim of circumstance, $F(1, 119) = 9.75$, $p = .002$, $\eta p^2 = .08$, more than the MBCs. Regarding questions about whether the character has other options, there was no significant difference between MACs and MBCs, $F(1, 119) = .20$, $p = .89$, $\eta p^2 = .00$, nor was there a significant difference between the MACs' and MBCs' perceived

acceptability of the character's actions, $F(1, 119) = .13$, $p = .72$, $\eta p^2 = .01$. In sum, both the MACs and MBCs were believed to have committed unacceptable actions (MAC $\bar{x} = 3.32$, $sd = .15$; MBC $\bar{x} = 3.24$, $sd = .17$) when there were other options to take (MAC $\bar{x} = 5.24$, $sd = .14$; MBC $\bar{x} = 5.27$, $sd = .16$), yet MACs were more understandable than MBCs (MAC $\bar{x} = 4.5$, $sd = .16$; MBC $\bar{x} = 3.75$, $sd = .18$) and were perceived to be more of a victim of circumstance (MAC $\bar{x} = 4.96$, $sd = .18$; MBC $\bar{x} = 4.14$, $sd = .19$). Thus, our moral salience manipulations worked appropriately. In the experiment, the character's image with a short description that dictated their racial group was placed on top of the vignette to ensure that participants associated the character's image with the story.

Identification

Adapted from Cohen (2001) and Shen (2010), identification is measured using a 10-item Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) created for this study. This scale has a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$ and was used to examine participants' emotional connection to the character. Higher scores indicate higher identification with the character.

Perceived Morality

Participants rated the perceived morality of the character using the 11-item Perceived Morality inventory (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2019) with a 7-point Likert-type scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This scale has a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$ and was used to examine the participants' perceptions of the character's morality. Higher scores indicate higher perceived morality, such that the participants perceive the character as more morally good.

Moral Disengagement

Adapted from Bandura and colleagues' (1996) original moral disengagement scale that had eight reasons for which people may morally disengage (e.g., moral justification, advantageous comparison, attribution of blame), a total of 13 items were created to measure participants' moral disengagement or justification for the character's actions and were rated using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). This scale has a Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$, but the removal of one item increased the alpha to .75. Higher scores indicate higher moral disengagement or greater justification of the character's actions.

Open-Ended Questions

We utilized two probing open-ended response prompts to examine for potential nuances in the audience's perception of the story and the characters. The first prompt asked: "What do you think is the larger story, and what is this character's role in it?" The second prompt asked: "To what extent do you believe this character should be forgiven for his actions? Why or why not? What were the instances or information in the story that made his actions forgivable or unforgivable?" Participants were asked to write three to five sentences in response to each prompt. Given the length of responses to these prompts, we analyzed them together as one response per participant for the qualitative analysis portion.

Analyses and Results

Quantitative

Composite scores were created for participants' identification, perceived morality, and moral disengagement. All measures were normally distributed; however, perceived morality had a moderate negative skew (−0.71) and was thereby transformed with a square root transformation after being flipped (adjusted skew = .39). In this case, the results of perceived morality were reversed such that lower scores now indicate greater perceived morality or greater belief that the character is morally good.

A MANOVA was then conducted to examine group differences between moral salience (MAC versus MBC) and race (White vs Black vs Asian), reported with Pillai's Trace regarding identification, perceived morality, and moral disengagement. Pairwise comparisons with LSD corrections were also examined to measure specific differences between groups. In the multivariate analysis, there was a main effect for moral salience, $F(3, 352) = 13.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .103$, but not for race, $F(6, 706) = 1.52$, $p = .17$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, or for the interaction between race and moral salience, $F(6, 706) = .33$, $p = .92$, $\eta p^2 = .003$.

For univariate tests, moral salience affected identification, $F(1, 354) = 22.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .06$, perceived morality, $F(1, 354) = 30.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .08$, and moral disengagement, $F(1, 354) = 5.69$, $p = .02$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, such that White participants generally favored MACs over MBCs (identification: MAC $\bar{x} = 4.78$, $sd = .06$; MBC $\bar{x} = 4.36$, $sd = .064$; perceived morality: MAC $\bar{x} = 2.01$, $sd = .13$; MBC $\bar{x} = 2.11$, $sd = .13$; moral disengagement: MAC $\bar{x} = 4.25$, $sd = .50$; MBC $\bar{x} = 4.08$, $sd = .50$).

However, univariate tests also revealed no effect of race on identification, $F(2, 354) = .99$, $p = .37$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, perceived morality, $F(2, 354) = 2.12$, $p = .12$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, and moral disengagement, $F(2, 354) = 2.10$, $p = .12$, $\eta p^2 = .01$. In this case, there was no significant difference between racial groups for White participants' identification with the characters (White $\bar{x} = 4.49$, s = 08; Black $\bar{x} = 4.64$, s = .08; Asian $\bar{x} = 4.58$, s = .08). However, there were two significant comparisons. First, there was a significant pairwise difference between Asian versus White characters ($p = .04$), such that White participants were more likely to morally disengage for Asian characters ($\bar{x} = 4.26$, $sd = .06$) than for White characters ($\bar{x} = 4.08$, $sd = .06$). Additionally, there was a significant pairwise difference for Black versus White characters for perceived morality ($p = .04$), such that White participants perceived Black characters as more morally just ($\bar{x} = 2.04$, $sd = .02$) than White characters ($\bar{x} = 2.08$, $sd = .02$).

Lastly, univariate tests revealed no significant interaction effect of race and moral salience for identification, $F(2, 354) = .66$, $p = .52$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, and perceived morality, $F(2, 354) = .54$, $p = .59$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, and moral disengagement $F(2, 354) = .08$, $p = .92$, $\eta p^2 = .00$. There were additionally no significant pairwise comparisons found. Altogether, quantitative results supported Hypothesis 1 but not Hypothesis 2 (see Table 1 below for means and standard deviations).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of race × moral salience.

	Morally Ambiguous Characters (MAC)			Morally Bad Characters (MBC)		
	ID	PM	MD	ID	PM	MD
White	4.78 (.11)	2.03 (.02)	4.21 (.09)	4.20 (.11)	2.14 (.02)	3.94 (.09)
Black	4.83 (.11)	1.99 (.02)	4.20 (.09)	4.45 (.11)	2.08 (.02)	4.10 (.09)
Asian	4.74 (.11)	2.00 (.02)	4.32 (.09)	4.41 (.11)	2.10 (.02)	4.19 (.09)

Note. ID stands for identification, PM stands for perceived morality, and MD stands for moral disengagement. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Qualitative

The qualitative data were analyzed using the grounded theoretical approach initially detailed by Glaser and Strauss (2017). This approach involves analyzing the data while it is collected, entering the process with a broad research question, taking notes, and using the constant comparison method (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020). We began qualitative data analysis by examining for potential themes in approximately 15% of the responses ($n = 76$ responses), creating first-level codes (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). After discussion and agreement between the authors on the existing themes, we then trained two undergraduate research assistants who were blinded from manipulations (such that they did not know which race or moral salience was connected to which responses) for 8 weeks on reliability for 75 participants (20.1% of the data). Qualitative themes were quantified in order to measure the prominence of these themes for the six manipulations.

According to Krippendorff (2004), reliability scores of .8 are desirable, but scores above .667 are acceptable. During the process of moving from first-level codes to more specific second-level codes (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017), the following two themes emerged as reliable: forgiveness (Krippendorff's alpha = .72) and justification (Krippendorff's alpha = .73). Themes are described below, and the remaining responses were divided between the two coders to complete. Once all codes were completed, two chi-square tests of association were conducted for each theme to examine differences in proportions based on the six manipulations and the prevalence of these themes.

The first emergent theme was that of *forgiveness*, falling along a spectrum including the following subcodes: *pure forgiveness (1), forgiveness with caveats (2), conflicted (3)*, and *no forgiveness (4)*. *Pure forgiveness* refers to participants forgiving the character completely. Often, they state they understand the character and their circumstances, and that external factors were at play. *Forgiveness with caveats* refers to participants forgiving the character, but only if a certain criterion or actions are met (e.g., going to jail first). *Conflicted* refers to participants feeling mixed about the character, where they may indicate they "understand" the character but are unable to forgive them, or are unsure if they should. *No forgiveness* occurred when participants stated that the character's actions were immoral and unforgivable. Table 2 shows exemplars of each subcode via respondent answers.

For the theme of forgiveness, the chi-square test was significant, X^2 (20, $N = 328$) = 35.59, $p = .02$, suggesting that there were some significant differences between some of the

Table 2. Forgiveness.

Codes	Exemplar Responses
Pure Forgiveness	*I think he should be forgiven.* ***The system is broken, not the character****, and he reacted in a way that protected himself and his team.* ***If he were able to live freely being who he is, this may not have happened.***
Forgiveness with Caveats	*Alex shouldn't be let off the hook easily, but he does deserve a chance to make things right. Yes, he made bad decisions, but his situation wasn't entirely his fault. That said,* ***forgiveness has to be earned. He needs to take full responsibility for what he's done, especially for the harm he caused, and work to fix it.***
Conflicted	*His circumstances made me see his actions as forgivable. His actions to commit crimes make me have doubts on the other end. Overall,* ***I feel mixed emotions*** *and also sympathy for what he had to do in order to get out.*
No Forgiveness	***He should not be forgiven. He made bad decisions, which he was aware of.*** *He needs to assume the consequences of his actions.*

Table 3. Tabulation of forgiveness subcodes.

	Not Mentioned	Pure Forgiveness	Forgiveness with Caveats	Conflicted	No Forgiveness
White MAC (n = 53)	0	16	16	9	11
Black MAC (n = 60)	4	19	16	9	9
Asian MAC (n = 57)	5	20[a]	19	3[b]	7
White MBC (n = 53)	2	7[a]	20	9	18
Black MBC (n = 56)	3	9	16	16[b]	11
Asian MBC (n = 57)	6	11	12	12	13

Note. Letters signify which manipulations were significantly different ($p < .05$) from each other within each code. Response total may be different from the manipulation total as some participants left their response blank, or some responses were in disagreement between coders.

manipulations and particular subcodes (see Table 3). In general, MACs were more likely to be forgiven than MBCs, and there were some variations based on race. Namely, Asian characters were more likely to be forgiven than Black characters, and both over White characters.

However, there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) within the *pure forgiveness* subcode, where a greater portion of White participants forgave the Asian MAC ($n = 20$) compared to those who forgave the White MBC ($n = 7$). This complements the quantitative results, such that White participants were more likely to morally disengage for Asian characters than for White characters.

The second significant difference ($p < .05$) within the *forgiveness* code was for the *conflicted* subcode, where the greatest difference in proportion was between Asian MAC ($n = 3$) and Black MBC ($n = 16$). In this case, participants were the least conflicted about the Asian MAC because they were more likely to directly forgive the character. However, of particular interest was why White participants were conflicted when describing the Black MBC. An example reads:

> I think that the character did commit a wrong action, and it won't be forgiven because of this. Though it is understandable why the character made this choice, it isn't necessarily correct or justifiable legally. I think that it is hard to determine whether he SHOULD be forgiven or not.

Here, the participant states they understand the Black MBC, yet goes back and forth in their reasoning. This pattern indicates a unique reaction for White participants exposed to the Black MBC, compared to other characters of the same racial group or the same moral salience.

The second emergent theme was that of *justification*, which included *justified (1), unjustified (2)*, and *conflicted (3). Justified* refers to the character's action being justified by the participants, such that they saw the behavior as appropriate for the circumstance the character was in. *Unjustified* refers to the character's action being seen as unjustified by the participants, such that the participant believed the character acted in an immoral way. In this case, the participants often had strong stances on the character's actions and often believed there is no excuse for murder (as per the vignette). *Conflicted* refers to participants' unsure responses, often characterized by a back-and-forth discussion. In this case, they may state one thing and then contradict the previous point they made, or state they are unsure. Table 4 shows exemplar responses of each code via respondent answers.

Table 4. Justification.

Code	Exemplar Responses
Justified	*I think that considering the circumstances and the environment in which he [was] raised,* ***he was under a lot of stress and pressure.*** *I think the fact that his* ***society demonizes him*** *makes it so* ***he shall be forgiven*** *for his actions*
Unjustified	*Even though he committed a natural response in the scenario, the act he committed is* ***immoral and costs the life of an innocent man.*** *The fact that the man died makes his actions unforgivable. There [are] close to* ***no justifications for killing someone***
Conflicted	*He seemed to be* ***looking out for the others*** *that were with him, which shows some morals, but he also* ***has free will and purposely got himself*** *in that position, even if* ***the world he lives in is challenging.***

Table 5. Tabulation of justification subcodes.

	Not Mentioned	Justified	Unjustified	Conflicted
White MAC ($n = 53$)	9	21[a]	13	9
Black MAC ($n = 60$)	10	21[a]	18	8
Asian MAC ($n = 57$)	11	23[a]	10[b]	10
White MBC ($n = 53$)	9	7[a]	26[b]	13
Black MBC ($n = 56$)	11	12	15	17
Asian MBC ($n = 57$)	17	11	18	10

Note. Letters signify which manipulations were significantly different ($p < .05$) from each other within each code. Response total may be different from the manipulation total as some participants left their response blank, or some responses were in disagreement between coders.

For the theme of justification, the chi-square test was also significant, X^2 (15, $N = 329$) = 31.70, $p = .01$, suggesting that there were some significant differences between how participants responded to the different manipulations for justifying the characters' actions (see Table 5).

The first significant difference was in the *justified* subcode, where the MACs of all races (White MAC = 21; Black MAC = 21; Asian MAC = 23) were more frequently justified than the White MBC ($n = 7$). In this case, White participants were all relatively the same when responding to MAC actions, but the White MBC was singled out. This ties to the second biggest difference, which was between Asian MAC ($n = 10$) and White MBC ($n = 26$) for the *unjustified* subcode. Altogether, White MBCs were the least *justified* and the most *unjustified*, and Asian MACs were the most *justified* and the least *unjustified*.

Though not significantly different, there were some other patterns of interest. Namely, the Black MAC and the Asian MBC were equally *unjustified* by participants, and the highest conflicted responses came from those exposed to the Black MBC, though unlike the forgiveness codes, there was no significant contrast.

Discussion

This study considers how racial categorization and moral salience affect White audiences' perceptions of MACs versus MBCs, using a between-subject experimental design and supplemented with a thematic analysis. Qualitative responses did find patterns that contrasted with the quantitative results and added greater complexity, highlighting the methodological strengths of this mixed-method study.

Quantitatively, only Hypothesis 1 was supported, such that moral ambiguity was the primary factor in influencing White participants' identification with, perception of, and moral disengagement for the character. Indeed, participants were able to connect more with MACs over MBCs, as prior studies have found. However, we found no quantitative support for Hypothesis 2, or White participants favoring White characters, and the White MAC in particular. However, this does not mean that race is meaningless, as the qualitative results reveal some nuances that may have been masked. Two prominent themes emerged from participants' responses (i.e., forgiveness and justifications of actions), and chi-square analyses of associations revealed there were some significant differences in the prevalence of these themes for different manipulations. Thus, there are some additional contexts to consider.

First, there was a slight favoritism toward Asian characters. Participants were more likely to morally disengage for Asian characters than White characters, as seen in the quantitative results, and the Asian MAC was the most likely to be forgiven and justified in the qualitative results. This may be due to Asians being perceived as "model minorities" such that they are intelligent, hardworking, and generally respectable (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), and the model minority stereotype is still prominent in media depictions of Asians, especially compared to other depictions (Besana et al., 2019). In essence, current media depictions of Asians reinforce Asian characters as "good" to White audiences (Chao et al., 2013), and, despite the current vignette being counterstereotypical to this racial group, prior associations with the model minority stereotype may be maintained, as there is not enough evidence within this study or in other media depictions that would counter this perception. Thus, prior depictions may bias participants' responses, leading them to associate the Asian MAC with positive characteristics and subsequently slightly more favorable responses. Additionally, it is important to note that the West Coast of the United States has more Asians (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), so it is probable that our participants have had more interpersonal interactions with Asians, which may additionally reduce the biases from media depictions (Ramasubramanian, 2011).

Moreover, results found some favoritism toward Black characters. Black characters were generally perceived as more moral than White characters in the quantitative results, and participants were the most conflicted with the Black MBC for forgiveness and justification in the qualitative results. This finding is particularly salient as comparisons between the Black MBC relative to the Black MAC or other MBCs show that participants' feelings of conflict were the most present for this particular manipulation. Though the presented vignette aligns with stereotypical media depictions of Black Americans as criminals (Dixon, 2019; Dixon & Maddox, 2005), the results here are contrary to some previous studies. It is possible that, rather than activating previous schemas of Black Americans, the vignette presented a different opportunity. As preferring Black characters might affirm antiracist beliefs (Coover, 2001), participants may have responded to the lack of context in the MBC vignette with the back-and-forth internal discussions in order not to be overly biased and to protect their self-concept. In sum, the results here may be indicative of participants wanting to be seen as egalitarian rather than a genuine preference for the Black characters over White characters.

Altogether, the findings here present a novel strategy for advantaged group members: ostracism of an ingroup member. Rather than morally disengaging and dismissing the ingroup character's actions as SIT would suggest, White audiences were more critical with

White characters, as evidenced by the pairwise comparisons and qualitative patterns. This seemingly contrasts with SIT, which suggests that those who are in devaluing circumstances may engage with certain responses to maintain or increase their group status, thereby protecting their self-worth (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). However, one deficit of the original SIT was that the initial strategies could not fully account for advantaged groups who may be temporarily devalued but do not need to re-navigate their social positions (Brown, 2000). It is possible that ostracizing a deviant ingroup member is an act of social creativity, as it creates a more viable and cost-effective strategy for advantaged groups to partake in; ostracism may serve to protect the group identity and maintain the social standing of the group, while minimizing associations with deviant ingroup members. Evidence of this may be tied to one of four identity-management strategies for advantaged groups as presented by Shuman et al. (2024). Namely, the strategy of *distance* somewhat aligns with the present results as it refers to the separation of oneself from the advantaged identity (i.e., they do not see themselves as part of the advantaged group) or from acts of inequality (i.e., inequality exists, but they do not participate in it). Ostracism may be a facet similar to Shuman et al.'s (2024) strategy of distance, such that advantaged members may seek to remove themselves from a threatening context, but removal of a "bad" ingroup member may preserve social standing and benefits. Thus, this study presents a new strategy ripe for future exploration.

Limitations

Though mixed-method studies may mitigate some issues that are common in quantitative or qualitative methods alone, we had some limitations. Regarding our qualitative analysis, our two undergraduate research assistants were trained on several themes and with several codes per theme. Because of this complexity, only two themes ended up being reliable for examination. Though greater nuance was achieved through these codes, future research should consider the tradeoffs between the reliability of more themes with less nuanced subcodes versus fewer themes with more nuanced codes. Factors also include the length it may take to train coders and the development of a clean codebook with definitive and clear definitions.

Additionally, our focus on White participants, while allowing us to focus on advantaged groups' strategies in threatening circumstances, also prevented us from fully understanding whether this strategy serves as a form of social creativity or is unique to advantaged groups. It is possible that these patterns and strategies may also occur for racial minority groups. Moreover, White identity in itself may not be the most appropriate identity to measure advantaged groups. Joyce and Harwood (2020) posit that racial identification may be particularly difficult to assess for White audiences as it is less salient to them than for racial minorities; thus, other factors may play more important roles. For example, our participants were young and generally identified as liberal leaning (approxiamately 60% of participants vs 22% who identified as conservative leaning), both factors of which may elicit more favorable opinions toward racial minorities. Social desirability may also play a role for this sample, as participants may seek to present themselves as egalitarian, thereby responding in a way that is favorable to racial minorities (i.e., via the high rates of moral disengagement for Asian characters or high conflicted feelings for the Black MBC). Replicating this study in another location where political identity and frequency of intergroup interactions are more varied, while controlling for factors like social desirability and morality perception, may lead to different results.

Furthermore, the context in which the threat has occurred (i.e., murder) may be polarizing for some participants, and some covariates may be needed to control for individual differences. For example, some participants may be more sensitive to particular crimes due to individual differences in morals, personal experience, and cultivated media perception. Our vignette captures several immoral actions (i.e., lying, gang activity, theft, murder), thus our results cannot capture the nuances of participants' experiences or which of these immoral actions influenced their responses. Controlling for these factors and further manipulating the types of crimes depicted in the vignette may reveal to what threshold deviancy from ingroup versus outgroup members is acceptable and for whom. For example, Jennings et al. (2022) found that perception of immoral behavior (i.e., lying) does affect evaluations of a character, but that in some contexts White characters may receive a "pass" for immoral behaviors where Black characters may not. Isolating different types of immoral behaviors may provide better insights into the interplay between race and morality for character evaluations.

Additionally, alterations to the narrative concerning different types of crimes may be more effective in eliciting stereotype activation unique to the different racial groups depicted. Because the vignette centers on gang violence and crime, this may be more stereotypical of Black characters who are commonly shown in media as criminals (Dixon, 2019; Dixon & Linz, 2000) and counterstereotypical to Asian characters, who are more typically depicted as model minorities (Besana et al., 2019; Mok, 1998). Additional frameworks such as Stereotype Activation Theory (Kunda & Spencer, 2003) may more appropriate guide development of future manipulations, such that they activate particular racial stereotypes for participants to apply to the corresponding character. One way this may occur is by strengthening the stereotypes of racial groups with relations to certain types of crimes (e.g., gang violence for the stereotype of Black Americans being violent, and white-collar crimes for the stereotype of Asian Americans being yellow perils) may reveal additional differences for how audiences may react to these characters and to what thresholds these actions are morally acceptable or not.

Conclusion

Altogether, the findings from this study were surprising in comparison to previous studies. Rather than favoring ingroup characters, as expected with SIT, White participants favored Asian and Black characters in unique ways and were dismissive of ingroup White characters. Because of the mixed-method approach, this study illuminates how quantitative results may mask further nuances with regard to participants' perceptions of morality and race. Theoretically, this study expands SIT as it reveals some circumstances in which audiences may shift their perception of the character to protect their group identity and self-worth. Namely, ostracism may occur when a deviant ingroup member provokes an identity-threatening situation. However, future studies should elaborate on whether this strategy falls in line with SIT's social creativity or if this is a unique strategy only available to advantaged members.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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