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Consumer Self-Concept and Fantasy

A DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

Stories and fantasy represent an important aspect of consumer life and comprise a huge marketing enterprise within consumer entertainment. Each year, upwards of $82 billion is spent on books, games, and other fantasy industries in the United States alone.[1] Likewise, fantasy has important implications for consumers' sense of identity. In this dissertation, I explore both theoretical and practical implications of consumer engagement with fantasy. In particular, in this dissertation I examine the processes underlying consumer engagement with one of the most quintessential story elements: villains.

Prior research asserts that in order to avoid threats to their sense of self, consumers tend to shy away from others who seem similar to themselves in some ways but undesirable in other ways (immoral, unstable, etc.). Chapter 1 explores the idea that consumers can feel drawn to, rather than repulsed, by story villains who resemble them. I demonstrate that fictional stories can mitigate feelings of threat at being associated with undesirable people, leading consumers to find similar villains more self-relevant and thus to feel drawn to them. I test this idea across eight studies, including seven experiments (N = 2702) as well as a large proprietary data set from a company with over 232,000 registered users. Some passages, figures, and tables from Chapter 1 are transcribed with permission from the paper that was published based on the work (Krause and Rucker 2020).

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[1] Sources: "Average annual expenditure on books per consumer unit in the United States from 2007 to 2019, by type" 2019; "Consumer Expenditures for the U.S., regions, and selected metropolitan areas" 2018; "Consumer spending on home entertainment in the United States from 1999 to 2019" 2019; Nash Information Services 2021; Richter 2019

In Chapter 2, I shift from consumer preference for similar over dissimilar villains to the preference for villains in general. Previous research, such as studies decrying the sadism of violent video game players, seems to suggest that it is those who have villainous real-world desires that prefer to play villains in games. Indeed, prior research has emphasized the motivation to engage with fantasy in order to simulate the achievement of real-world wishes – which I call *upward fantasy*. Yet, this explanation seems insufficient to explain the immense popularity of villain-centric games and media. I explore alternative potential motives that could lead non-villainous consumers to pursue villainous fantasy experiences. Specifically, I propose consumers often engage in fantasy for the purpose of temporarily escaping their real-world goals – a motivation I call *outward fantasy*." Across four studies (N = 1003), I find evidence for outward fantasy motivation. Moreover, I demonstrate such fantasy does not stem from real-world villainous desires, but from a more benign motivation related to reducing psychological strain.

Keywords: Identity, Self, Similarity, Motivation, Stories, Villains, Fantasy

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DEDICATION

To my brother, Ryan. Without your enthusiasm, confidence, and support, obtaining a doctoral degree would have been nothing but a fantasy.

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CHAPTER 1: CONSUMERS AND SIMILARITY TO FICTIONAL VILLAINS

In Collaboration with Derek D. Rucker

Transcribed in part from the publication based on this work, with permission from Derek D. Rucker and the Association for Psychological Science (Krause and Rucker 2020)

"There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed… We even look something alike."

"'I don't think I'm like him!' said Harry, more loudly than he'd intended."

- Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

As captured in J.K. Rowling's iconic story, something unsettling, even repulsive, occurs in the discovery of similarities between oneself and a villain. The mere association with Lord Voldemort induces a defensive response by Rowling's titular character. Indeed, academics have long suggested consumers distance themselves from similar others with negative features such as obnoxiousness (Taylor and Mettee 1971), instability (Novak and Lerner 1968), and treachery (Miller, Downs, and Prentice 1998).

Consumers' repulsion from similarity with negative others can be understood through the lens of the self-concept. Consumers strive to maintain a positive self-view and to think of themselves and fundamentally good and worthwhile individuals (Allport, 1937; Jones, 1964; McDougall, 1933). Similarity to negative others can threaten one's self-view by revealing unwanted associations. However, in this chapter I suggest such comparisons also hold a high degree of self-relevance. In other words, those who seem similar to us also seem to have

outcomes relevant to our own. As a result, if one can mitigate self-threat, we prefer similarity. Consumers become drawn toward, not repulsed, by darker versions of the self.

To test this idea, I explore one prevalent context that might provide a particularly effective "safe haven" for such comparisons: characters in movies, books, television shows, and other stories. Although story villains have many undesirable qualities, I suggest their separation from reality attenuates the feeling of self-threat generally associated with similarity to those perceived as "bad." As such, rather than being repulsed by similarity, people are drawn toward it.

Self-Threat and the Desire to Dissociate

Humans have a basic motivation to view the self positively (Taylor and Brown 1988). In fact, consumers will actively avoid information that might disconfirm a positive self-view (Brown and Dutton 1995). For example, some consumers prefer to cling to positive illusions about the world in order to cope with the anxiety associated with a threatening sales experience (Wilson and Darke 2012). Likewise, for some consumers threats to personal control can lead to engaging in biased processing to confirm their current beliefs at the expense of accuracy in order to avoid feeling threatened (Chaxel 2016).

One potential source of self-threat that consumers may seek to avoid is others who are similar to the self in their personality traits, mannerisms, or values, but who also possess undesired traits. For example, consumers actively try to change their attitudes to seem different from a person who is similar to them if that similar other is made to seem obnoxious (Cooper and Jones 1969). In another study, people shied away from similar others experiencing mental illness

(Novak and Lerner 1968)[2]. In addition, while consumers generally prefer a salesperson who seems similar to them, they prefer one who is different from them if the salesperson is rude (Jiang et al. 2009).

Put simply, given the desire to protect the self, people seem inclined to avoid similar others when those others have negative traits or characteristics. However, this conclusion rests on the assumption that these comparisons are actually threatening. What if this assumption were false? In the absence of threat, people might show *greater* interest in negative others when they are similar. Specifically, similarity increases the perceived self-relevance of a stimulus to the point that thinking about a similar other activates the same area of the brain as thinking about the self (Mitchell, Macrae, and Banaji 2006). Self-relevance, in turn, increases involvement with and attraction toward a stimulus (Celsi and Olson 1988; Konijn and Hoorn 2005; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Thus, in the absence of threat, consumers might exhibit interest in, rather than repulsion from, similar others - even those with dark and undesired characteristics.

Stories as a Safe Haven

Stories offer one prevalent context where threat from similarity to negative others might be diminished. Stories are encapsulated worlds removed from reality. Prior research has theorized that stories represent "safe havens" to explore new perspectives (Konijn and Hoorn 2005; Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, and Arkin 2014). Indeed, prior work suggests stories have the capacity to disarm people and allow them to digest information that would otherwise feel threatening. Specifically, the field of narrative persuasion demonstrates how stories' ability

[2] While people may have a more understanding attitude toward those facing mental illness today, at the time of Novak and Lerner's (1968) study, emotional difficulty was considered undesirable and unattractive to their population of interest.

to soften threatening information can allow marketers to persuade consumers who are resistant to persuasion through other means (Escalas 2004; Green and Brock 2000). For example, narrative persuasion can increase consumers' interest in purchasing otherwise undesirable products (Krause and Rucker 2019). Further, researchers have found success using stories to persuade consumers of even highly threatening ideas, such as convincing citizens of Sudan to end culturally ingrained practices of genital cutting (Vogt et al. 2016).

Beyond encouraging consumers to accept information they may otherwise find threatening, stories can also allow people to take on perspectives they would be unwilling to assume in real life. For example, Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, and Huffman (2013) found embedding a member of a disliked outgroup in a story reduced anxiety and facilitated taking an otherwise self-threatening perspective. In other words, Johnson and colleagues were able to use the fictional context of a story to engage consumers with the perspective of an individual they would otherwise feel unwilling to consider due to the potential for self-threat. Extending this finding, I propose that stories may offer a safe haven that attenuates or eliminates self-threat stemming from comparisons to similar, negative others.

Importantly, with threat removed, drawing on the earlier observations regarding self-relevance, I propose a novel outcome will emerge; consumers will show greater interest in similar others with negative features. As such, in contrast to findings that people avoid similar others with negative qualities (e.g. Novak & Lerner, 1968; Taylor & Mettee, 1971), my

perspective suggests that in the context of fiction, similarity to a "bad" person can *increase* people's interest in such comparisons. More formally:

H_1: Consumers are drawn toward, rather than repulsed, by fictional villains who seem similar to them.

H_2: The effect of similarity on interest in a fictional villain is mediated by the perceived self-relevance of the villain.

When Fiction is not Safe: The Role of Social Scrutiny

My argument in this research is that similarity to villains is attractive because stories offer a safe haven and mitigate feelings of threat, allowing the greater self-relevance of similar villains to make them more interesting and attractive than dissimilar villains. If this is the case, then the effect should reverse in contexts in which fiction fails to provide a feeling of safety and psychologically shield consumers from threat. In other words, consumers' interest in comparisons to villains with similar characteristics should dissipate when stories are no longer deemed safe.

Specifically, I propose contexts exist in which similarity to a story villain might still threaten the self. A consumer's sense of self and identity is largely created by and dependent on the way they are treated and perceived by social others (Cooley 1922). Consumers often feel a drive to experience coherence between the way they view themselves and the way others view them (Swann Jr., Rentfrow, and Guinn 2003). As a result, consumers can experience threats to their identity based on how they think others see them (Major and O'Brien 2005). Based on this reasoning, consumers may be affected not only by their own judgments regarding the implications of being similar to a fictional villain, but also by the judgments of others.

Moreover, consumers routinely underestimate others' willingness and capacity to understand the contextual nuances of a situation; as a result, they tend to overestimate the extent to which others will judge them for minor imperfections (Epley, Savitsky, and Gilovich 2002). In line with this, I predict that consumers will expect observers to ignore the mitigating implications of fictionality and judge them for similarity to a villain with the same harshness they would for similarity to a real-life "bad" individual. Because the perceptions of others can impact personal feelings of identity threat, even a consumer who believes similarity to a villain is acceptable when on her own may find such similarity threatening if others are present to witness it. As a result, when facing potential scrutiny from others, people may recoil from exposure to villains that are similar to them, even within a fictional story. More formally:

H_3: Under social scrutiny, feelings of threat will cause consumers to prefer dissimilar over similar fictional villains.

Overview of Experiments

Study 1.1 tests the proposition that, in everyday life, consumers prefer similar over dissimilar story villains with large-scale, proprietary data from a real-world company. Study 1.2 tests the assumption that stories represent a "safe haven" that mitigates the discomfort of similarity to negative others. In Studies 1.3 and 1.4, I find causal evidence for the effect of similarity on consumers' villain preferences. In Study 1.5, I test self-relevance as a mechanism. Study 1.6 tests the boundaries of stories' ability to protect against threat. Finally, consistent with the idea of a "safe haven," Studies 1.7 and 1.8 demonstrate that the attraction to similar but negative others reverses once stories cease to feel safe, as in the context of social scrutiny.

STUDY 1.1

Study 1.1 tests whether, in everyday life, people exhibit a preference for similar or dissimilar fictional villains. Using villains from media in popular culture and data from a company called CharacTour, this study examines whether consumers appear drawn to or repulsed by fictional villains similar to themselves.

Method

We obtained access to real-world proprietary data from the company CharacTour ("CharacTour," 2019). CharacTour is an online, character-focused entertainment platform that had approximately 232,500 registered users at the time of analysis. One of the site's features allows users to take a personality quiz and see different characters' similarity to themselves. Users can browse characters and become their "fans" (akin to a Facebook "like"). From users' interactions with these two aspects of CharacTour, we can observe whether consumers are drawn toward or repulsed by similar villains by looking at the personalities of users that become "fans" of each character.

Data structure. At the time of analysis, the CharacTour database contained 3,963 characters. CharacTour staff assigned whether the character was a villain or not. Villains included characters such as Maleficent, The Joker, and Darth Vader. Non-villains included Sherlock Holmes, Joey Tribbiani, and Yoda. CharacTour staff also assigned each character a score from 1-5 on various bipolar traits (e.g., chatty to reserved, social to solitary, highbrow to lowbrow). CharacTour users then took a quiz on the same bipolar traits.

The CharacTour data set is anonymized with regard to specific users; data is aggregated at the character level. For a given character, the data set indicates: 1) whether the character is a

villain, 2) the total number of users who became fans of the character, 3) the character's assigned score on each trait, and 4) the number of the character's fans who possess each trait. Here, whether a fan "possesses the trait," is a dichotomous measure defined by the company as follows. The company, and thus the data set I have access to, codes a user as having a trait if they score a 1-2 on the trait dimension or a 4-5 on the opposite end of the spectrum. For example, on the bipolar trait "1 = chatty to 5 = reserved", a user who scored a 1 to 2 counts as "chatty," whereas a user who scored a 4 to 5 counts as "reserved" (see Figure 1). Thus, the data we have access to is continuous with respect to characters' scores on traits and categorical with respect to whether or not each fan possesses each trait.

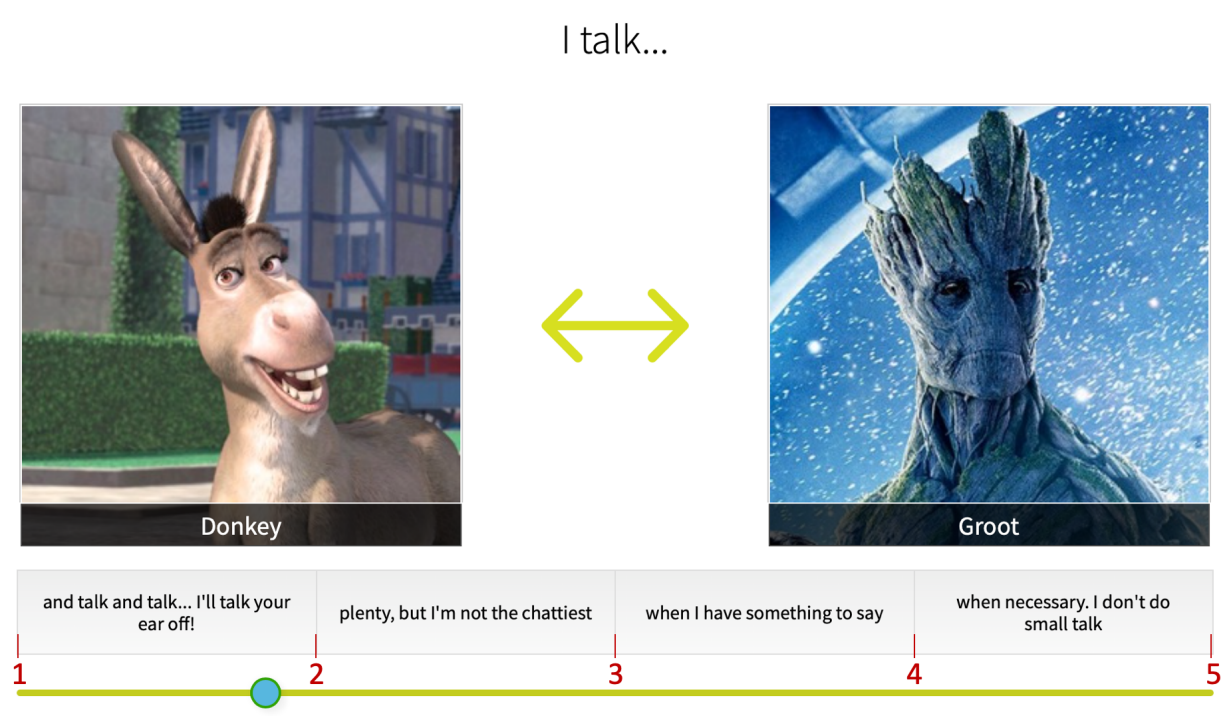

Figure 1 – Study 1.1: Example of CharacTour personality quiz question with corresponding scores (1-5) superimposed on top. This user is "chatty" because their score is between 1 and 2.

This data set can be used to test whether consumers are attracted toward or repulsed by similar villains, using non-villains as a baseline. I observe the total number of fans a character

has and the subset of those fans who possess each trait. Thus, I can use a character's score on a trait to predict the percent of that character's fans who possess that trait. If people are attracted toward similar non-villains but repulsed by similar villains, then as a character's score on a trait increases, the percent of their fans who possess that trait should *increase* for non-villains but should *decrease* for villains. In contrast, if the story context leads similarity to increase interest in both villains and non-villains, an increase in a character's score on a trait should correspond to an increase in the percent of fans with that trait for villains and non-villains alike.

Analysis. I used a multi-level mixed effects linear regression to examine whether the percent of a character's fans who have a given trait is predicted by the character's score on that trait and whether the character is a villain or non-villain (see Model 1 for model specifications). As noted, CharacTour aggregates the data such that I only observe the percent of users that are categorized as possessing each trait; I do not observe individual scores of users on each trait. I used a mixed effects model to control for differences across personality traits and types of characters. Since different user personality traits might predict whether users are likely to become fans at all (e.g., playful users might become fans of characters more than uptight users), I include a fixed effect for trait to control for this variation. Likewise, since each character has a unique array of scores across multiple character personality traits, each character might attract a different array of people extreme on traits. For example, a character that is balanced and possesses multiple traits might attract fewer users high on intelligence than a character who is specifically known for being intelligent above all else. Thus, it is important to control for character-specific differences in the distribution of users who became fans. I use a random effect to control for character, since these characters could be considered a random sample of all

characters throughout stories (for a discussion of when to use random versus fixed effects, see Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998).

Model 1:

$$\boldsymbol{PercentWithTrait} = \boldsymbol{\beta_1}(\boldsymbol{traitscore}) + \boldsymbol{\beta_2}(\boldsymbol{villain}) + \boldsymbol{\beta_3}(\boldsymbol{traitscore} * \boldsymbol{villain}) + \boldsymbol{\mu_{character}} + \boldsymbol{\alpha_{trait}}$$

PercentWithTrait: *The percent of a character's fans (users) who possess a given trait*

traitscore: The score from 1-5 assigned to a character on a given trait by CharacTour staff

villain: A dummy variable assigned by CharacTour staff and coded as 1 for villains and 0 for non-villains

$\boldsymbol{\mu_{character}}$**:** A random effect to control for variation across different characters (Sherlock Holmes, Joey Tribbiani, etc.)

$\boldsymbol{\alpha_{trait}}$**:** A fixed effect to control for variation across different traits (brainy, solitary, etc.)

Methodological Detail. Because each trait score is on a bipolar scale from one trait to its opposite (e.g., 1=social, 5=solitary), it is problematic to analyze all traits in a single regression. Specifically, the bipolar traits are associated with a single score on the independent variable (e.g., Sherlock Holmes is a 5 on the social-solitary scale) but two different scores on the dependent variable, one for each pole of the scale (e.g., 47.5% of Sherlock fans are solitary, and 3.2% are social). As such, it is not sensible to conduct the regression on both the high and low anchors of the trait scales simultaneously; therefore, in the main analysis I included only those traits for

which a 5 is considered high (e.g., solitary is included but social is not). However, as detailed in "Additional Analyses/Robustness," I subsequently conducted the same analyses on the remainder of the traits (for which a 1 is high) in a separate model.

Results and Discussion.

A mixed effects model with maximum likelihood estimation revealed that a character's trait score significantly and positively predicted the percent of a character's fans with that trait (β_1 = 2.39%, *SE* = 0.07%, z = 33.87, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [2.25%, 2.53%]). In line with prior theory and findings, as a character's score on a given trait increased, the percent of that character's fans who possessed that trait increased (H_1). Importantly, this positive effect of similarity emerged for both villains and non-villains. In fact, a significant positive interaction effect of villain*traitscore emerged (β_3 = 0.64%, *SE* = 0.18%, z = 3.49, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.28%, 1.00%]). The positive effect of similarity was even stronger for villains than non-villains. In accordance with H_1, this suggests people are interested in, as opposed to repulsed by, similar villains (see Figure 2 for a margins plot of results).

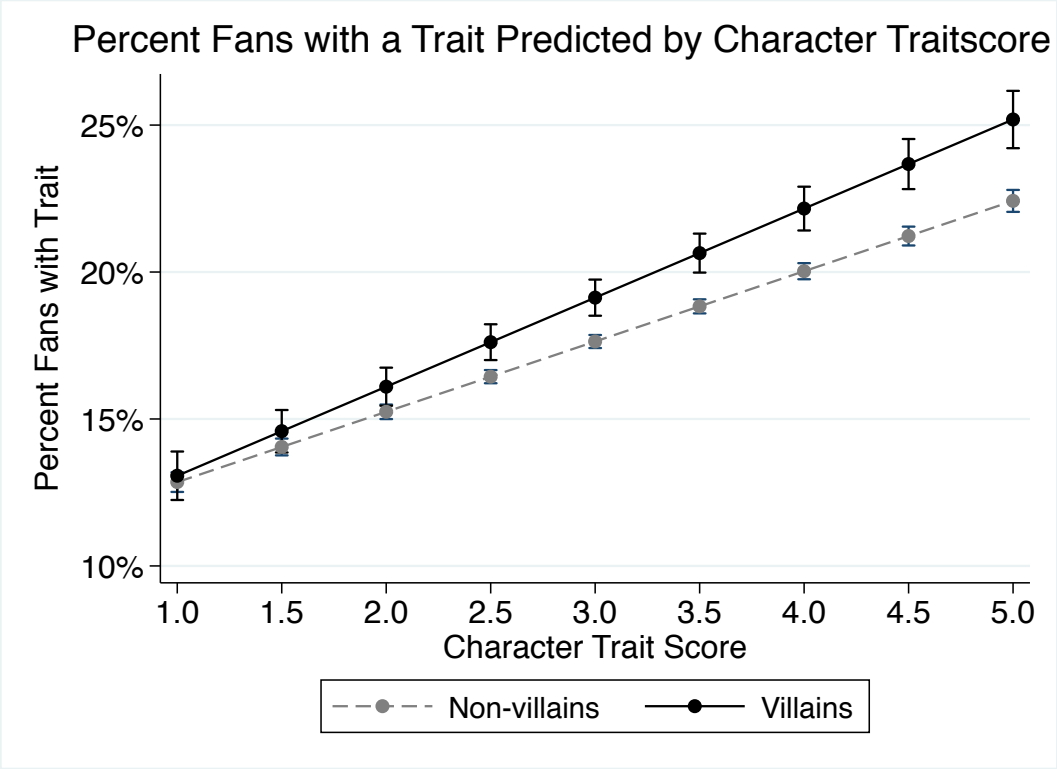

Figure 2 – Study 1.1: Predicted values at 0.5-point trait score intervals of percent of fans with a trait given a character's score on that trait. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals for estimates.

Additional Analyses/Robustness

I used a random effect to control for the effects caused by specific characters. However, prior work suggests random effects can potentially introduce bias into a model if the random effect correlates with the independent variable. Prior work suggests that a Hausman test, which compares a random effects model to a corresponding fixed effects model, can be used to test for correlation and whether a random effects model is appropriate (Wood 2006). A Hausman test found no evidence of correlation between the independent variable and Character, supporting the use of a random effects model ($\chi^2 = 6.38$, $p = 1.00$). In addition, I also ran a fixed effects model on the data and found similar results (Appendix 1).

I also reverse coded and conducted all analyses on the other half of the data (the traits for which 1 indicates a high score and 5 a low score- "1-High"). The effects were highly similar to the original analysis, speaking to the robustness of these findings. Both 5-High and 1-High regression outputs with both random and fixed effects for Character are presented in Appendix 1.

Supplementary Analysis.

The results of the main analysis suggest that users are most drawn to villains who are similar to them. But this analysis does not indicate *which* traits people prefer to share with villains. When we think of villains, we think of negative traits – manipulative, rude, dishonest, and so on – since villains tend to embody these traits more often than non-villains. However, villains can also have positive traits – funny, intelligent, charismatic, and so on. It is possible consumers only like feeling similar to villains' positive traits, but shy away from villains with whom they share negative traits. If similarity on any trait is attractive, then villains' fans should be more likely than non-villains' fans to possess traits more closely associated with villains, such as manipulativeness, rudeness, and dishonesty. If instead consumers only like sharing positive traits with villains, then villains' fans might look no different than non-villains' fans on these negative traits or may even be less likely to possess them.

To explore these relationships, I conducted a supplementary analysis with a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with the percent of fans with each trait as the dependent variables and villain vs. non-villain as the independent variable. The results suggested that villains do, indeed, share negative traits as well as positive traits with their fans. For example, compared to non-villains, villainous characters had a greater percentage of fans who rated themselves as **dishonest** ($M_{villains}$ = 16.18%, 95% CI = [14.75%, 17.60%]), $M_{non\text{-}villains}$ =

9.04%, 95% CI = [8.53%, 9.56%]), $F(1, 3960) = 84.98$, $p < .001$), **rude** ($M_{villains}$ = 34.16%, 95% CI = [31.81%, 36.5%]), $M_{non\text{-}villains}$ = 27.38%, 95% CI = [26.54%, 28.23%]), $F(1, 3960) = 28.41$, $p < .001$), **manipulative** ($M_{villains}$ = 23.28%, 95% CI = [21.22%, 25.33%]), $M_{non\text{-}villains}$ = 15.18%, 95% CI = [14.44%, 15.93%]), $F(1, 3960) = 52.65$, $p < .001$), and **selfish** ($M_{villains}$ = 11.65%, 95% CI = [10.53%, 12.78%]), $M_{non\text{-}villains}$ = 5.41%, 95% CI = [5.00%, 5.81%]), $F(1, 3960) = 104.52$, $p < .001$). The results of this supplementary analysis suggest people are drawn to similarity with villains, even when the similarity is on negative traits.

STUDY 1.2

In contrast to prior literature, Study 1.1 suggests people can be drawn toward similar people with negative characteristics and, in particular, similar villains. I argue the reason for this departure is the villains on CharacTour are story villains, and stories represent a "safe haven" in which similarity to "bad" others does not threaten the self in the way real-life villains would. However, Study 1.1 could not test this assumption directly because the villains on CharacTour are largely fictional or fictionalized. To address this, Study 1.2 tested whether comparisons to villains in fictional stories are indeed less likely to evoke psychological discomfort than comparisons to real life (non-fictionalized) villains.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (character type: villain vs. hero) x 2 (fictionality: real vs. fictional) within-subjects design. One hundred two undergraduate and graduate students at a private midwestern university were selected to complete an online study. One participant was excluded for failing the attention check, and one participant was excluded

because they experienced technical difficulties with the survey, leaving 100 participants (43 male, 56 female, 1 other, M_{age} = 23.95). This study was pre-registered on AsPredicted.com.

Procedure. Participants were told they would be shown brief descriptions of fourteen online quizzes. Participants were told they would be asked their quiz preference and would have the opportunity to take their preferred quiz at the end of the survey. As such, the setup was incentive compatible; participants should be motivated to attend carefully to the material and answer accurately since they would receive their preferred quiz at the end. Participants then saw fourteen quizzes in randomized order. Each quiz had a title, a short description, and a small image icon (Appendix 2). Embedded within this list of quizzes were the four focal quizzes in which participants could discover which 1) fictional villain, 2) real-life villain, 3) fictional hero, or 4) real-life hero was most similar to them. The hero quizzes were included to rule out the possibility that any difference in discomfort between the fictional villain quiz and the real villain quiz might be caused by general preferences for fiction over non-fiction, rather than specifically by greater discomfort toward similar real-life villains compared to similar fictional villains.

For each quiz, participants completed a filler question about confidence as well as the focal question regarding discomfort. One concern was that participants might be unwilling to admit something as innocent as an online quiz would make them feel uncomfortable due to impression management concerns. To minimize this issue, I adopted a procedure from prior literature to reduce impression management concerns by framing the question from a third party perspective (Cannon and Rucker 2019; Fiske et al. 2002). Specifically, participants answered the question: “How likely is it that taking this quiz could make a person feel uncomfortable?” from 1-Not very likely to 7-Very likely. Participants then chose their preferred quiz from a list and

answered some basic demographic and attention check questions. Finally, as promised, participants were provided the opportunity to take their preferred quiz via a link.

Results and Discussion

Discomfort. A two-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with discomfort as the dependent measure and character type and fictionality as factors revealed a significant main effect of fictionality; fiction quizzes were less uncomfortable than real-life quizzes ($F(1, 99) = 16.57$, $p < .001$). A main effect of character type was also present; villain quizzes were more uncomfortable than hero quizzes ($F(1, 99) = 70.68$, $p < .001$). More importantly, there was a significant interaction between fictionality and character type ($F(1, 99) = 18.41$, $p < .001$).

Simple effects tests revealed that for villainous individuals, the quiz to discover similarity to fictional villains was viewed as less uncomfortable than the quiz to discover similarity to real-life villains ($M_{\text{fictional-villain}} = 3.81$, 95% CI = [3.47, 4.15], $M_{\text{real-villain}} = 4.92$, 95% CI = [4.54, 5.31]; $t(99) = -5.07$, $p < .001$). However, no difference emerged for fictional vs. real-life heroes: ($M_{\text{fictional-hero}} = 2.66$, 95% CI = [2.32, 3.01], $M_{\text{real-hero}} = 2.65$, 95% CI = [2.32, 2.98], $t(99) = 0.07$, $p = .947$). Together, these results support the idea that stories, where villains are fictional, represent a safe haven for comparisons to potentially darker selves.

Additional analysis. As an extra "replication" within this study, two of the other quizzes participants rated were also about villain similarity – specifically, similarity to real and fictional serial killers. I conducted an additional two-way repeated measures ANOVA with fictionality and hero vs. serial killer as factors to determine whether fiction provides a safe haven from threat toward the more specific villainous group, serial killers. The results were similar to those of the

main analysis: there was a significant interaction between fictionality and hero/killer ($F(1,99) = 5.24$, $p = .024$) such that while there was no difference in discomfort for real and fictional hero quizzes ($p = .947$), the fictional serial killer quiz was significantly less uncomfortable ($M_{\text{fictional-killer}} = 4.72$, 95% CI = [4.35, 5.09]) than the real serial killer quiz ($M_{\text{real-killer}} = 5.19$, 95% CI = [4.83, 5.55], $t(99) = -2.84$, $p = .005$).

STUDY 1.3

Study 1.1 provides an initial demonstration using large-scale, real-world data that similarity to fictional villains is attractive, not repulsive. Study 1.3 tests whether this relationship is causal by employing an experimental design to test the relationship between similarity and participants' interest in fictional villains.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (non-villain vs. villain) x 3 (similarity level: low, medium, high) between-participants design (N = 602). Adults living in the United States were selected from an online pool (MTurk). Two participants were removed for failing an attention check, leaving 600 participants (330 male, 266 female, 2 other, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.17$).

Procedure. Participants read a scenario where a friend told them about a new television show that featured a character called Sam and were told that Sam was either the villain or the hero of the story. To manipulate perceived similarity, participants were given a list of 24 of Sam's traits and were asked to choose six of them (Appendix 3). Participants were told to either choose the six traits most different from themselves (low similarity), the six traits most similar to themselves (high similarity), or the three most similar and three most different traits (medium similarity).

Next, participants completed a 7-point scale measuring preference for the show with three items: how interested (1-Very uninterested, 7-Very interested), likely (1-Very unlikely, 7-Very likely), and excited (1-Not excited, 7-Very excited) they would be to watch the show, which were averaged to form a composite ($\alpha = .95$). Participants also completed an attention check, provided demographic information, and answered some additional unrelated questions for a separate project.

Results and Discussion.

Show preference. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant positive effect of similarity on show preference ($F(2, 594) = 16.91$, $p < .001$). Simple contrasts confirmed that participants had a significantly greater interest in the show in the high similarity conditions than the medium similarity conditions ($t(594) = 2.95$, $p = .003$), and significantly greater interest in the medium similarity conditions than in the low similarity conditions ($t(594) = 2.86$, $p = .004$). No significant effect of whether the character was a villain was present, ($F(1, 594) = 2.68$, $p = .102$). Importantly, there was also no significant interaction between villain condition and similarity condition ($F(2, 594) = 0.83$, $p = .436$). Rather, as in Study 1.1, the positive effect of similarity held for both villains and non-villains (for cell means see Table 1 and Figure 3). Once again, in line with H_1, participants appeared to be drawn toward rather than repulsed by the similar fictional villain, and the effect of similarity did not significantly differ from that observed for non-villainous characters.

Table 1 – Study 1.3: Show interest predicted by condition

Villain/Non-Villain	Low Similarity	Medium Similarity	High Similarity
Non-Villain	4.15 [3.88, 4.42]	4.53 [4.28, 4.79]	5.08 [4.82, 5.35]
Villain	4.07 [3.81, 4.34]	4.45 [4.18, 4.72]	4.70 [4.45, 4.96]

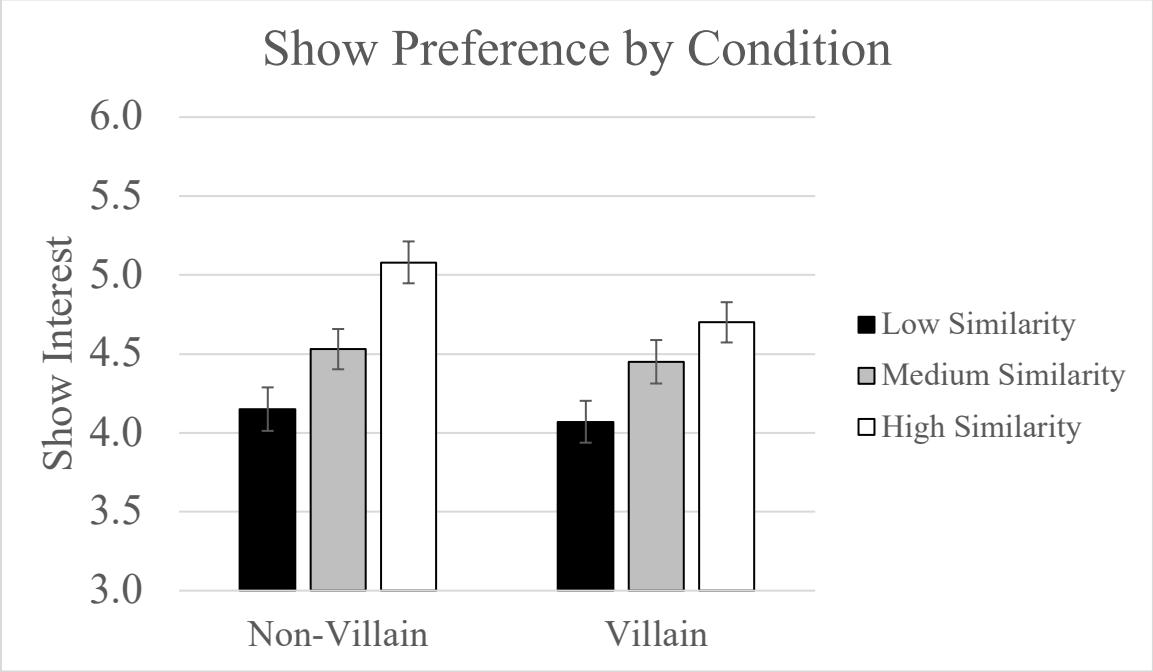

Figure 3 – Study 1.3 results: Show preference predicted by similarity and villain/non-villain.

Alternative explanation. After conducting this study, I realized there was a plausible alternative explanation for these findings. As part of the similarity manipulation, participants were presented with 24 character traits of Sam, and this list included both positive (e.g., "persuasive") and negative (e.g., "rude") traits. It is possible that because consumers wish to see themselves as "good" (Blasi 1984; Greenwald 1980), they will be more likely to select positive traits as similar to themselves and negative traits as dissimilar to themselves. If this were the

case, then the apparent effect of similarity might actually be an artefact of valence: those in the similar conditions chose more positive traits, which caused them to associate more positive traits with the character, Sam. If consumers generally prefer characters with positive traits over those with negative traits, then this alternative could explain the results.

To test whether this alternative was plausible, I conducted a post-hoc analysis of Study 1.3. Each trait was coded as negative or positive, and the total number of negative traits chosen was subtracted from the number of positive traits chosen to create an index of positivity. I then ran a linear regression with the positivity of traits chosen predicted by villain condition, level of similarity, and their interaction. Indeed, there was a significant effect of similarity on positivity of words chosen, such that participants chose more positive adjectives in more similar conditions than in more different conditions ($\beta_{sim} = 2.15$, $t = 12.09$, $p < .001$), with no significant effects of villain condition and no significant interaction (p's $> .5$). Since participants did systematically choose more positive traits in the similar conditions and more negative traits in the different conditions, I cannot rule out the alternative explanation that due to affective transfer or another valence-related explanation, choosing these more positive traits increased participants' ratings of the show rather than the actual similarity manipulation. I address this alternative in the design of Study 1.4.

STUDY 1.4

The results of Study 1.3 suggest that consumers tend to prefer similar over dissimilar fictional villains. However, one alternative explanation for Study 1.3 is that consumers were more likely to select positive traits as similar to them and negative traits as dissimilar. Then, they simply liked the similar villain more because, based on their choices, that character had more

positive traits. Study 1.4 replicates the procedure in Study 1.3 and also manipulates trait valence between subjects. This alteration allows me to rule out differential trait selection by condition as an alternative explanation of the results. In addition, manipulating valence rather than merely controlling for it allows me to test whether the preference for similar fictional villains extends to both positive and negative traits.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (non-villain vs. villain) x 2 (similar vs. dissimilar) x 2 (positive vs. negative traits) between-participants design.[3] Adults (N = 436) living in the United States were selected from an online pool (MTurk). Eighteen participants were removed for failing an attention check, leaving 418 participants (219 male, 197 female, 1 other, 1 not specified, M_{age} = 35.06).

Procedure. Participants read a scenario where a friend told them about a new television show that featured a character, Sam. I manipulated whether Sam was a villain or not by repeatedly referring to Sam as either the villain/antagonist or hero/protagonist of the story. To manipulate perceived similarity, participants were given a list of 21 of Sam's traits and selected the four traits that were most similar to/different from themselves (Appendix 4). I also manipulated trait valence. Specifically, participants saw either all positive traits (e.g., charismatic, optimistic, adventurous) or all negative traits (e.g., greedy, stubborn, impatient). Next, participants completed the same 3-item measure of preference as in Study 1.3 (α = .95). Finally, participants answered exploratory questions about their perceptions of Sam, completed

[3] Because medium similarity seemed unsurprisingly between high and low similarity in Study 1.3, subsequent studies included only two levels of similarity to simplify the design.

manipulation checks for character similarity (1-Different from me, 7-Similar to me) and villain status (1-Definitely a bad person, 7-Definitely a good person), completed an attention check, and provided demographic information.

Results

Manipulation checks. Independent samples t-tests suggest the manipulations were successful: Those in the similar conditions saw Sam as more similar to them ($M_{similar}$ = 4.58, 95% CI = [4.37, 4.79]) than those in the dissimilar conditions ($M_{dissimilar}$ = 3.12, 95% CI = [2.90, 3.34], $t(414) = 9.35$, $p < .001$). Likewise, those in the villain conditions saw Sam as more of a bad person ($M_{villain}$ = 3.50, 95% CI = [3.30, 3.70]) than those in the non-villain conditions ($M_{non\text{-}villain}$ = 4.75, CI = [4.54, 4.96], $t(415) = 8.43$, $p < .001$).

Show preference. A three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant positive effect of similarity on show preference ($F(1,410) = 35.95$, $p < .001$). No significant

Table 2 – Study 1.4: Show interest predicted by condition

Valence	Villain/Non-Villain	Dissimilar	Similar
Positive	Non-Villain	4.28 [3.85, 4.70]	5.22 [4.96, 5.48]
	Villain	4.59 [4.30, 4.87]	4.95 [4.63, 5.28]
Negative	Non-Villain	3.59 [3.20, 3.97]	4.42 [4.06, 4.77]
	Villain	3.85 [3.45, 4.25]	4.74 [4.39, 5.09]

effect of whether the character was a villain was present ($F(1,410) = 1.57$, $p = .211$). A significant main effect of valence occurred such that positive traits made a show more attractive than negative traits ($F(1,410) = 23.38$, $p < .001$); however, no significant interactions of valence with similarity emerged, which suggests participants preferred villains similar to them,

regardless of trait valence. In fact, there were no significant two- or three-way interactions at all (all *p*'s > .2). Rather, as in prior studies, the positive effect of similarity held for both villains and non-villains (see Table 2 and Figure 4).

Note: Means and [confidence intervals] for each group are presented.

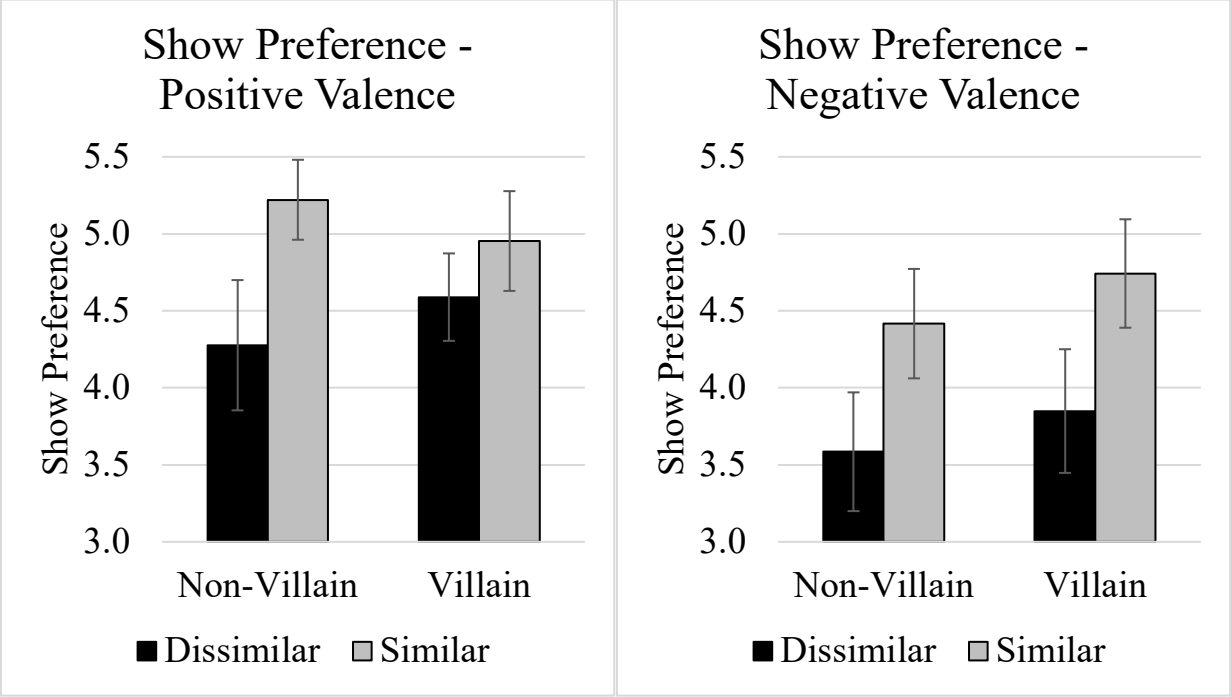

Figure 4 – Study 1.4 results: Show preference predicted by similarity and villain/non-villain with positive (left) and negative (right) traits. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

STUDY 1.5

In contrast to prior research, I have found that similarity draws people toward others with negative characteristics in fiction. I propose this result occurs because, with stories as a safe haven, people view similar villains as more self-relevant. Study 1.5, pre-registered on AsPredicted.org, tests this account via measured mediation of self-relevance.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2-cell (similar vs. dissimilar) between-subjects design. In both conditions, participants were exposed to a villain. Adults (N = 400) living in the United States were selected from an online panel (MTurk). Twenty-four participants were removed from analyses for failing an attention check, leaving 376 participants (189 male, 184 female, 2 other, M_{age} = 36.49).

Procedure. Participants were told a show called "*Standard Protocol,*" was being developed and were shown a mockup poster. The show featured Sam who was described repeatedly as the main villain of the show. Participants completed the similarity manipulation from Study 1.4, choosing 4 traits of the character, Sam, that were similar/dissimilar to them. They also completed the 3-item measure of show preference from prior studies (α = .95). Choosing the correct number of traits (4) was used as the attention check. Participants also answered a 6-item, 7-point scale measuring perceived self-relevance of Sam (e.g., 1="Sam seems irrelevant to me," to 7="Sam seems relevant to me" - Houston & Walker, 1996; α = 0.97), measures of how similar and how villainous Sam seemed, as well as basic demographic questions.

Results

Manipulation checks. An independent samples t-test suggested the manipulation checks were successful: Those in the similar condition indicated Sam was more similar to them ($M_{similar}$ = 4.43, 95% CI = [4.17, 4.69]) than those in the dissimilar condition ($M_{dissimilar}$ = 2.16, 95% CI = [1.94, 2.38], $t(358) = 13.09$, $p < .001$).

Show Preference. An independent samples t-test showed a significant effect of similarity, such that similar villains led to greater show preference ($M_{similar}$ = 4.38, 95% CI = [4.17, 4.59]) than dissimilar villains ($M_{dissimilar}$ = 3.88, 95% CI = [3.67, 4.09], $t(374) = 3.32$, $p < .001$).

Mediation by self-relevance. An independent samples t-test showed a significant effect of similarity; similar villains seemed more self-relevant ($M_{similar}$ = 3.66, 95% CI = [3.43, 3.89]) than dissimilar villains ($M_{dissimilar}$ = 2.90, 95% CI = [2.70, 3.10], $t(374) = 4.89$, $p < .001$). I tested for mediation using the PROCESS macro (model 4) in SPSS with 5,000 bootstrapping samples (Hayes 2013; Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007) with similarity condition as the independent variable, show preference as the dependent variable, and self-relevance as the mediator. For ease of interpretation, the show preference and self-relevance scores were standardized.

Similarity condition significantly predicted self-relevance (β = 0.49, SE = 0.10, t = 4.88, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.29, 0.69]) and self-relevance significantly predicted show preference (β = 0.71, SE = 0.04, t = 19.06, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.64, 0.79]). Moreover, when I controlled for self-relevance, similarity condition no longer predicted show preference (p = .879). In addition, the indirect effect of similarity on show preference through self-relevance was significant in that the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (β = 0.35, SE = 0.08; 95% CI = [0.21, 0.50]), which suggests the effect of similarity on show preference is mediated by perceived self-relevance (H_2; Figure 5).

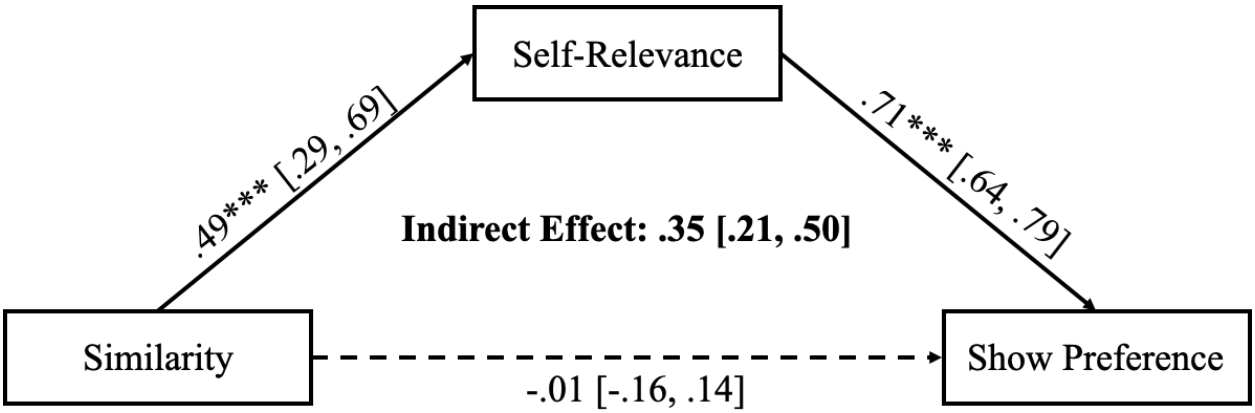

Figure 5 – Study 1.5: Mediation Analysis in SPSS PROCESS, Model 4. Estimates and [confidence intervals] are presented. Asterisks indicate significance (*** $p < .001$).

Alternative explanation. Upon exploration of the data, although participants' ratings of how villainous Sam was (1=A hero, 7=A villain) were above the midpoint of the scale (both $p < .001$), they were lower in the similar condition ($M_{similar} = 6.30$, 95% Confidence Interval (CI) = [6.13, 6.47]) than dissimilar condition ($M_{dissimilar} = 6.53$, 95% CI = [6.40, 6.66], $t(338) = -2.10$, $p = .037$). This might lead one to wonder whether participants' greater preference in the similar condition was caused by the fact that the character seemed less villainous rather than the fact that he seemed more self-relevant.

To test for this possibility, I ran an alternative mediation analysis with SPSS PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapping samples (Hayes, 2013; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). In this analysis, the similarity condition was the independent variable, standardized show preference was the dependent variable, and both standardized self-relevance and perceived villainy were included as simultaneous mediators. In this model, increased similarity both increased self-relevance ($\beta = 0.49$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 4.83$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.29, 0.68]) and decreased perceived villainy ($\beta = -0.22$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -2.11$, $p = .036$, 95% CI = [-0.42, -0.01]).

However, perceived villainy actually had a positive effect on show preference, such that participants preferred the show more when Sam was perceived as more villainous (β = 0.07, SE = 0.04, t = 2.01, p = .045, 95% CI = [0.001, 0.15]). This suggests the increased show preference in the similar condition was not caused by decreased perceived villainy. In addition, the indirect effect of similarity on show preference through self-relevance was significant in that the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (β = 0.35, SE = 0.07, 95% CI = [0.21, 0.50]), whereas the indirect effect through villainy was not significant (β = -0.02, SE = 0.01, 95% CI = [-0.05, 0.00]). Thus, the data provide support for the mechanism of increased self-relevance and no support for the alternative mechanism of decreased perceived villainy.

STUDY 1.6

The purpose of Study 1.6 was to test the boundaries of fiction's ability to protect consumers from threat. I wanted to see if consumers would find similarity to even highly depraved and evil villains acceptable thanks to the protective barrier of fictionality, or whether there is some level of villainy at which threat re-enters the equation and a highly despicable villain would cause the effect of similarity to reverse.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (similar vs. different) x 2 (villain vs. hero) between-participants design. Adults (N = 427) living in the United States were selected from an online pool (MTurk). Ten participants were removed for failing an attention check, leaving 417 participants (201 male, 214 female, 2 other, M_{age} = 38.05).

Procedure. Participants were given the same similarity manipulation used in prior studies and saw either all positive or all negative traits of a character called Alex.[4] After choosing traits, participants were told more about the character of Alex. They were told that Alex was either the hero or the villain of the story and were given some additional details about what makes the character a hero or villain. In the hero condition, participants were told Alex rescues children from a fire during the show. In contrast, in the villain condition, participants were told gruesome details about Alex engaging in murderous and cannibalistic actions during the show. The purpose here was to make the villain as extreme as possible to test the boundaries of fiction's ability to protect consumers from threat. Next, participants answered the same three questions about show interest as in prior studies ($\alpha = .97$). Participants also answered a number of other questions about the character of Alex: a manipulation check of similarity (1-Different from me, 7-Similar to me), a manipulation check of good vs. evil (1-Definitely a bad person, 7-Definitely a good person), whether they would like the character of Alex (1-Strongly dislike, 7-Strongly like), and some additional exploratory items (e.g., how interesting Alex seems, identification with Alex, fear of Alex).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An independent samples t-test suggested the manipulation checks were successful: Those in the similar conditions felt Sam was more similar to them ($M_{\text{similar}} = 3.36$, 95% CI = [3.10, 3.63]) than those in the non-similar conditions ($M_{\text{non-similar}} = 2.31$, 95% CI = [2.09, 2.54], $t(413) = 5.89$, $p < .001$). Likewise, those in the villain conditions felt Sam was

[4] Since valence was mainly manipulated to avoid the confound present in Study 1.3, I collapse across valence conditions in this study. As in Study 1.3, in a 3-way ANOVA valence does not interact with the factors of interest.

more evil ($M_{villain}$ = 5.44, 95% CI = [5.24, 5.63]) than those in the non-villain conditions ($M_{non-villain}$ = 1.61, 95% CI = [1.43, 1.79], $t(413) = 28.74$, $p < .001$).

Show preference. A two-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect of similarity ($F(1, 413) = 4.27$, $p = .040$), a significant main effect of character type ($F(1, 413) = 129.26$, $p < .001$), and a significant interaction ($F(1, 413) = 6.74$, $p = .010$). Simple effects tests revealed that, for the hero, similarity significantly increased movie preference ($M_{similar}$ = 4.82, SD = 1.30, $M_{dissimilar}$ = 4.08, SD = 1.50; $F(1, 413) = 10.82$, $p = .001$), consistent with prior studies. However, similarity neither significantly increased nor decreased interest in the show with the particularly heinous villain ($M_{similar}$ = 2.60, SD = 1.80, $M_{dissimilar}$ = 2.69, SD = 1.82; $F(1, 413) = 0.14$, $p = .708$; see Figure 6).

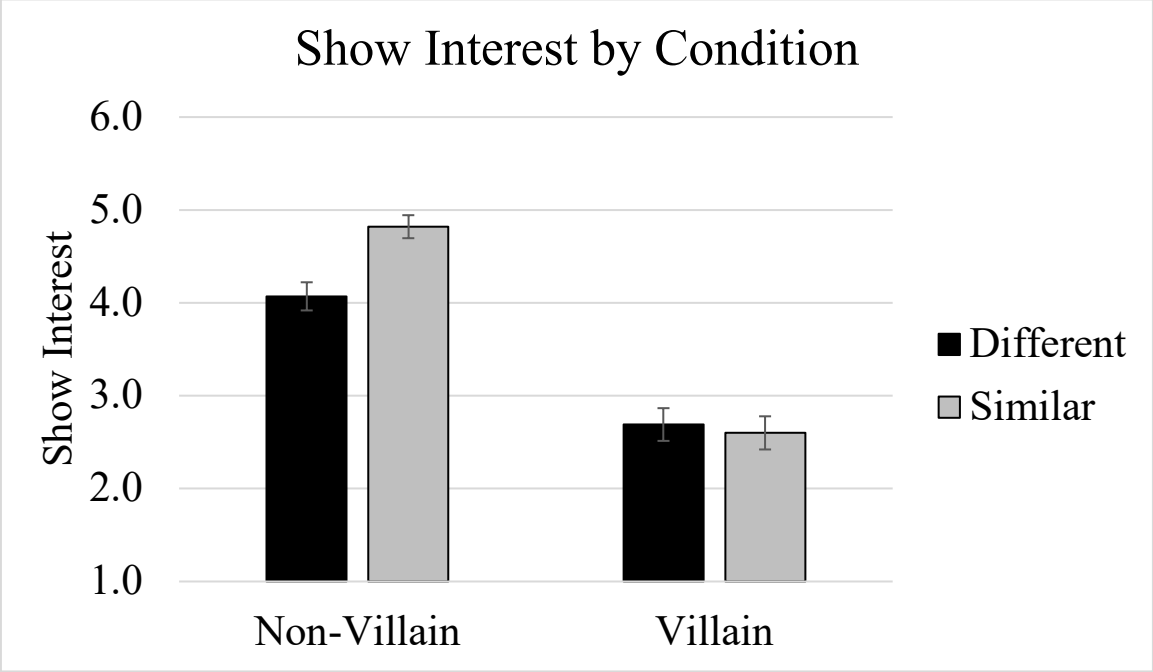

Figure 6 – Study 1.6: Show interest by character condition (villain/non-villain) and similarity.

Although the heinous villain in Study 1.6 eliminated the preference for similarity, it did not significantly reverse this preference. Instead, the effect of similarity on preference simply disappeared in the case of the cannibalistic villain. This type of interaction is more difficult to interpret – it is possible there is in fact a limit to fiction's ability to protect against threat, and the threat in this study was too great and left the similar participants feeling threatened. However, it is equally possible those in the similar condition did not feel threatened, and instead the description of the heinous villain led to a measurement floor effect. In other words, the null effect may have occurred because the description of the murderous cannibal (similar or no) sounded too upsetting and unappealing, leading to generally low interest in watching the show. In the remaining studies, rather than merely increasing the level of threat, I focus on a context which may render fiction incapable of buffering against threat at all.

STUDY 1.7

Study 1.7 sought to test the hypothesis that under social scrutiny, threat will occur, and the effect of similarity will reverse such that consumers want to avoid similarity to even fictional villains (H_3). To test this idea, Study 1.7 employs a context in which social scrutiny is likely to be present: a first date (Leary and Kowalski 1990).

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (villain: similar vs. non-similar) x 2 (context: high threat vs. low threat) between-participants design. Four hundred five adults living in the United States were selected from an online pool (MTurk). Eleven participants were removed for failing an attention check, leaving 394 participants (193 male, 198 female, 3 other, M_{age} = 36.14). This study was pre-registered on AsPredicted.org.

Procedure. After answering initial demographic questions, all participants completed an activity designed to activate impression management concerns. Specifically, they read a research report revealing that people assume individuals who are similar on one dimension are more likely to share other characteristics in common. In fact, this is a finding observed in research, and participants were given the citation of the work (Cooper and Jones 1969). Participants also read, as an example, that when observers learn a target is similar to a person with a negative characteristic, observers might infer that the target possesses that negative characteristic as well. This manipulation was designed to alert people to the possibility of social judgment (Appendix 5).

Second, I manipulated the extent of threat via context. All participants were told they would indicate their interest in watching a movie. In the low-threat conditions, participants were told they would rate their interest in watching the movie alone. In contrast, in the high-threat conditions, participants were told they would rate their interest in watching the movie on a first date. Although impression management concerns were induced for everyone via the research summary, our prediction was that participants would be most concerned about what others thought when the consumption of the movie would occur in the presence of others (i.e., the first date).

Next, all participants saw a screen shot of a text message "from a close friend" which described a movie called *Fractured Mind*. Similarity was manipulated within this text message. In the non-similar conditions, the text message simply recommended and described the movie. In the similar conditions, the text message contained the same movie recommendation and description, but additionally described the villain as similar to the participant (see Figure 7).

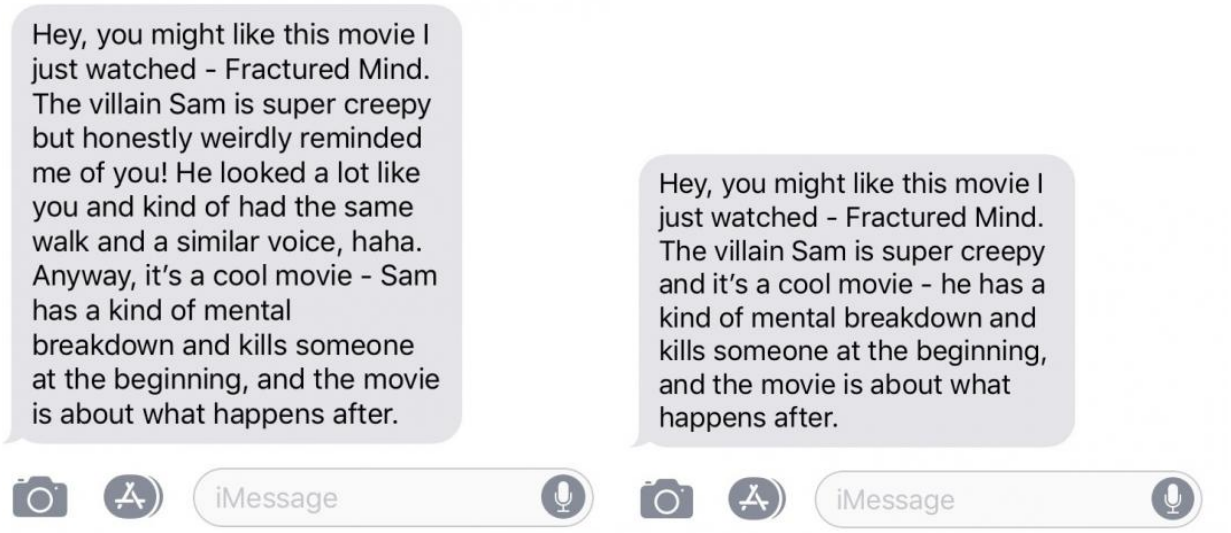

Figure 7 – Study 1.7: Text message for similar (left) and non-similar (right) conditions. Movie descriptions were matched to participant gender.

Finally, all participants saw a mockup movie poster for *Fractured Mind* (Appendix 5) and answered the same three movie preference items as in previous studies ($\alpha = .96$), as well as manipulation and attention checks.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An independent samples t-test suggested the similarity manipulation check was successful: Those in the similar conditions felt Sam was more similar to them ($M_{similar} = 5.76$, 95% CI = [5.54, 5.98]) than those in the non-similar conditions ($M_{non\text{-}similar} = 2.69$, 95% CI = [2.45, 2.93], $t(387) = 18.70$, $p < .001$). Likewise, 85.8% of those in the high-threat conditions confirmed they imagined watching the movie on a date, compared to only 13.7% who spontaneously did so in the low-threat conditions.

Movie preference. A two-way ANOVA showed no significant main effect of similarity ($F(1, 390) = 2.49$, $p = .116$), but a significant main effect of threat; high threat led to a lower

preference for the movie than low threat ($F(1,390) = 41.74$, $p < .001$). More importantly, a significant interaction effect between similarity and threat emerged ($F(1, 390) = 4.01$, $p = .046$).

Simple effects tests revealed that, in the high-threat conditions, similarity significantly decreased movie preference ($M_{similar} = 2.78$, 95% CI = [2.42, 3.14], $M_{non\text{-}similar} = 3.43$, 95% CI = [3.06, 3.80]; $F(1, 390) = 6.41$, $p = .012$). However, in the low-threat conditions, similarity increased movie preference slightly, but this was not significant ($M_{similar} = 4.32$, 95% CI = [3.95, 4.69], $M_{non\text{-}similar} = 4.24$, 95% CI = [3.92, 4.57]; $F(1,390) = 0.09$, $p = .764$, see Figure 8).

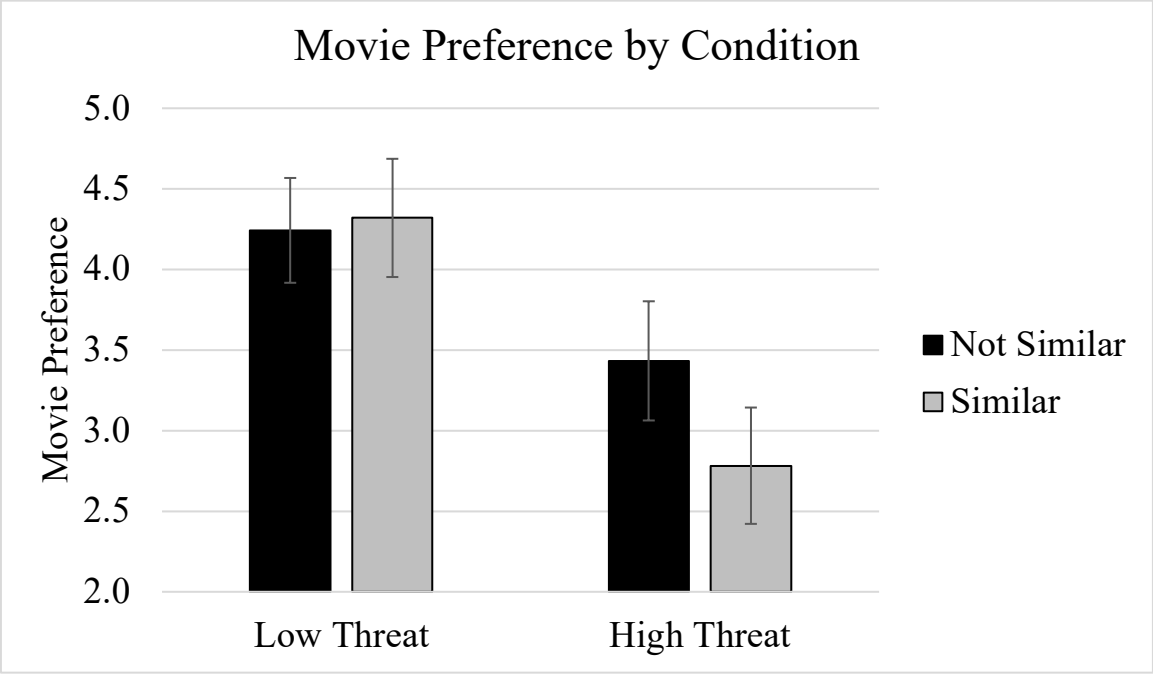

Figure 8 – Study 1.7 Results: Movie preference predicted by similarity and threat condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

STUDY 1.8

One might view the null effect in Study 1.7 under low threat as a lack of replication of the prior studies. However, this attenuation is sensible because all participants saw potentially threatening information; everyone was told similarity to a bad person could cause social judgment. The threat was greater in the context of a first date; but even in the context of private

viewing, the social judgment information may have reminded participants of the possibility for social scrutiny and heightened threat, attenuating the attraction to similarity observed previously. In Study 1.8, I address this issue by comparing threat present versus absent rather than high versus low.

Method

Participants and Design. This experiment used a 2 (similar vs. not similar) x 2 (threat present vs. threat absent) between-subjects design. Adults (N = 403) living in the United States were selected from an online pool (MTurk). Six participants were removed for failing an attention check, leaving 397 participants (209 male, 186 female, 2 other, M_{age} = 36.45). This study was pre-registered on AsPredicted.org.

Procedure. Participants completed materials similar to Study 1.7, with several critical changes. First, I adjusted the stimuli to either create threat or not. In the threat present conditions, participants read the scientific finding from Study 1.7 that suggested people judge others based on similarity and were asked their interest in a movie for a first date. In the threat absent condition, participants did not read the finding and were asked their interest in a movie to watch alone. I used this procedure to elevate threat in the threat conditions and avoid activating threat in the no threat conditions. That is, the threat present conditions induced concerns about impression management and used a context where such concerns should arise. In contrast, the threat absent conditions did not induce impression management concerns and used a context where such concerns should not arise. Participants once again completed the same three items regarding their interest in watching the movie (α = .96).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. Those in the similar conditions felt Sam was portrayed as more similar to them ($M_{similar}$ = 5.85, 95% CI = [5.63, 6.07]) than those in the non-similar conditions ($M_{non\text{-}similar}$ = 2.72, 95% CI = [2.48, 2.96], $t(391) = 18.91$, $p < .001$). In addition, those in the threat present conditions indicated greater belief that similarity to bad others could cause social judgment ($M_{present}$ = 4.99, 95% CI = [4.80, 5.18]) than those in the threat absent conditions (M_{absent} = 4.56, 95% CI = [4.31, 4.81], $t(365) = 2.74$, $p = .007$).

Movie preference. A two-way ANOVA showed no significant main effect of similarity, ($F(1, 393) = 0.30$, $p = .587$) and a significant main effect of threat condition such that those in the threat present conditions showed less preference for the movie than those in the threat absent conditions ($F(1, 393) = 39.44$, $p < .001$). Importantly, a significant interaction between similarity and threat also emerged ($F(1, 393) = 8.94$, $p = .003$).

Simple effects tests revealed that, in the threat present conditions, similarity significantly decreased movie preference ($M_{similar}$ = 2.77, 95% CI = [2.42, 3.13], $M_{non\text{-}similar}$ = 3.40, 95% CI = [3.04, 3.76]; $F(1,393) = 6.17$, $p = .013$, see Figure 9). In the threat absent conditions, as in prior experiments, similarity tended to increase movie preference ($M_{similar}$ = 4.42, 95% CI = [4.11, 4.74], $M_{non\text{-}similar}$ = 3.99, 95% CI = [3.63, 4.35]; $F(1,393) = 3.03$, $p = .082$).

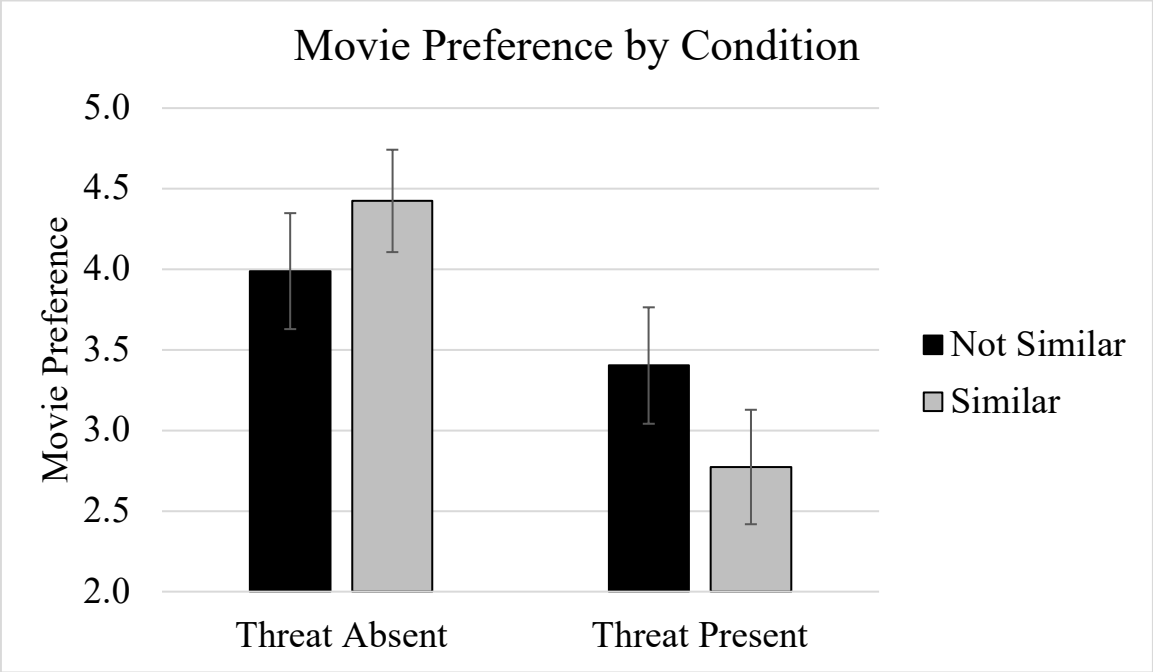

Figure 9 – Study 1.8 results: Interest in the movie based on similarity and threat conditions. Error bars represent 95% confidence interval.

CHAPTER 1: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prior work has shown that similarity to a 'bad' person can be threatening and induce avoidance (Novak and Lerner 1968; Senn 1971; Wan and Wyer Jr. 2019). I find the opposite. First, in large-scale, real-world company data, consumers expressed interest in similar villainous story characters in everyday life (H_1). This finding replicated in controlled experiments, which also demonstrated that the effect occurs due to the combination of fiction's ability to mitigate feelings of threat (H_3) and to the heightened perceived self-relevance of similar villains (H_2). Overall, the present research suggests a more contextual understanding of human nature: consumers are not always repulsed by similar, negative others; they can become drawn to such others when concerns of self-threat are mitigated.

This chapter of my dissertation offers potential insights into a broad range of distinct psychological phenomena. First, the work has implications for researchers interested in the self-

concept. This work highlights how efforts to maintain a positive view of the self shape the comparisons people seek out. Second, this work informs research on interpersonal attraction by demonstrating when similarity to darker selves garners interest rather than repulsion. Third, this research explores psychological reactions to story characters, which has implications for understanding story processing and potentially how people select avatars in virtual worlds. Finally, the work demonstrates how big data from people's online experiences can be used to offer insights about their everyday behavior.

This chapter of my dissertation focused on stories as a means to mitigate threat. However, I believe the conceptual implications of this work extend beyond stories. The theorizing suggests that any factor that mitigates self-threat might make people more prone to favor comparisons to negative others that are similar. For example, secure attachment figures represent another potential safe haven from threat that might also insulate people from the discomfort associated with similarity to negative others (Cox et al. 2008). Likewise, self-affirmations have been shown to mitigate threat (Cohen, Aronson, and Steele 2000). Thus, while the present research used stories, it invites a more general exploration of other factors that might mitigate threat, and thus attract people toward comparisons with similar, but negative, others.

Future research could also explore the implications for real-life others who become "fictionalized." For instance, with the prevalence of reality television, real-life individuals may be processed as if part of a story. This raises the question of whether viewers might feel less threatened in comparing themselves to these "fictionalized" individuals with negative characteristics than if they were to interact with the same person in real life. If there are situations when people perceive real-life villains as "fiction-esque" and this makes them feel

more comfortable with similarity to that person, this could have potentially sinister implications for people's choice of role models (Martin and Bush 2000) and voting behavior (Gabriel et al. 2018). Though speculative at present, this possibility indicates the broad scope of potential future directions for this work.

Chapter 1 Conclusion

Similarity to negative others is aversive because it implies an affront to one's self-view. Thus, people recoil from others they see as negative and similar to themselves. However, the current research suggests that the combination of threat mitigation and perceived self-relevance in stories allows similarity to negative others to become attractive. Although similarity to Lord Voldemort is aversive to Harry Potter, it might be attractive to some readers of the series. Likewise, perhaps Harry Potter might find villainous similarity attractive if instead of his own world's antagonist, Lord Voldemort, he was similar to an alternative world's villain. One can imagine Harry Potter discovering a "darker side" through *X-Men* villain and fellow orphan, Magneto; but that, as they say, is another story.

CHAPTER 2: FICTIONAL VILLAINS AND ESCAPE FROM SELF

In Collaboration with Derek D. Rucker

"I don't play villains. I play very interesting people."
-Alan Rickman, on portraying movie villains

Chapter 1 demonstrates that consumers tend to prefer similar over dissimilar fictional villains. This suggests that if a consumer were forced to choose between portraying a similar villain versus a dissimilar villain in a game, she would likely select the similar villain. However, in most cases consumers are not forced to choose a villain to portray. Given the wide range of characters from which to choose, why would a consumer choose to play a villain at all?

According to prior research, they shouldn't. Games are a form of fantasy, and prior research generally assumes that the motivation for fantasy is the desire to imagine the fulfillment of real-world goals (Klinger 2009; Oettingen and Mayer 2002). Because of this, researchers often conclude that the only consumers who choose to portray violent characters and villains in games are those harboring secret desires to cause pain and destruction in reality (Greitemeyer 2015; Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2017).

However, this portrait of gamers who play villains as real-life sadists seems puzzling in light of the immense popularity of violent and villain-centric games. *God of War*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Among Us*, and other games that cast the player as the villain are considered among the highest rated and most popular games of all time (Gilbert 2020; Verma 2020). Given the popularity of consumption experiences that allow people to take a walk on the fictional dark side, I believe it is important to move beyond the image of the sadistic gamer to understand other motivations that may explain the popularity of villainous and violent games.

Specifically, I propose a novel distinction between two different fantasy motivations: upward fantasy and outward fantasy. Upward fantasy represents the motive most researchers use to explain fantasy engagement: a desire to virtually achieve one's real-world goals. In contrast, I propose outward fantasy is motivated by a different purpose: the desire to avoid one's real-world goals and take a break from responsibility and stress. Introducing the concept of outward fantasy allows me to reconcile the immense popularity of villainous and violent games with the fact that the majority of consumers do not seem to have sadistic tendencies in reality. In this chapter, I test the idea that consumers experiencing psychological strain (i.e., those particularly burdened by responsibility and stress) will have a heightened desire to engage with fictional villains in games and other fantasy contexts, and that they are specifically using villains as a form of outward fantasy to temporarily escape their real-world selves.

Prior Literature: Villainous Fantasies Imply Villainous Desires

Based on prior literature, one might predict that consumers who choose to play villains in games likely have villainous desires. This prediction would be consistent with the tone of much of the research and popular press on villainous gaming, which tends to depict those who play violent or villainous characters in games as aggressive and sadistic individuals in real life (Anderson 2004; Carey 2013; Walker et al. 2018). A cautionary note is warranted, however. Much of this research focuses on the outcomes of violent game play rather than the motivations for it. For example, particularly following the increase in school shootings across the country, there has been a large body of work and even a task force at the American Psychological Association devoted to examining whether violent video game play results in real-life aggression and violence (Anderson 2004; APA 2020; Becker-Olsen and Norberg 2010; Deanne Brocato et

al. 2010; Laczniak et al. 2017). These studies focus on the effects of games, but they do not focus on causes of playing such games. Those limited studies that do focus on antecedents of and motivations for villainy in games seem similarly focused on the players' real life desires for dominance and destruction, asking questions such as whether violent video game players are real-life sadists (Ashworth, Pyle, and Pancer 2010; Greitemeyer 2015; Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2017). Indeed, the preference to portray villains in games is even included as an item in the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (CAST), an 18-item measure of everyday sadism (Buckels and Paulhus 2014).

The plethora of research on violent games seems to imply that engagement in these kinds of "deviant" fantasies points to underlying deviant real-world desires. Importantly, this conclusion is also consistent with our current understanding of the motivations for engaging in fantasy more broadly. Fantasy is a type of mental simulation, or "imitative representation of the functioning or process of some event or series of events" (Kappes, Sharma, and Oettingen 2013; Taylor and Schneider 1989) that depicts situations not tied to a consumer's real-world sensory stimuli. The desire to role-play a fantasy is considered one of the driving motivations for video game play (Yee 2006); therefore, the literature on motivations for fantasy seems highly relevant to understanding video game preferences.

The fantasy literature generally assumes that fantasy engagement stems from the desire to fulfill deficiencies consumers wish to fulfill in reality, meaning that consumers prefer fantasies consistent with their real-life desires (Klinger 2009; Oettingen and Mayer 2002; Oettingen and Sevincer 2018; Oyserman and James 2009; Singer 1966). The rationale for this assumption is that, in many cases, consumers will enact their fantasies in real life when provided the chance to

do so (Klinger 2009). This has led researchers to the conclusion that fantasies center on consumers' "current concerns," or the important unfulfilled goals weighing on consumers' minds (Klinger 2009). In other words, fantasy content is believed to be dictated by what a consumer wants to occur in real life.

Two Types of Fantasy

Applied to the context of portraying villains in media, this logic suggests that most "good" consumers should want to play heroes and wishing to play the villain implies a desire to enact villainy in the real world. However, this would suggest only a minority of consumers engage in villainous fantasies. This assessment seems factually inaccurate. Several findings suggest widespread engagement with "deviant" fantasies. For example, a substantial proportion of men with no history of criminal sexual activity (perhaps as high as 54% - Greendlinger & Byrne, 1987) admit to exploring coercive, non-consensual sexual fantasies (Leitenberg and Henning 1995). Likewise, another study found 68% of their undergraduate participants reported having homicidal fantasies (Kenrick and Sheets 1993). In addition, as was mentioned previously, games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *God of War*, and *Among Us* put the consumer in the role of the villain and feature violence and cruelty; yet, these are considered among the highest rated and most popular games of all time (Gilbert 2020; Verma 2020). While one could assume all these individuals have violent goals, there exists an alternative explanation. Specifically, I propose a more plausible conclusion is that not all fantasies reflect real-world desires.

If this is the case, it is important to distinguish the motivations and consequences of these different forms of fantasy – fantasies focused on real-world ideals, versus fantasies that do not involve ideals. Given the emphasis on fulfilling real-world goals, I label the fantasies

emphasized by previous research *upward fantasies*. In contrast, I will call fantasies that do not reflect one's real-world goals *outward fantasies.*

Outward Fantasies: Pressure and Escape

As was detailed previously, much of the fantasy literature focuses on what I call upward fantasies, which stem from a desire to virtually approach and accomplish one's real-world goals. However, I argue that there is a second important form of fantasy: outward fantasies. While upward fantasies focus on approaching real-world goals, outward fantasies represent nearly the opposite: the desire to temporarily alter, ignore, or avoid one's real-world goals. The reason for engaging in upward fantasies is relatively straight-forward: consumers spend their lives pursuing their goals, and their time spent in fantasy is no exception. However, the reason for engaging in outward fantasies is less clear. Why would someone choose to engage in fantasies that explicitly conflict with their real-world goals?

One reason people may choose to engage in outward fantasies is that pursuing important life goals routinely causes the experience of psychological strain, or feeling pressured, stressed, or overwhelmed (Baumeister 1991). For example, consider a PhD candidate who has a goal to become a professor. This goal is extremely important to him and the outcome is desirable, but meanwhile the process of pursuing that goal may make the student feel pressured or overwhelmed. He does not want to change this goal—it is still ultimately what he desires— but a temporary respite from the strain associated with that goal would be a welcome relief. While the student may wish to fantasize what it would be like to be a professor (upward fantasy), the student may also seek a fantasy that allows him to get as far away from those goals and pressures

as possible (outward fantasy). In other words, rather than seeking to virtually attain his goals, he may instead seek to temporarily escape them.

Prior work supports the idea that psychological strain may lead many consumers to require periodic but brief "escapes from themselves." For example, one body of research finds that due to the strains of pursuing daily goals, many consumers seek relief through escape via avenues such as religion, alcoholism, and binge-eating (Baumeister 1991). Likewise, research on coping suggests that those who are feeling stressed or anxious or who tend to be more neurotic are likely to cope using mental disengagement and escapist strategies (Carver and Scheier 1989; Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). In line with this, I suggest that in addition to the methods proposed by Baumeister, consumers who are feeling psychological strain may also seek to escape from themselves via outward fantasy. I argue that outward fantasy allows consumers to try on alternative life experiences and personalities, temporarily forgetting, altering, or avoiding their real-life goals without jeopardizing them.

Given that people generally wish to see themselves as "good," (Greenwald 1980), particularly when it comes to questions of morality (Blasi 1984), most consumers will likely see heroes as closer to their ideal selves, or the goals they have for themselves, than villains. Because of this, fantasizing portraying a hero should satisfy a consumer looking for an upward fantasy (in line with their goals), whereas fantasizing portraying a villain should satisfy a consumer looking for an outward fantasy (separate from or contrary to their goals). Therefore, a consumer feeling weighed down by the pressure of pursuing her ideals may show greater interest in portraying a villain than a hero.

Whereas research on upward fantasies alone would suggest that only consumers with villainous goals (i.e., immoral or sadistic consumers) will choose to engage with a villainous fantasy, I predict that some non-villainous consumers will also choose to portray the villain. Specifically, I predict that consumers who are feeling a great deal of psychological strain due to their real-world concerns will feel a desire to escape from their goals and will therefore choose to fantasize portraying the goal-inconsistent villain rather than the goal-consistent hero. Formally:

H_1: While the draw to fantasy heroes is strongly driven by upward fantasy motives, the draw to fantasy villains is driven largely by outward fantasy motives.

H_2: Feeling psychological strain increases the desire to portray a villain rather than a hero.

H_3: Psychologically strained consumers choose to portray villains in order to distance themselves from who they are in real life and their real-world concerns.

Overview of Studies

My theoretical account was tested across four studies (N = 1003). Study 2.1 tests whether consumers report different motivations underlying preferences for villains compared to heroes (H_1). In Study 2.2, using a consequential choice context I examine whether consumer preference for villains is predicted by their feelings of psychological strain (H_2). Study 2.3 replicates the findings of Study 2.2 in a new context and with the new population of Halloween costume shoppers; Study 2.3 also begins to assess the process underlying the effect by examining a separate, related outcome (H_3). Finally, Study 2.4 replicates the effect of psychological strain on

villain preference and demonstrates mediation by the desire to get away from the self (H_3); Study 2.4 employs a different measure of psychological strain, a new consequential context, and a population of consumers for whom games and fantasy are highly meaningful: attendees of the role-playing game (RPG) convention Gen Con.

STUDY 2.1

Study 2.1 explores how the underlying motivations to engage with fictional characters may differ for heroes compared to villains, and for those who are experiencing psychological strain compared to those who are not. This study examines whether interest in identifying with both heroes and villains can be explained by the motivation to have traits and pursue actions consumers wish they could enact in real life, as is implied by much of the research on violent game engagement and fantasy motivations. This study also sheds light on how psychological strain may lead to a motivation to escape the real-world self when playing games.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants (N = 100) were recruited from Amazon's online platform, Mechanical Turk, and were randomly assigned in a 2-cell (hero versus villain) between-subjects design. Participants were paid for participation. Two participants failed an attention check, leaving 98 participants (61 male, 36 female, 1 other, M_{age} = 35.73).

Procedure. Participants first answered a few questions about themselves and their personal preferences, such as their age, gender, level of extroversion, etc. Importantly, one of these was a dichotomous measure of psychological strain: "Do you tend to experience a lot of anxiety?" ("I tend to experience a lot of anxiety" or "I tend not to experience much anxiety"). Another question asked them to choose their preferred method of story consumption: reading a

novel, watching a television show, or seeing a movie. On the following screen, participants were told to consider a new story. To maximize engagement in the task, the image on the page and the type of story described were either a book, a television show, or a movie, matched to the participant's stated preference[5].

Depending on condition, participants were told about either the main hero of the story, or the main villain of the story. In both cases, their answers to the personal questions asked earlier were piped into the character description to make the character seem similar to them. For example, a participant who indicated in the survey they were female, extroverted, and highly anxious would be told the character in the story also liked to be around people and felt anxious, and the pronouns used would be feminine. They were also told the character has a 91% match in personality.

Following this description, participants were provided with a list of nine potential reasons that consuming a story with a hero/villain who was similar to them, as in the example they just saw, might make a story more appealing. One of these reasons represented the typical assumption in the fantasy literature that fantasies have ideal-conforming motivations: "Seeing a hero [villain] similar to me can be inspiring – it would be great to be able to be a little more like them in my real life." Other questions assessed alternative motives – two assessed the general motives for liking similar characters discussed in Chapter 1 ("It is easier to identify with (feel connected to) a hero [villain] who is similar to me" and "The [book/television show/movie] generally seems more relevant to me if the [hero/villain] is similar to me"). The remaining

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[5] The type of story did not interact with any of the core measures or manipulations and will not be discussed further in the results.

questions assessed other possible motives for engaging with heroes and villains, including questions alluding to the desire to escape the self: “It is fun to watch someone similar to me do things I'd never want to do in my real life” (Table 3). Participants were tasked with ranking these reasons from the most important/accurate to least important/accurate for them. This ranking task allows a test of whether the motives for engaging with villains differ from the motives for engaging with heroes (H_1), and whether those experiencing high psychological strain are more likely to use fictional villains as a means to escape the self.

Results

I conducted a two-way ANOVA with condition (hero vs. villain), psychological strain (high vs. low), and their interaction as predictors and the rankings of all nine different reasons for engaging with characters as the dependent variables. The results in each section refer to this analysis[6]. (See Table 3 for all cell means.)

Villains versus heroes. A significant main effect of condition emerged for rankings of Motive 2: use of characters to enact real-world desires. Consistent with H_1, participants ranked real-world desire satisfaction or inspiration much lower for villains compared to heroes ($F(1, 92) = 20.75$, $p < .001$). There was also a main effect of condition on rankings of Motive 5: how complex and interesting the character seems, such that complexity was ranked as more important for villains than for heroes ($F(1, 92) = 5.25$, $p = .024$). No main effects of condition emerged for any of the other motives (all p’s $> .15$).

[6] Note that ranking orders are reversed in analyses so that higher numbers indicate higher rankings (i.e., rank 9 is the most accurate and rank 1 is the least).

Psychological strain. There were significant main effects of psychological strain (low vs. high anxiety) on two of the nine motives. First, Motive 3 – the desire to watch someone do things completely different from what one might want to do in real life – received significantly higher rankings from those experiencing psychological strain than from those not experiencing it ($F(1, 92) = 5.82$, $p = .018$). Second, Motive 8 – the desire to experience hidden or shameful aspects of personality – also received significantly higher rankings from those experiencing psychological strain than from those not experiencing it ($F(1, 92) = 5.84$, $p = .018$). No main effects of condition emerged for any of the other motives (all p's > .13). In addition, no significant interactions between condition and strain emerged (all p's > .06).

Table 3 – Study 2.1: Means and Standard Errors for Character Preference Motives

Motive Number	Question	Condition	Psychological Strain	Mean	Std. Error
1	It is easier to identify with (feel connected to) a [hero/villain] who is similar to me.	Hero	high	7.24	0.52
			low	5.56	0.46
		Villain	high	5.71	0.58
			low	5.90	0.43
2	Seeing a [hero/villain] similar to me can be inspiring - it would be great to be able to be a little more like them in my real life.	Hero	high	5.91	0.56
			low	6.44	0.49
		Villain	high	3.59	0.62
			low	3.90	0.46
3	It is fun to watch someone similar to me do things I'd never want to do in my real life.	Hero	high	3.86	0.55
			low	5.82	0.49

		Villain	high	5.00	0.62
			low	5.61	0.46
4	I like to imagine myself doing the things the [hero/villain] does without having the actual consequences of doing those things in reality.	Hero	high	5.19	0.55
			low	4.96	0.49
		Villain	high	4.35	0.61
			low	5.36	0.45
5	A [hero/villain] seems more complex and interesting if [he /she/they] is similar to me.	Hero	high	4.14	0.56
			low	4.37	0.49
		Villain	high	5.65	0.62
			low	5.32	0.46
6	The [book/television show/movie] generally seems more relevant to me if the [hero/villain] is similar to me.	Hero	high	5.24	0.51
			low	4.85	0.45
		Villain	high	5.59	0.57
			low	4.81	0.42
7	Having a similar [hero/villain] in the [book/television show/movie] makes me feel like the [book/television show/movie] was made especially for me.	Hero	high	3.29	0.56
			low	4.30	0.49
		Villain	high	4.00	0.62
			low	3.87	0.46
8	Watching a [hero/villain] who is similar to me lets me explore aspects of my personality or my desires that I normally hide or ignore.	Hero	high	5.57	0.55
			low	4.26	0.49
		Villain	high	6.06	0.61

9	Being similar to the [hero/villain] makes me feel more "special". It suggests in this story I'd be important, not just another face in the crowd.	Hero	low	4.81	0.46
			high	4.57	0.55
		Villain	low	4.44	0.48
			high	5.06	0.61
			low	5.42	0.45

Discussion

Study 2.1 provides exploratory insights about different consumers' motivations for engaging with fictional characters. First, consistent with Chapter 1, character relevance (Motive 6) and particularly identification (Motive 1) are equally important in explaining the preference for both similar heroes and similar villains. However, there are important differences worth noting. While aspiration (Motive 2) explains preferences for similar heroes, it does not at all explain preferences for similar villains. This strikes a blow against the claims that all fantasies stem from real-world wishes, and that therefore those with violent fantasies have violent desires.

In addition, Study 2.1 provides initial support that those experiencing psychological strain use fiction as an avenue for escaping the self, as they were significantly more motivated by a desire to perceive or experience something very different from their real-life goals (Motive 3). At first it might seem surprising that no interactions were found between psychological strain and villain/hero condition in predicting motive rankings. However, this could be related to the fact that this study presented participants with characters, both heroes and villains, described as similar to themselves. The fact that all characters were described as highly similar to the participant may have counteracted psychologically strained participants' ability to use villains as

a means to escape the self. However, the fact that strained individuals seemed to show an increased desire to use characters to escape the self in general suggests we may see evidence consistent with H_3 in the subsequent studies that do not describe the villain as similar to the participant.

Interestingly, there was also a significant relationship between psychological strain and a motive to engage with hidden or shameful aspects of the self (Motive 8). This suggests that perhaps when it comes to story consumption preferences, there are two separate motives that stem from feeling psychological strain: the desire to escape the self (explored here), and the desire to engage with one's darker real-world aspects. I discuss this idea more in the General Discussion.

STUDY 2.2

Study 2.2 tested whether consumers' feelings of psychological strain can predict their interest in portraying a villain in a video game, as well as their likelihood to choose the villain over another character (the hero). Study 2.2 also tested whether psychological strain simply increases the desire to play games in general, or whether it increases interest in villains in particular.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants (N = 50) were recruited from Amazon's online platform, Mechanical Turk, and were paid for their participation. As an attention check, participants were asked to write the word "game" in a box. One individual failed to answer this check and was excluded from analyses. Six participants misunderstood the instructions and listed a specific game (Scrabble, Chess, etc.). Results are consistent regardless of whether the six

participants are included. In the analysis presented, these participants were retained, leaving 49 participants (27 male, 22 female, M_{age} = 38.94).

Procedure. Participants were told we were interested in differences in game playing preferences and were asked for their age, gender, and level of experience playing games. Participants then answered a battery of questions about themselves, their concerns, and their current state. The focal question in this set asked about their feelings of psychological strain: "To what extent do you currently experience a lot of pressure on you in your life – at your workplace, at home, or elsewhere?" (1-Not really to 7-Very much).

After finishing these questions and an attention check, participants saw a description of a virtual role-playing game called "Summer Weekend." This description informed participants of the game's premise and explained that a role-playing game is a game in which the player can make choices that affect the story's outcome. This page also told them that they would be able to choose which character to play, and that this choice would be consequential in that it would determine the options open to them in the game (Appendix 6).

Participants then saw two different character options: they could play as Heroic Hal or Villainous Vic. The character options were accompanied by a description of the character and a picture, which was matched to the participant's gender. The character images were created using an online cartoon creation tool ("Cartoonify" 2021) and were created such that the female and male versions looked as similar as possible. Likewise, the villainous versions of the characters had similar facial structures and hairstyles to the heroic versions, but the hair and eye coloring as well as the facial expressions were altered to look more "villainous" (Appendix 6). The primary

dependent measure asked, “How interested are you in playing this game as the character of Villainous Vic?” (1-Not at all interested, 7-Very interested).

One potential alternative explanation for any effects of psychological strain on this measure could be that strain increases the desire to play games more generally, rather than interest in villains specifically. To rule out this possibility, participants also answered the same question regarding their interest in playing Heroic Hal. In addition, participants were told: “You will now have the opportunity to play this game. Please select which character you would like to play:” and were asked to choose between Heroic Hal and Villainous Vic (the order in which the characters were presented was counterbalanced across subjects).

Once participants made their selection between the characters, the choice was consequential in that they actually had the opportunity to play the game as that character. I programmed the game “Summer Weekend” in JavaScript; the game’s plot involved chatting with a number of inhabitants of a tropical island and making choices regarding how to react to their various plights. The game used a basic role-playing game structure; participants made a series of choices, and for each choice they saw a title, a description of events, an image or short animation that represented those events, and a set of two options from which to choose. Then, they got to see a description and image representing the fallout of their decision before the next plot point was presented. The plights were the same for all participants, but the choices they were allowed to make depended whether they chose to play “Heroic Hal” or “Villainous Vic.” For example, the game’s first interaction involves a man struggling to build a card tower to impress a woman on the island. Participants portraying Heroic Hal are provided two “heroic” options of how to react to this man, whereas those playing Villainous Vic are provided two “villainous” options for

their reaction (Appendix 6). The game typically took a few minutes to complete. Once the game was over, participants indicated their real-life similarity to Heroic Hal and Villainous Vic. This allowed me to test the alternative explanation that strained individuals feel more similar to Villainous Vic, in which case the results could be explained by previous research on the immorality of violent game players and by the findings of Chapter 1.

Results

Villain preference. A linear regression analysis revealed that, consistent with H_2, increased psychological strain significantly predicted increased interest in portraying Villainous Vic ($B = 0.45$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(46) = 2.78$, $p = .008$).

Hero preference. A linear regression analysis revealed that, unlike Villainous Vic, increased psychological strain did not predict increased interest in portraying Heroic Hal; instead, strain predicted less interest in portraying Heroic Hal ($B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(45) = -2.18$, $p = .035$).

Dichotomous choice. A logit analysis suggested psychological strain significantly increased the likelihood of choosing Villainous Vic over Heroic Hal when choosing between the two characters ($B = 0.61$, $SE = 0.24$, $z = 2.55$, $p = .011$).

Similarity. A paired t-test confirmed that on average, participants felt significantly less similar to Villainous Vic ($M_{Vic} = 2.11$, $SD_{Vic} = 1.40$) than to Heroic Hal ($M_{Hal} = 4.81$, $SD_{Hal} = 1.50$; $t(46) = -8.05$; $p < .001$). A linear regression analysis revealed that contrary to the alternative explanation proposed, psychological strain did not significantly predict similarity to Villainous Vic ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(47) = 0.63$, $p = .531$), nor did similarity to Villainous Vic predict interest in Villainous Vic ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.21$, $t(47) = 0.74$, $p = .461$). A logit analysis

further revealed that similarity to Villainous Vic did not predict choosing Vic over Hal (B = 0.12, SE = 0.21, z = 0.57, p = .569). In contrast, a linear regression analysis confirmed that, consistent with the findings of Chapter 1, similarity to Heroic Hal did significantly predict interest in Heroic Hal (B = 0.47, SE = 0.15, $t(43)$ = 3.13, p = .003), and a logit analysis confirmed that similarity to Heroic Hal predicted choosing Hal over Vic (B = -0.49, SE = 0.23, z = -2.14, p = .033).

Discussion

In Study 2.2, psychological strain in the form of felt pressure in life significantly and positively predicted participants' interest in portraying Villainous Vic in a game, supporting the idea that psychological strain increases interest in the outward fantasy of playing villains (H_2). Importantly, strain did not predict interest in playing the hero, suggesting that the relationship is specific to preferences for villains rather than strain increasing the desire to play games more generally. The effect emerged even for a consequential choice which determined the form of the game participants could play; psychological strain significantly predicted the likelihood to choose the villain over the hero. Consistent with Chapter 1 and prior research, similarity to Heroic Hal predicted interest in and choice of Hal over Vic. However, psychological strain did not predict similarity to Villainous Vic, and similarity to Vic did not predict preference for or choice of Vic. So, the alternative explanation that psychological strain increases similarity to Villainous Vic and similarity increases preference (i.e., the "Chapter 1" hypothesis) was not supported.

STUDY 2.3

Study 2.3 seeks to replicate the result that psychological strain predicts preference for villains in a new context using a field survey. Study 2.3 also includes a second dependent measure: interest in portraying the opposite gender. The purpose of this additional measure is to find initial evidence that the effect of psychological strain on preference for villains is not due to a difference in real-world ambitions or morality, but rather a desire to escape the self.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants (N=45) were recruited from a Halloween store in Chicago in October 2018. I offered shoppers approaching the checkout line the opportunity to take a survey for the chance to win a gift card to the store. Instructions for how to take the survey online were also left with the store managers while I was not present. One participant who began the survey was under 18, so that participant was not allowed to finish the survey and the data from that participant was deleted. A second line of data was excluded because all fields were left empty, leaving 43 participants (12 male, 31 female, M_{age} = 31.65).

Procedure. Volunteers were solicited near the checkout line inside a costume store in Chicago, Illinois. The participants completed the survey on a computer I provided or on their own device. The survey included a number of questions. Embedded among these was the same measure of psychological strain used in Study 2.2. However, a new dependent variable was used that related to the context of the Halloween store and the upcoming Halloween holiday. As the main dependent variable, participants were asked "How interested would you be in going to a Halloween party where everyone dresses up as their favorite movie villain?" (1-Not at all, 7-Very). I used this measure as a conceptual replication of the game measure in Study 2.2 and as a

test of H_2, with the prediction that the more psychological strain and pressure a consumer is feeling, the more interested they will be in engaging in a fantasy involving portraying a villain (in this case, through a Halloween costume). To once again ensure that psychological strain does not simply increase interest in portraying a character more generally, participants also answered the question "How interested would you be in going to a Halloween party where everyone dresses up as their favorite movie hero?" (1-Not at all, 7-Very).

Participants were also asked "How interested would you be in going to a Halloween party where everyone dresses up as the opposite of their actual gender?" (1-Not at all, 7-Very). This question allows an initial test that the motivation to escape the self explains the effect on villain preferences, rather than explanations predicted by prior research such as everyday sadism (Greitemeyer 2015). If psychological strain increases interest in villains due to a desire to escape the self, then strain should also lead to a desire for other ways of distancing from the real self, such as switching gender. In contrast, the sadism explanation would suggest that interest should only be heightened for portraying villains and other characters who cause harm, and not for the categorical but amoral shift represented by portraying the opposite gender.

Finally, participants were asked a number of additional questions about themselves (how close they are to their ideal selves, how exciting their life is, their age, and their gender), and their costume purchase that day (what they bought and for whom; what costume they will wear for Halloween; whether it is a person, animal, etc.; whether the costume resembles them; whether the costume represents a hero, villain, or neutral; whether the costume represents the ideal self; their reason for choosing the costume).[7]

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[7] I do not discuss the results of all these additional questions in this document, but they are available upon request.

Results

Villain Costume Preference. A linear regression revealed that consistent with H_2 and Study 2.2, as psychological strain increased, the desire to attend a party dressed as a favorite villain significantly increased ($B = 0.49$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(40) = 3.12$, $p = .003$).

Opposite Gender Costume Preference. A linear regression revealed that psychological strain significantly predicted interest in attending a party dressed as the opposite gender ($B = 0.40$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(40) = 2.56$, $p = .014$).

Hero Costume Preference. Consistent with Study 2.2, psychological strain did not significantly influence the desire to attend a party dressed as a favorite hero ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.18$, $t(41) = 1.57$, $p = .125$).

Discussion

Study 2.3 replicated Study 2.2 in a new context and using a field survey design. The level of psychological strain experienced by shoppers at a Halloween store significantly predicted their interest in attending a costume party dressed as a villain. Also consistent with Study 2.2, psychological strain did not predict preference to attend a costume party dressed as a hero, again lending credence to the idea that psychological strain increases preference for the outward fantasy of playing a villain but not for the upward fantasy of playing a hero. Finally, new to this study, feelings of psychological strain also predicted interest in attending a costume party dressed as the opposite gender, providing initial support that psychological strain leads to preferences to play the villain not because of a desire to commit evil deeds (upward fantasy), but because of an increased desire to explore personas as far as possible from real-life goals (outward fantasy).

STUDY 2.4

Study 2.4 examined the robustness of the relationship between psychological strain and the preference for playing villains (H_2). In this study, rather than pressure I used a different measure of psychological strain: trait neuroticism. Neuroticism is an individual difference measure that represents a consumer's trait tendency to experience aversive psychological states (Mick 1996; Watson and Clark 1984). As such, it seemed an alternative, but valid, means to measure the disposition to experience psychological strain. This study also tested for statistical mediation of the effect by the desire to use games to escape the self (H_3). This study changed the context by using characters the participants created, rather than offering them a choice of pre-determined characters. Finally, this study employed a large-scale field survey design and examined the results of actual choices at a popular gaming convention.

Participants and Design. Participants (N=1,389) were recruited by email after attending the Gen Con gaming convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. Gen Con is a convention celebrating role-playing board games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* at which participants can play RPGs, purchase games and other merchandise at vendor booths, attend workshops, shows, and other special events, along with many other game-related activities ("Gen Con" 2021). Participants on the Gen Con email list were offered the chance to take a survey about their Gen Con experience in exchange for the chance to win a free ticket to the following year's Gen Con event (an approximately $110 value). Only participants who played an RPG while at the convention could be included in the primary analyses, resulting in a sample of 813 participants (596 male, 207 female, 9 other, M_{age} = 40.96).

Procedure. Participants completed a survey regarding their experience at Gen Con. The survey contained a variety of questions intended for a number of different research projects. Embedded in this survey was a measure of trait neuroticism. To prevent fatigue, I used a two-item version of a measure of neuroticism used in prior literature: "I am a person whose moods go up and down easily" and "I am filled with doubts about things" (1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree; DeYoung, Quilty, and Peterson 2007). These two items were averaged to create an index of neuroticism ($\alpha = .63$).

The survey also asked participants whether, during the convention, they played any role-playing games, which were described as games "where you got to play a chosen character, either one you designed or a pre-generated one that you selected." They were given example games to ensure they understood the question. Those who answered "Yes" to this question were asked additional questions about their experience playing this game. In this section, participants were asked to choose one game they remembered playing at the convention. They were asked what this game was, as well as some questions about the character they created or chose for the game. Most importantly for this research, participants were asked, "To what extent would you characterize your character as good versus evil?" (1-Purely good, 7-Purely evil). This question served as a measure of participants' portrayal of a villainous character during their game at the Gen Con event.

The last measure of importance for the analyses discussed here asked about participants general reasons for engaging with games. Specifically, participants were asked "In general, when you create characters for role playing games, to what extent to you tend to make the character very different from who you are in real life?" (1-Not at all, 7-Very much). This question gets at

whether the motivation to engage with a villainous character is rooted in a desire to escape the self and be someone else temporarily (outward fantasy). An alternative explanation consistent with prior literature on fantasy would be that those who choose villains do so because they wish they could act out those evil characteristics in real life. A second question helps test this alternative mediator: "In general, when you create characters for role playing games, to what extent do you tend to give the character features you wish you could have in real life?" (1-Not at all, 7-Very much). Participants were also asked to what extent one of these motivations was more important to them than the other: creating wishful characters (1) or creating characters very different from themselves (7). All measures used in analyses are first standardized.

Participants answered many additional questions during the survey; some for this project, some for other projects, and some for the benefit of the marketers at Gen Con. For example, participants were asked about their convention experience (how much money they spent, what other games they played, whether they attended any ceremonies or workshops, etc.); the character they created (their attributes, their similarity to themselves on various facets, how much they enjoyed the game, etc.), how long they have been playing RPGs, and other questions.[8]

Results

Evil Characters. A linear regression revealed that consistent with H_2, psychological strain significantly predicted the extent to which participants rated the characters they created or selected as evil rather than good ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(809) = 2.16$, $p = .031$).

Mediation. A mediation analysis using the SPSS PROCESS macro (model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples - Hayes 2013) revealed a significant effect of psychological strain on escape

[8] Feel free to contact the author for inquiries about the findings from other questions in this field survey.

motivation (B = 0.13, SE = 0.03, t = 3.62, p < .001, 95% Confidence interval (CI): [0.06, 0.19]), and controlling for psychological strain, a significant effect of escape motivation on how evil the character seemed (B = 0.09, SE = 0.04, t = 2.47, p = .014, 95% CI: [0.02, 0.16]). Finally, the indirect effect of psychological strain on character evil through escape motivation was significant in that the confidence interval did not include zero (B = 0.01, SE = 0.01, 95% CI: [0.002, 0.02]).

Alternative mediation. An alternative mediator based on previous research could be that those experiencing psychological strain are actually enacting their ideals, and they are more likely to wish they could enact villainous deeds in real life. However, a mediation analysis using the SPSS PROCESS macro (model 4, 5000 bootstrap samples) demonstrated a significant effect of psychological strain on the motive to use games for aspirational purposes (B = 0.19, SE = 0.03, t = 5.48, p < .001, 95% CI: [0.12, 0.26]), but no significant effect of aspirational motives on how evil the character seemed (B = 0.00, SE = 0.04, t = 0.07, p = .942, 95% CI: [-0.07, 0.07]), and no significant indirect effect of strain on character evil via aspirational motives (B = 0.00, SE = 0.01, 95% CI: [-0.01, 0.01]).

Discussion

Study 2.4 provides a conceptual replication of the previous studies using a new population, an alternative measure of psychological strain, and a new context of characters played by Gen Con attendees. Consistent with H_2, psychological strain predicted Gen Con attendees' choice to play an evil character in a real game. Further, Study 2.4 provides statistical support for the idea that the effect of psychological strain on interest in villains is mediated by a desire to escape the self, rather than by an increased desire to enact real-world sadistic tendencies within a fantasy environment. These effects emerged despite the fact that in a real-world setting

like Gen Con there are many different forces at play, and despite the fact that responses were collected several days after the game was played, speaking to the robustness of the effect.

CHAPTER 2 GENERAL DISCUSSION

Much of the prior research on fantasy focuses on what I call upward fantasies, or fantasies that stem from real-world goals. In this research I find that there are motivations to engage in fantasy that are not driven by real-world goals, which I call outward fantasy (H_1). This chapter explores one example of outward fantasy – the choice to portray a fictional villain – and demonstrates how engagement in this outward fantasy can be predicted by feelings of psychological strain (H_2). This chapter also provides support for the mechanism underlying the effect – that psychological strain induces a desire to temporarily escape the pressures of real-world goals (Baumeister 1991), which leads consumers to seek out opportunities to portray villains in fiction rather than the more similar heroes (H_3).

This chapter demonstrates that psychological strain predicts the preference for fictional villains across four studies, which include field surveys (Studies 2.3 and 2.4) as well as studies with consequential outcomes (Studies 2.2 and 2.4). The effect is robust to multiple ways of measuring both psychological strain and villain preference. In addition, I demonstrate statistical mediation of the effect by the desire to escape into someone different (Study 2.4). I also provide additional support for the mechanism of the desire to escape rather than an alternative mechanism of sadistic desires by demonstrating that psychological strain also affects an amoral outcome – the desire to portray the opposite gender – in a similar fashion.

Contributions

This chapter provides an important theoretical contribution to the literature on motivations for engaging in fantasy. Much of the prior work on fantasy assumes that fantasy engagement stems from the desire to virtually enact one's real-world goals and dreams (Klinger 2009; Oettingen and Mayer 2002). In contrast, this work introduces a distinction between goal-relevant, or upward fantasies, and outward fantasies, which do not center on actual goals. In doing so, this work provides an explanation for why a consumer might choose to engage in a fantasy that does not reflect her real-world goals, such as portraying an evil villain or a member of the opposite gender. This chapter also contributes to the literature that suggests consumers need a periodic escape from the stresses of everyday life (Baumeister 1991). This work suggests that, in addition to religion, alcohol, and the other escapes explored in the escape from self literature, consumers sometimes use outward fantasies for this purpose.

This work also has important practical implications for policy around violent video game players. Much of the current research regarding violent games focuses on violent game-play as a type of upward fantasy for those with real-world sadistic desires (Anderson and Bushman 2001; Greitemeyer 2015; Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2017). As a result, researchers and policy makers alike tend to focus on interventions that stop such players from playing games and especially from enacting those behaviors in real life. The current research suggests that not all violent game players play for the purpose of acting out real-world desires for depravity; in some cases, players are engaging in outward fantasies, meaning they have no desire to enact those behaviors in reality. It is essential to understand the difference between these motivations in order to recognize the type of intervention that will be most effective for a given individual, or whether any intervention is needed at all.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the present studies is that they are all correlational. While it is important to understand how consumers' personalities influence their consumption choices, future research could examine whether psychological strain can be manipulated to show causal effects on villain preference consistent with the findings of the present studies. Future work could also examine the potential boundaries of this effect and explore when feelings of psychological strain may not lead to a preference for villains. For example, if villains are desirable because they provide an outlet for escape from real-world concerns, perhaps consumers will see a villain who shares those worries as an unsatisfactory escape.

Future research should also examine other motivations underlying outward fantasies and engagement with villains in particular. In Study 2.1, psychologically strained individuals were more likely to endorse a preference to watch characters do things they would never do in real life, as predicted by the theorizing presented. However, they were also more likely to endorse a desire to engage with villains to explore hidden or shameful aspects of their real personality. This motivation is distinct from the desire to escape the self. Rather than escape, these individuals appear to be searching for an outlet to examine aspects of themselves they find difficult to accept during day-to-day life. It would be interesting for future research to examine this motivation for fantasy in more detail and determine when consumers are most likely to use fantasy to engage with shameful parts of themselves, how they choose to do so, and what positive and negative consequences this kind of fantasy might produce in their real lives.

Another interesting avenue for future research would be exploring the use of outward fantasy in domains other than preference for villains. This chapter of my dissertation merely

introduces the concept. As is evidenced by the preference to dress as the opposite gender in Study 2.2, outward fantasy can potentially manifest in and explain a number of otherwise inexplicable consumption choices. For example, in a pilot study, participants were asked about favorite fantasies in which they have indulged. One participant responded, "I fantasized that I didn't have children." Based on previous research focusing on upward fantasy, this revelation might be considered problematic or even dangerous. However, the concept of outward fantasy introduces the possibility that this fantasy is not reflective of the participant's real-world desires, meaning his or her children are in no danger. Indeed, the data were consistent with this idea: as pleasant as they found this fantasy (8 / 9), they indicated little desire for this fantasy to come true in real life (2 / 9). In addition, their explanation for when they choose to engage in this fantasy echoes the theorizing presented here for interest in villains – they choose this fantasy when they "feel overwhelmed with [their] responsibilities." Examples like this suggest the need for additional research on outward fantasy motives to discover which fantasy behaviors and choices suggest a need for intervention, and which ones are unlikely to result in real-world harm.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From movies to books to television to video games, fiction and fantasy represent a multi-billion-dollar context. Even outside these specific industries, understanding how consumers engage with personal fantasies is critical to marketing efforts in general (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). In this dissertation, I explore consumers' engagement with villains in fantasy and fictional worlds. In particular, across twelve studies and over 3700 experimental participants, I examine how a consumer's sense of self and identity impacts his or her preference for fictional villains.

In Chapter 1 I find that contrary to what prior research on real-world similarity might suggest, consumers are drawn to rather than repulsed by fictional villains who seem similar to themselves. I also demonstrate that this effect occurs because similar villains are more self-relevant than dissimilar villains, and the safe haven produced by the context of fiction protects consumers from feelings of threat, allowing self-relevance to positively influence interest. In addition, I show that this effect can only persist as long as fiction succeeds in keeping threat at bay, with the result that consumers instead tend to avoid similar fictional villains when under social scrutiny.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the idea that there are two distinct types of fantasy engagement that stem from separate motivations. I argue that most prior research focuses on upward fantasies, which stem from yet-to-be-realized real-world goals. I argue for a second type of fantasy engagement I call outward fantasy, which does not stem from real-world goals. In this chapter I demonstrate that in some cases, the desire to portray a fictional villain can represent an outward fantasy. Specifically, I find that the experience of psychological strain can increase a consumer's interest in engaging in fantasies in which they act as an evil villain, but not in fantasies of portraying a hero. I find this effect for consumers playing a JavaScript-coded video game, deciding whether to attend a costume party, and describing the type of character they chose to play at a tabletop role-playing game event.

Fantasy and fiction play a critical role in consumers' lives and well-being. For marketers, understanding the motivations and drivers underlying consumer fantasy can be important for both product development and advertising efforts. For policy makers, understanding the consumer motivations that lead to the pursuit of different types of fantasies may be critical to

ensuring a productive and non-judgmental population. With these objectives in mind, in my future research I hope to continue exploring the motivations and consequences of consumer fantasy engagement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Main and Robustness Regression Outputs – Study 1.1

Regression output for Model 1 and three robustness models

	5-High - Random (Model 1)	5-High - Fixed (Robustness)	1-High - Random (Robustness)	1-High - Fixed (Robustness)
traitscore	2.392*** [2.254,2.531]	2.360*** [2.220,2.501]	2.499*** [2.353,2.646]	2.493*** [2.345,2.640]
villain	-0.422 [-1.587,0.743]	(omitted)[a]	-0.910 [-2.503,0.683]	(omitted)[a]
villain x traitscore	0.638*** [0.280,0.996]	0.670*** [0.307,1.032]	0.622** [0.244,1.001]	0.613** [0.233,0.994]
clumsy	19.40*** [18.51,20.30]	19.39*** [18.49,20.29]		
cynical	10.46*** [9.562,11.36]	10.46*** [9.560,11.36]		
disorganized	14.51*** [13.62,15.41]	14.51*** [13.61,15.40]		
dumb	-5.748*** [-6.647,-4.849]	-5.764*** [-6.663,-4.865]		
easygoing	12.21*** [11.31,13.10]	12.21*** [11.31,13.10]		
free spirit	-0.146 [-1.043,0.750]	-0.144 [-1.041,0.752]		
happy	3.369*** [2.473,4.266]	3.365*** [2.468,4.262]		
honest	11.74***	11.75***		

	[10.84,12.63]	[10.85,12.64]
humble	17.62*** [16.72,18.51]	17.61*** [16.71,18.51]
immature	-0.644 [-1.542,0.254]	-0.654 [-1.552,0.244]
lazy	4.836*** [3.937,5.736]	4.819*** [3.919,5.719]
low-brow	-3.238*** [-4.135,-2.341]	-3.245*** [-4.142,-2.348]
passive	0.230 [-0.667,1.127]	0.224 [-0.673,1.121]
quirky	28.35*** [27.46,29.25]	28.35*** [27.46,29.25]
reserved	4.272*** [3.375,5.169]	4.266*** [3.369,5.163]
risk-averse	12.61*** [11.72,13.51]	12.60*** [11.70,13.50]
romantically challenged	26.23*** [25.33,27.13]	26.22*** [25.32,27.12]
rude	19.75*** [18.85,20.65]	19.74*** [18.84,20.64]
selfish	-2.210*** [-3.110,-1.309]	-2.222*** [-3.123,-1.322]
serious	-3.096*** [-3.993,-2.198]	-3.104*** [-4.002,-2.206]
solitary	30.69*** [29.79,31.58]	30.68*** [29.79,31.58]
thick-skinned	4.781*** [3.883,5.679]	4.781*** [3.883,5.679]

brainy	22.12*** [21.17,23.06]	22.12*** [21.18,23.07]
chatty	1.372** [0.431,2.314]	1.374** [0.433,2.316]
cocky	-3.004*** [-3.946,-2.062]	-3.000*** [-3.942,-2.058]
determined	-2.427*** [-3.373,-1.482]	-2.422*** [-3.367,-1.476]
dishonest	-8.362*** [-9.304,-7.421]	-8.363*** [-9.304,-7.421]
fearless	-10.74*** [-11.69,-9.798]	-10.74*** [-11.68,-9.792]
funny	9.492*** [8.550,10.43]	9.493*** [8.551,10.44]
highbrow	30.26*** [29.32,31.20]	30.26*** [29.32,31.20]
hotheaded	-4.547*** [-5.488,-3.606]	-4.546*** [-5.487,-3.604]
manipulative	-3.418*** [-4.361,-2.476]	-3.415*** [-4.357,-2.472]
neurotic	13.94*** [13.00,14.88]	13.94*** [13.00,14.88]
optimistic	-2.443*** [-3.385,-1.501]	-2.445*** [-3.387,-1.502]
organized	-10.95*** [-11.89,-10.01]	-10.95*** [-11.89,-10.01]
polite	-1.205* [-2.148,-0.263]	-1.205* [-2.147,-0.262]
responsible	10.80***	10.80***

			[9.853,11.74]	[9.855,11.74]
sad			-7.907*** [-8.848,-6.966]	-7.905*** [-8.846,-6.964]
selfless			13.00*** [12.06,13.95]	13.00*** [12.06,13.95]
sensitive			1.708*** [0.767,2.650]	1.707*** [0.765,2.649]
sexy			-9.950*** [-10.89,-9.008]	-9.947*** [-10.89,-9.005]
smooth			-5.302*** [-6.245,-4.359]	-5.298*** [-6.241,-4.355]
social			-14.26*** [-15.20,-13.32]	-14.26*** [-15.20,-13.32]
traditional			-7.545*** [-8.485,-6.604]	-7.546*** [-8.487,-6.605]
Constant	1.503*** [0.725,2.282]	1.540*** [0.796,2.284]	11.07*** [10.22,11.92]	10.98*** [10.21,11.76]
sigma_u (Character)				
Constant	5.078*** [4.888,5.269]		9.169*** [8.919,9.420]	
sigma_e				
Constant	20.25*** [20.15,20.34]		21.24*** [21.14,21.34]	

Appendix 2

Sample Similarity Quiz Stimuli - Study 1.2

Which Movie Hero Are You?

Find out if you are similar to any fictional movie heroic individuals.

Which Movie Serial Killer Are You?

Find out if you are similar to any fictional serial killers.

Appendix 3

Similarity Manipulation – Study 1.3

Imagine that there is a new television show premiering soon. Your friend is telling you a little bit about one of the characters in the show, whose name is Sam. **Sam is the main [protagonist (hero)/antagonist (villain)]** of the show. When your friend describes the hero, you find that Sam has all the traits listed on the following page.

High Similarity Condition: Go through the list of traits that the character of Sam has. Of these traits, choose **exactly 6** traits that are similar to you. These are traits **you share** with the character of Sam. Highlight these traits green.

Medium Similarity Condition: Go through the list of traits that the character of Sam has. Of these traits, choose **exactly 3** traits that are similar to you. These are traits **you share** with the character of Sam. Highlight these traits green. Also choose **exactly 3** traits that are different from you. These are traits that Sam has but that **you do not have**. Highlight these traits red.

Low Similarity Condition: Go through the list of traits that the character of Sam has. Of these traits, choose **exactly 6** traits that are different from you. These are traits that Sam has but that **you do not have.** Highlight these traits red.

HONEST	GREEDY	PERSUASIVE
LOYAL	GRUMPY	STUBBORN
CHARISMATIC	DEVOTED	UNFORGIVING
LOVING	AMBITIOUS	SOMETIMES UNKIND
IMPATIENT	ADVENTUROUS	OPTIMISTIC
FUNNY	RUDE	DOMINANT
CONFIDENT	RESOURCEFUL	ROMANTIC
ANXIOUS	LOGICAL	IMPULSIVE

Appendix 4

Similarity Manipulation – Study 1.4

New Television Show

Imagine that there is a new television show premiering soon. Your friend is telling you a little bit about one of the characters in the show, whose name is Sam. **Sam is the main [protagonist (hero)/ antagonist (villain)]** of the show.

Like real people, television characters are often complicated and have many different traits. Below are some of the more ["positive"/"negative"] traits the [hero/villain], Sam, has. Of these traits, choose **exactly 4** that are **most [similar to/different from] you**. That is, put a check mark next to the traits that you and Sam [**share/do not share]**.

Positive Condition:

☐ HONEST	☐ ADVENTUROUS	☐ WITTY
☐ PERSUASIVE	☐ OPTIMISTIC	☐ FEARLESS
☐ LOYAL	☐ FUNNY	☐ CREATIVE
☐ CHARISMATIC	☐ CONFIDENT	☐ INTELLIGENT
☐ DEVOTED	☐ RESOURCEFUL	☐ ADAPTABLE
☐ LOVING	☐ ROMANTIC	☐ CONSIDERATE
☐ AMBITIOUS	☐ LOGICAL	☐ GENEROUS

Negative Condition:

- [ ] GREEDY
- [ ] GRUMPY
- [ ] STUBBORN
- [ ] UNFORGIVING
- [ ] WORKAHOLIC
- [ ] IMPATIENT
- [ ] RUDE
- [ ] DOMINANT
- [ ] ANXIOUS
- [ ] IMPULSIVE
- [ ] QUICK-TEMPERED
- [ ] BOSSY
- [ ] JEALOUS
- [ ] SARCASTIC
- [ ] ARROGANT
- [ ] BLUNT
- [ ] PESSIMISTIC
- [ ] CLUMSY
- [ ] PERFECTIONIST
- [ ] DISORGANIZED
- [ ] UNTRUSTING

Appendix 5

Social Scrutiny Manipulation – Study 1.7

Similarities Cause Negative Judgments

 [9]

Research suggests it is common for people to assume that **if you are similar to someone in a few ways, you are likely similar to them in other ways**. So, seeming similar to someone considered "good" can make you seem like more of a good person, whereas seeming similar to someone considered "bad" can make you seem like more of a bad person.

This suggests that similarity to another person can make others think negatively of you. In particular, if a person is similar to you on certain traits, but has **done things that are bad, wrong, or immoral,** another individual who discovers you are similar might assume that you have those bad traits too, particularly if the individual does not know you very well. Some

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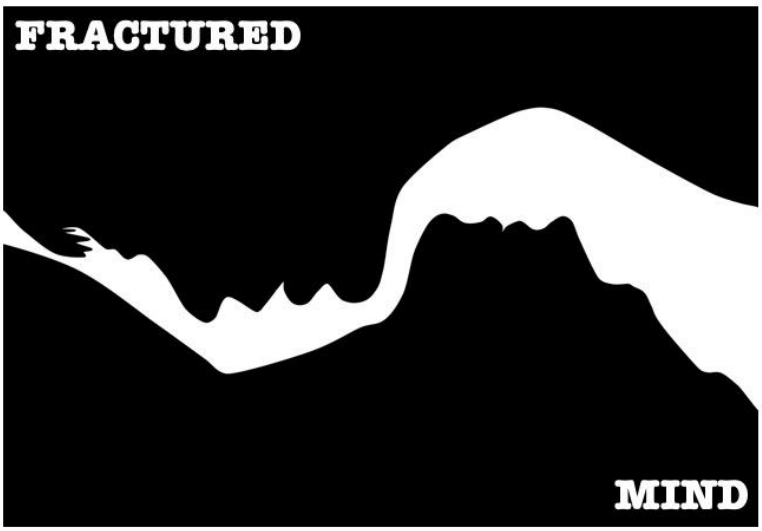
[9] Image from Maria Rantanen's licensed for reuse "self reflection (4)" - https://www.flickr.com/photos/idhren/4176198989

psychologists have termed this effect “associative casting” because others’ negative characteristics become "associated" with you.

Movie Poster – Study 1.7



Appendix 6

Description and Characters in JavaScript Game “Summer Weekend” – Study 2.2

Game Description:

Playing the Game "Summer Weekend"

You will be playing a brief game called "Summer Weekend" about a luxury resort. This resort is a bit funny in that the guests seem very open about their lives - they are going to tell you a lot about themselves upon first meeting you. This is a role playing game, which means **you get to choose which character you would like to play in the game.**

The basic premise of the game is the same for all characters, but **the character you play changes the options of what you get to do in the game**. The available characters are listed on the next screen. Please read the character descriptions and select which character you would like to play in the game..

Remember: this is just a game. **There is no right or wrong answer;** you can choose whichever character you feel like playing. Once you pick a character, you will have the chance to play the game as that character.

Pictures and descriptions of male and female versions of Heroic Hal and Villainous Vic

Option: Play as Villainous Vic

You can play the game **as the character of Villainous Vic, pictured above.** Vic is wickedly smart, charismatic, and independent. If you play as Vic, the set of choices you get to make in the game will all reflect these characteristics. For example, Vic’s wicked intelligence and independence will allow you to cause chaos in ways that other characters cannot.

Option: Play as Villainous Vic

You can play the game **as the character of Villainous Vic, pictured above.** Vic is wickedly smart, charismatic, and independent. If you play as Vic, the set of choices you get to make in the game will all reflect these characteristics. For example, Vic's wicked intelligence and independence will allow you to cause chaos in ways that other characters cannot.

Option: Play as Heroic Hal

You can play the game as the **character of Heroic Hal, pictured above**. Hal is extremely intelligent, kind, and brave. If you play as Hal, the set of choices you get to make in the game will all reflect these characteristics. For example, Hal's kindness and bravery will allow you to take bold actions and help others in ways that other characters cannot.

Option: Play as Heroic Hal

You can play the game as the **character of Heroic Hal, pictured above**. Hal is extremely intelligent, kind, and brave. If you play as Hal, the set of choices you get to make in the game will all reflect these characteristics. For example, Hal's kindness and bravery will allow you to take bold actions and help others in ways that other characters cannot.

Example screen shots from game (villain version):

Philip's Card Tower

You come across a man in the process of building a two-story playing card tower. He is concentrating, but looks up when you arrive.

'Hello!' he says. 'My name's Philip. Like my tower? I'm making it for Angelica.' His voice becomes dreamy and filled with affection when he says Angelica's name. Then, his eyebrows knit together in anxiety. 'I really hope she likes it.'

Laugh at Philip

Poke the tower repeatedly

Philip's Card Tower

'I'm impressed! Oh wait, did I say impressed? I meant depressed. Your terrible tower depresses me. Why would you want to hurt me like that? I barely know you.' Philip is so distracted by your harsh words that he flinches as he tries to place a card. The entire tower falls. You smirk at him. 'Have a lovely day!' you say cheerfully as you walk away.

Walk toward the beach