WHEN THE MOB BOSS, DRUG LORD, AND MALEVOLENT QUEEN AREN'T ALL BAD: AUDIENCES' COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING OF AND ALLEGIANCE TO FICTIONAL ANTIHERO CHARACTERS IN TELEVISION AND FILM

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WHEN THE MOB BOSS, DRUG LORD, AND MALEVOLENT QUEEN AREN'T ALL BAD: AUDIENCES' COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING OF AND ALLEGIANCE TO FICTIONAL ANTIHERO CHARACTERS IN TELEVISION AND FILM

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Antihero characters in TV and film have grown in popularity with both audiences and in academic study in recent years. The antihero literature thus far has focused on predicting audience enjoyment of such characters/narratives and building theories to explain audience members' ability to root for morally questionable characters. However, the current literature lacks a foundational understanding of *how* and *why* audiences engage with antihero characters, and how that engagement evolves over time. In order to address this gap, this project breaks from traditional effects-based methodologies used in the study of antihero characters by triangulating three qualitative studies (focus groups, in-depth interviews, and thought-listing exercises) that allow for the free generation of audience-driven data regarding the full engagement experience with antihero characters, from their first introduction to post-viewing contemplation and discussion.

The findings uncover two fundamental goals that drive audiences' engagement with antihero characters: 1) understanding the complexities and true nature of the antihero, and 2) determining the nature of their (the audience member's) allegiance, or sympathetic and/or antipathetic stances towards the antihero character. The findings also highlight the dynamic processing style and mixed automatic/conscious processing that was common across participants in all three studies. Three themes capture more specific details regarding several elements, concepts, and processes involved in audience engagement with antiheroes – many of which have not yet been recognized, studied, or measured in

previous antihero research – as they relate to the character, narrative, and viewer. Particularly notable among these findings are the multiple roles a single antihero character may fill, their layered personas, the importance of context and between-character relationships, the comparative nature of engagement, the difference between understanding, agreement, and acceptance, the central role of sympathy, empathy, and pity, and the many ways viewers deal with questionable or immoral issues including justification, rationalization, forgiveness, and forgetting. Not only do these findings provide a strong foundation for future academic research, they also offer useful insight for industry professionals who wish to develop engaging antihero characters, and point to potential personal and societal implications of audience engagement with antihero characters.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melissa Seipel received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Brigham Young University in 2013 with a double major in Communications and German Studies. She then took two years away from academia to work, one year in online marketing and another in South Korea as an English teacher, before completing her Master of Arts degree in Mass Communication from Brigham Young University in 2017. She then matriculated into Cornell University's doctoral program in the Department of Communication in the fall of 2017. This dissertation, completed in 2021, fulfills the final degree requirement for that program.

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PREFACE

One of the most highly consumed forms of media, and therefore one of the most studied, is narratives (Dill-Shackleford, 2015). While there are many facets to the study of narrative engagement, the great majority of the narrative literature focuses on the exploration of variables, effects, and processes related to the *characters* within those narratives (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012). For instance, fundamental narrative concepts such as identification, parasocial relationships, homophily, and even transportation are reliant on the way audiences view and/or engage with characters within those narratives. In fact, because audiences can't help but engage in automatic social processes with other social objects – including fictional characters – scholars have argued that character engagement provides the basis for all narrative engagement (Dill-Schackleford et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2008; Vaage, 2010). The centrality of characters to narratives is not an argument made only by academics, but the creators of media content as well. TV/film writers who were asked about the value of characters to fictional narratives replied simply, "It's everything. TV is all about character" and "characters are the core of [any TV show or film]" (Author interviews, 2018).

It is generally understood that the purpose of characters in entertainment narratives is to engage audiences into the *journey* of a narrative, so that they may enjoy the unfolding narrative experience alongside the characters (Author interviews, 2018; Vaage, 2010). Therefore, if the intended purpose of characters is to help engage audiences in a dynamic experience, it follows that significant academic attention should also be given to how and why that engagement happens. While many researchers have taken on the study of character and narrative engagement in many ways, this project uses a unique, exploratory approach in the investigation of audience engagement with one particularly intriguing type of character: fictional antiheroes.

This project triangulates the findings from three qualitative studies – focus groups, in-depth interviews, and thought-listing exercises – to gain audience-driven insight regarding the overarching question: How do audiences engage with antihero characters? The findings uncover two fundamental goals of engagement – understanding and allegiance – as well as two key features of engagement – processing style (automatic vs conscious) and dynamic engagement. Three additional themes capture more specific details regarding the elements, concepts, and processes involved in audience engagement with antiheroes as they relate to the character, narrative, and viewer.

Literature Review

Antiheroes

Antiheros, also known in the literature as morally ambiguous characters (MAC), have been defined in many ways. Most definitions focus on the moral complexity of such characters. This moral ambiguity can range widely with some scholars conceptualizing antiheroes as protagonists who sometimes do bad or questionable things (Shafer & Raney, 2012; Janicke & Raney, 2015) while others see them as villains who happen to have some redeemable qualities or motivations (Oliver et al., 2019). Some researchers have used an online crowd-sourced website (tvtropes.org) which has identified 5 antihero categories by comparing and contrasting thousands of antihero characters and ranking them based on morality. While these categories represent an important step towards capturing the range/diversity of antihero characters, the researchers found that the categories were overly simplistic and inappropriately restrictive given the ups and downs of a character's journey (Eden et al., 2017). Despite the various definitions and approaches to conceptualizing antihero characters, the common element is the idea that antiheros act as "a contrast to traditional virtuous heroes without moral flaws on the one side, and malicious, evil villains on the other. Antiheroes are the in-between category" (Kleemans et al., 2017, p. 3).

Based on the amalgam of antihero definitions presented above, I chose to define/describe antiheroes as follows: "Antiheroes are characters that fall in-between classic heroes and villains. They generally display some hero-like characteristics and behaviors for which they are admired, but simultaneously act in ways or have qualities that can be regarded as ambiguous, questionable, or even evil." This definition was meant to be open enough to capture a wide range of antihero characters, with just enough structure to unify them as a separate, distinct group from heroes, villains, or other more neutral characters.

There are two main reasons why antiheroes were selected for this study of character engagement. First, by nature, antihero characters are complex, contradictory, and unpredictable, which "demands equally complex responses from viewers" (Canet, 2019, p.97). This means that audiences will likely need to engage more fully with antihero characters than classic heroes or villains in order to understand who they are, why they do the things they do, and to determine how audience members think/feel about them (Janicke & Raney, 2018; Smith, 2011; van Ommen et al., 2016). The cognitively demanding nature of antiheroes may also push some of the traditionally automatic or subconscious engagement processes to a more conscious level, leading to more cognitively accessible/reportable data. In essence, antiheroes are a promising category for study because the increased processing demands make it easier to capture processes and details that would likely have presented more subtly in other types of characters, revealing key aspects of narrative engagement that have thus far been overlooked.

Second, within the past few decades, there has been a significant rise in popular television shows and films featuring very complex antihero characters with long story arcs such as Tony Soprano (*The* Sopranos), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*), Don Draper (*Mad Men*), and Gregory House (*House*) (Shafer & Raney, 2012; Janicke & Raney, 2015). While these types of characters have been around in popular media for many years, their recent spike in popularity has given rise to a new line of antihero literature in the field of communication (Shafer & Raney, 2012). This interest is largely driven by the fact that antiheroes challenge the traditional narrative experience of "rooting for the good guy." This contradicts our traditional understanding of media enjoyment (e.g., affective disposition theory) and audience-character engagement (e.g., parasocial relationships) (Giles, 2002; Raney, 2004; Zillmann &

Cantor, 1976). As Janicke and Raney (2015) argue, these stories represent "socially significant media experiences" in the modern media landscape, and deserve serious investigation (p. 494).

Existing Antihero Literature

Studies within this growing line of antihero research are generally driven by a set of fundamental questions such as: Why do audiences enjoy antihero narratives? Why are antiheros so popular? Why do audiences root for morally ambiguous/bad characters (Garcia, 2016; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2015; Raney et al., 2009; Smith, 2011)? By far the most commonly addressed question thus far is, "Why do audiences enjoy antihero narratives?" The focus on enjoyment likely stems from the basic idea that audiences seek out content that they will enjoy watching (Raney, 2004).

However, the fact that audiences clearly enjoy antihero characters and narratives created a problem for the current understanding of entertainment enjoyment at the time. During the early 2000's, the predominant theory on entertainment media enjoyment was affective disposition theory (ADT). In its original conceptualization, ADT argued that audiences derive enjoyment from watching good things happen to characters they consider morally good (and therefore liked), and bad things happen to characters who are morally bad (and therefore disliked) (Raney, 2004; Raney, et al., 2009; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Early on in the new wave of antihero literature, however, researchers realized that audience enjoyment of antiheroes could not be explained by basic ADT principles (Raney, 2004; Raney et al., 2009). Antiheroes frequently behave immorally, yet audiences still enjoy watching them and even root for them. As such, it became clear that moral judgements were not necessarily the primary determinant of character liking and enjoyment and alternative explanations beyond ADT were needed to understand antihero character enjoyment (Raney, 2004; Raney et al., 2009; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012).

Initially, antihero scholars worked to adapt and expand ADT to explain how and why audiences enjoy morally-complex antihero characters. In 2009, Raney et al. discovered that identification with the antihero, rather than morality, predicted enjoyment of antihero narratives. This differed from the enjoyment of hero character, which they also tested, which was predicted by moral judgements rather than identification in line with traditional ADT. They contextualized and explained their findings using the recent developments regarding moral disengagement, schema theory, and the growing complexities of entertainment theories (e.g., liking a character).

Moral disengagement is a concept originally developed in behavioral research by Albert Bandura, which argues that we utilize a variety of strategies to justify or excuse behaviors that we would normally consider moral violations (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1999). These strategies include restructuring inhumane conduct into a moral one (e.g., war → defense), using sanitizing language (e.g., collateral damage), advantageous comparisons (e.g., lesser of two evils), disavowal of personal agency/displacement of responsibility (e.g., following orders), minimizing injuries (e.g., not a big deal), and blaming or dehumanizing the victim (e.g., brought it upon themselves).

While moral disengagement is generally discussed as a strategy of self-sanctioning, antihero scholars have argued that audiences use the same strategies to morally disengage and therefore justify or excuse immoral behaviors in characters that we have grown to like or love, including antiheroes (Raney, 2004). Many antihero scholars have included measures of moral disengagement in their studies, usually in the context of enjoyment, and have found that moral disengagement does play a role in the enjoyment of antihero characters (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Martins et al., 2020; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). While outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that

there are many nuances to the use of moral disengagement including viewing motivation (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016), personality differences (Janicke & Raney, 2018), and other variable interactions, many of which have yet to be fully understood. However, findings still indicate that moral disengagement alone does not fully bridge the gap between antihero enjoyment and ADT.

Other avenues of inquiry have examined the role of schema in antihero enjoyment. The findings thus far have provided evidence that many audiences do have a schema (or pre-existing structure of understanding for a category of information) built about antiheroes that help them more quickly and/or confidently determine their attitudes and expectations towards an antihero character. Pre-existing schema generally led to more positive and accepting attitudes towards antiheroes (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Shafer & Raney, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of an antihero schema may help audiences quickly process slightly-inconsistent behaviors using a heuristic form of moral disengagement while extreme violations of existing schema (e.g., a huge departure from a character's normal behavior) prompt more elaborative moral disengagement (Matthews, 2019). This finding also highlights an important boundary of antihero engagement – showing that there are limits to the violations that even antiheroes can make when it comes to moral disengagement.

Additional studies have highlighted interactions and processes involving key variables such as identification, liking, familiarity/exposure, and empathy (among others), higher levels of which all have been linked to greater enjoyment of antihero characters (Eden et al., 2017; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Oliver et al., 2019; Raney et al., 2009; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). These variables and the interactions between them are being explored in a

variety of ways to capture more of the complexity of antihero engagement, although again, primarily within the limited context of enjoyment.

For instance, multiple studies have found the influence of these variables to differ by audience type. Janicke & Raney (2015) found that sympathy and liking better predict enjoyment in fans, whereas attractiveness and identification are more predictive of enjoyment of non-fans. Non-fans also did not engage in moral disengagement as fans tend to do. Van Ommen et al. (2016) found that audiences with different life experiences (i.e., prisoners, law enforcement, civilians) also came to moral judgements (and therefore enjoyment) by using different strategies. Law enforcement officers and prisoners drew heavily from their own personal experiences when interpreting a crime show, whereas civilians allowed the rules of the story world to ground their moral judgements, leaning towards more flexible and lenient mentalities. This indicates that personal experience and closeness to a story or character impacts an audience member's viewing experience. Similarly, Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel (2015) found that audiences primed to think about their own vices enjoyed antihero stories more than a story featuring a villain. On the other hand, participants primed to think about their own virtues enjoyed hero stories more than antihero stories, demonstrating the impact a person's mental state has on engagement and enjoyment. Janicke & Raney (2018) also found that a person's willingness to accept violence impacted the likelihood that they would morally disengage, and therefore identify, like, and enjoy antihero narratives more than those who weren't as accepting of violence.

Taking a different approach to the study of antihero enjoyment, Kleemans et al. (2017) examined how a character's moral development over a narrative related to audiences' responses, including liking, moral evaluation, and enjoyment. Results indicated that antiheroes with positive development were increasingly liked and seen as more moral, and the narrative increasingly

enjoyable overall. A character with little/no development suffered in terms of likability and moral evaluation over the course of the narrative, while enjoyment rose then declined in a pattern uncorrelated to the liking and morality measurements. This indicates the existence of other influences on enjoyment outside of character liking and morality.

Thanks to these ongoing studies, we have learned that while morality is an important influence in antihero enjoyment, there are many additional factors in play that have the potential to supersede the centrality of moral judgements on antihero enjoyment beyond what ADT predicts. Elements from the story itself, the individual audience member, and the greater media context all impact the way antihero narratives are experienced and enjoyed. Of course, this line of research is still in its infancy and much more work is still needed to build a stronger understanding of antihero enjoyment.

Before moving beyond the question of enjoyment, it is worth noting that a few studies have begun to expand the notion of enjoyment to include both hedonic (pleasure-rooted) and eudaimonic (meaning/purpose-rooted) enjoyment, often termed appreciation. Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak (2016) found that hedonic (or pleasure-based) goals for media consumption led to more leniency regarding the moral standards of characters while eudaimonic (or meaning/purpose-based) motivations resulted in higher expectations and moral standards when making character judgements (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). Similarly, Eden et al. (2017) found that moral judgements predicted traditional hedonic enjoyment whereas experiencing self-expansion (expanding one's sense of self by taking on others' experiences) predicted appreciation. Not only do these studies show how pleasure-based enjoyment is not the only motivation or outcome sought out or experienced by audiences, but it reminds us that relying on

unidimensional measures of enjoyment may obscure important processes or experiences involved in the experience of antihero engagement.

Beyond Enjoyment

Referring to the three big questions commonly asked about antiheroes – Why do audiences enjoy antiheroes? Why are antiheros so popular? Why do audiences root for morally ambiguous/bad characters? – there has been very little direct investigation regarding the last two questions. Given the nascent state of the antihero literature, this is not too surprising. While the question of popularity is perhaps indirectly answered by the question of enjoyment, there are still many avenues left to explore when it comes to overall audience engagement with antiheroes, especially those related to audience support of morally ambiguous antihero characters.

From the field of communication, the only study to my knowledge that addresses antihero engagement outside of enjoyment was conducted by Bonus et al. in 2019. They brought in ADT in conjunction with expectancy violation theory (EVT) to examine how moral violations impact character liking and the development of parasocial relationships (or audience-character relationships). While some expected patterns emerged (i.e., lower morality ratings related to weaker parasocial relationships), they found that audiences responded in a variety of nuanced ways which were only partially accounted for by ADT and EVT. They emphasized the need for further theoretical development and pushed for more audience-driven, rather than researcher-driven definitions and tropes when it comes to classifying characters. This was because some audience members classified the role (i.e., hero, villain) and morality level of certain characters in extremely different ways. Imposing a pre-determined label or even classification on some of these characters may cause problems for researchers given the truly unique interpretation an individual audience member may have about a given character. This idea of audience versus

researcher-driven conceptualizations and stimuli holds important implications for the future of antihero research, which will be discussed later in this paper.

For additional insights into antihero engagement, one must look outside the field of communication towards other literatures including film and philosophy. These disciplines have taken an altogether different approach to the study of character/antihero engagement by focusing on philosophical and critical analytical approaches rather than empirically-based surveys, experiments, or variable approaches (manipulating and/or measuring the influence of specific variables or the interaction between variables), which make up the bulk of communication literature. Thanks to these differences, we can gain some alternative perspectives, ideas, concepts, and theories that could strengthen the communication field's understanding of antihero engagement. While it would be impossible to address all the literatures, theories, and ideas related to character/antihero engagement, a few concepts stand out as particularly useful.

Predominant amongst these ideas is the "structure of sympathy" developed by Murray Smith, a film theorist. While originally developed to address engagement with all fictional characters generally (Smith, 1994; Smith 1995), Smith also gave particular attention to how the structure of sympathy could specifically address the unique peculiarities of antihero engagement (Smith, 1999; Smith, 2011). The structure of sympathy includes three main elements that play fundamental roles in audience engagement with fictional characters: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Recognition is the construction of the character in the eyes of the audience member – who they are, what traits they have, etc. Alignment is the placement of the audience member to the character by means of the story structure/content, including cinematography, point of view, and access to information about the character's actions, thoughts, and feelings. Finally, and most relevant to the lingering question of why audiences root for antihero characters, is the concept of

allegiance. Allegiance refers to the way an audience member assesses a character's behaviors, attitudes, and traits, leading them towards a sympathetic or antipathetic stance towards the character. That stance reflects an audience member's desire to root for or against a character.

Smith (2010) states that allegiance is a neutral construct through which all types of characters may be evaluated. He argues that an audience member's allegiance towards any given character is determined fundamentally by moral evaluations, but he also recognizes, as others have pointed out, the powerful influence of factors such as likability, charm, skill, wit, or other attractive qualities. Allegiances differ from the more common concepts of sympathy, empathy, and other cognitive or emotional reactions in that they are not in-the-moment responses to a specific incident, but relatively stable stances founded upon an accumulation of "evidence" that generally takes some time and familiarity to develop (Garcia, 2016; Plantinga, 2010; Smith, 2011). While more stable than sympathy and empathy, allegiances are constantly updated and can change over time as characters develop or as new information is revealed, even after a character has died (e.g., learning Snape's true nature after he dies in the *Harry Potter* series).

What is particularly interesting about sympathetic allegiances is that they don't necessarily require strict liking, identification, or positive moral evaluations of a character to develop. Many character shortcomings may be excused or overlooked if they have other attractive or admirable qualities or actions, or have/are experiencing sympathetic circumstances/contexts. A handful of film scholars have discussed narrative strategies that enable audiences to develop allegiances towards morally ambiguous or otherwise distasteful antihero characters, some of which are similar to strategies of moral disengagement. For instance, Garcia (2016) summarizes a few of these strategies including 1) moral comparatism (pitting the antihero against a worse villain); 2) the use of family relationships to humanize, soften, and justify actions

of the antihero; 3) acts of contrition (showing guilt or remorse for immoral/bad acts); and 4) portraying antiheros as victims of circumstance or other wrongful treatment. The structure of the storytelling (or alignment, as Smith terms it) also contributes by providing information through voice-over, flashbacks, and point of view – allowing audiences access to private or past moments, thoughts, experiences, etc. (Smith, 1995; Smith, 2011; Mittell, 2015). Each of these strategies helps audiences feel a more intimate sense of understanding or sympathy for the character, which helps justify or soften their less-than-admirable behaviors and traits. However, it should be noted that allegiances are not limitless or unconditional (Smith, 2011). Extreme moral violations or negative character developments can cause audiences to abandon their sense of allegiance towards a character, usually temporarily, but potentially permanently (Garcia, 2016; Smith, 2011).

Part of the reason overall likability or morality is not a requirement for sympathetic allegiances is because, as Smith (1995; 2011) argues, audiences may develop partial allegiances, which allow for the development of multiple contrasting stances towards a character in different domains. For example, someone may develop sympathetic allegiances in support of Tony Soprano as a father, but antipathetic feelings against him as a mob boss. Plantinga (2010) similarly argues that multiple conflicting allegiances may form regarding different aspects of a character, but further details the possible combinations of liking/disliking, sympathy/antipathy, and allegiance/opposition all towards a single character. For instance, taking the character Gregory House from the show *House* as an example, audiences may like his wit, dislike his arrogance, feel sympathy towards his struggle with addiction, antipathy towards his treatment of his more likable co-workers, allegiance towards him as a skilled and well-intended doctor, but

opposition towards him as a person. It is this complexity that Plantinga (2010) and others argue makes well-written antiheroes so engaging.

A handful of case studies and textual analyses have shown how the structure of sympathy – particularly alignment and allegiance – function in real television narratives. For instance, Mittell (2015) explores the full journey of Walter White from *Breaking Bad,* an antihero with an a-typical negative trajectory, but shows how the principles of alignment and allegiance still explain audience engagement with the character. Smith himself (2011) also provides an in-depth analysis of Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos,* illustrating how the structure of sympathy functions. Plantinga (2010) references several antiheroes in his paper, but focuses on the character Tristan from the film *Legends of the Fall,* illustrating how these principles work even in shorter-length narratives. Canet (2019) takes a slightly more detailed approach, examining the push and pull of both "sympathetic strategies" and "antipathetic strategies" (as he calls them) similar to those discussed by Garcia (2016) (see above) to understand audience engagement with Tony Soprano, especially as they relate to his relationship with another key character in the show, Dr. Melfi. His aim was to highlight the important role other characters play in an audience's experience and allegiance with an antihero character. Each of these analyses show strong support for both the depth and breadth of the explanatory power of the structure of sympathy and its role in audience engagement with antihero characters.

In sum, allegiances reflect an audience member's overarching stance towards characters of all types (liked, disliked, moral, amoral, ambiguous) in ways that are dynamic, multi-dimensional, and conditional upon a variety of character, narrative, and audience variables (Garcia, 2016; Plantinga, 2010; Smith, 2011). The concept of allegiance provides a useful lens through which we can investigate how and why audiences root for morally-complex, even

dislikable antihero characters. It reaches beyond any of the currently popular concepts of narrative engagement from the communication literature (i.e., identification, homophily, liking, attraction, etc.) and could be used to bridge the empirically-based communication literature with that of the analytically-based film theory literature.

Gaps in the Antihero Literature

As mentioned in the previous discussion on the existing antihero literature, the vast majority of studies on antihero engagement conducted in the field of communication have focused on predicting a specific outcome or effect of antihero engagement, primarily enjoyment. They sought to identify factors that predict antihero enjoyment, testing concepts/variables such as moral disengagement, identification, liking, and individual differences (i.e., trait empathy, pre-existing schema, etc.) (Eden et al., 2017; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Raney, et al., 2009; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). Almost all of these studies used experimental or variable approaches (primarily using surveys) to test their hypotheses, consistent with the recent effects-based methodological paradigm common within the academic field of communication (Lang & Ewoldsen, 2010).

These studies provide excellent empirical data regarding the relationship between key variables such as moral evaluation, liking, and enjoyment. For instance, one of the most recent antihero studies combined pre-existing findings into a model of antihero enjoyment, which they tested to overall success. Their model begins with individual audience traits (specifically willingness to accept violence), which predicted moral disengagement, leading towards greater identification and character liking, which ultimately predicted enjoyment (Janicke & Raney, 2018). However, these researchers recognized the limitations of their study, noted the variability

in patterns across the three stimulus films, and suggested that future work could contribute additional variables to improve the predictability of their model.

While this model-building approach to antihero studies will certainly enhance our ability to predict audience responses to antihero narratives, there are some important limitations to this approach. First, the variables and concepts tested in these studies were brought to the table by the researchers themselves. This means that the variables included have been pre-filtered by the researchers' own perspectives, hypotheses, and academic traditions. Naturally, a long history of media engagement literature has resulted in a battery of proven engagement variables (i.e., morality, liking, identification, etc.), but the remaining gaps in the antihero literature clearly indicate the existence of additional variables, concepts, and processes that antihero scholars have not yet been discovered. Therefore, alternate methodologies allowing for audience-driven perspectives, for instance, could provide new and valuable insight that researcher-driven methodologies are not capable of tapping.

The over-reliance on researcher-driven methods and the limitations of empirical, effects-based studies in the field of communication has been a topic of recent discussion (Jingjing & Lang, 2018; Lang, 2013; Lang & Ewoldsen, 2010; Poole, 2007). These scholars argue that this effects-based approach limits both the types of questions we can ask and the types of results we can gather. For example, effects-based models are well suited to answer questions about *if* antihero engagement *effects change* in an audience member (i.e., enjoyment, imitation), but they were not developed to address questions of *how* or *why* those effects occur (Lang & Ewoldsen, 2010). While a few effects-based studies can and have provided some insight into more dynamic communication processes (including character engagement) in an attempt to address questions of *how* and *why*, the correlational surveys, experiments, and variable approach employed by such

studies only capture snapshot insights and short-term effects of those processes (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

To answer questions of *how* and *why* antihero engagement functions and affects viewers, we should broaden our methodological approaches to include more exploratory, process-focused methods that were built to answer just such questions (Donsbach, 2006; Lang, 2013; Lang & Ewoldsen, 2010; Poole, 2007). We can take advantage of several qualitative methods of research that are guided by theory and grounded in data, yet open and flexible enough allow for rich, complex, and unexpected insights to emerge. Furthermore, this exploratory approach will allow for audience-driven rather than researcher-driven data, greatly freeing the results from the limited perspectives and expectations of the researcher. Specifically, this project will use focus groups, in-depth interviews, and thought-listing exercises to address the overarching question: How do audiences engage with antihero characters?

Current Studies

The question of how audiences engage with antiheroes is clearly very broad and could be approached in many ways. While exploratory in nature, the approach taken in this project was guided by a theoretically-based understanding of narrative and character engagement. For instance, we know that characters play a central role in narrative engagement and that audiences engage in automatic parasocial processes (interpretation and evaluation) with those characters (Dill-Schackleford et al., 2016; Hartmann, 2008). But we don't have a full picture of what elements within a narrative audiences pay attention to during that parasocial processing (either consciously or subconsciously) or how audiences organize and make sense of that information.

Of course, extant research has already identified some elements audiences may be attending to thanks to related literatures. For instance, from studies on character morality,

scholars have argued that audiences consider the context in which characters must make choices, the character's goals and motivations, relationships, where the character stands in terms of relative morality to other characters, and character traits such as cleverness, charm, humor, and physical appearance when making moral judgements about a character (Garcia, 2016; Plantinga, 2010; Smith, 2011). Given that morality is considered to be a big part of character engagement as a whole, it is likely that these factors will also be involved in antihero engagement. However, as mentioned previously, morality appears to be only one piece of the antihero engagement puzzle and traditional methodologies are not well suited for the discovery of additional elements and processes. Therefore, when it comes to understanding antihero character engagement, by allowing the free-generation of audience-driven insight, we can take a step closer to a more comprehensive understanding of what types of information/cues audiences attend to while engaging with antihero characters and how they use that information.

Furthermore, we know that the development of relationships and/or allegiances to characters is an important part of character engagement, but how do these relationships and allegiances develop with such complex and morally-ambiguous antihero characters? As discussed previously, allegiance refers to the sympathetic or antipathetic stances audiences develop towards (or against) a character after having assessed the character's attitudes, traits, and actions (Smith, 2011). In essence, allegiance is what drives an audience member to root for or against a character. Open-ended audience responses and in-depth descriptions of their experiences engaging with antihero characters should help shed light on how and why audiences are able to develop relationships and allegiances with antihero characters.

In order to investigate audience engagement with antihero characters from an audience-driven perspective, this project employed three studies, each using different exploratory,

qualitatively-based methods. Study 1 used focus groups to generate a broad set of ideas and experiences for follow-up exploration and to compare and contrast how different individuals engage with commonly known antihero characters. Study 2 used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to dig deeper into an individual's engagement process with a specific antihero character, and study 3 was conducted online using thought-listing techniques to capture the content and structure of thoughts about antihero characters stimulated in short term memory. While each method had its own strengths and weaknesses (to be discussed below), by triangulating all three methods, it was possible to obtain a broader, more in-depth understanding of the complex phenomena of antihero engagement (Flick, 1992).

Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used successfully in media studies to identify how different individuals experience and create meaning from the same media text(s) (Granello, 1997; Guttman et al., 2008; Hall, 2006; Liebes & Katz, 1986). As Granello (1997) argues, every media text has multiple potential meanings, and focus groups are particularly useful for identifying elements that are individualistically versus socially or structurally determined. In the case of this study, focus group discussions about a single, mutually known antihero character allowed us to identify aspects of the character/their story that are shared across multiple viewers and those that are more individually interpreted. Additionally, participants were able to compare multiple antihero characters against each other, leading to further insight into elements/experiences that remain consistent across various antihero characters, and those that vary.

Another key advantage of focus groups is that they reduce the influence of the researcher and their biases, preconceptions, and expectations. Spontaneous discussion between participants often lead to novel insights and avenues of thought that the researcher would not have thought of

from their scholarly perspective (Krueger & Casey, 2000). An additional benefit of focus groups is their ability to generate a wider range of examples, ideas, and experiences that would not be possible on an individual basis (Belzile & Öberg, 2012). Furthermore, the focus and dynamics of focus groups discussions may provide some insight into which of those many ideas and experiences are the most relevant, important, or meaningful to participants. These strengths are especially meaningful for exploratory studies which are aimed at expanding the scope of existing scholarly literature. As such, focus groups were chosen as the method for study 1 to provide a broad foundation of organic and diverse ideas, perspectives, and patterns across both participants and antihero characters from which studies 2 and 3 could build upon.

Nevertheless, focus groups have their weaknesses. Some common issues include domineering personalities taking over conversations, participants being unwilling to disagree with the majority opinion, socially desirable rather than honest responses, and discussion hyper-focusing on one idea or perspective while neglecting others (Bezile & Öberg, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Some of these issues may be minimized by moderator strategies such as directing questions to specific participants, asking for alternative opinions, and emphasizing the value of all opinions and the lack of "right" or "wrong" answers (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In the case of this study, having each participant "take charge" of their antihero character of choice was helpful in encouraging relatively equal and open participation across all participants.

In-depth Interviews

In contrast to the more broadly-focused, comparative approach utilized in the focus groups, semi-structured in-depth interviews can provide richer, more detailed insight into the complexities of a single participant's unique experiences with a specific antihero character (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Like focus groups, semi-structured interviews combine the structure

needed for valid, reliable data gathering with the flexibility necessary to explore unexpected avenues and to follow up on incomplete ideas, descriptions, or experiences (Barriball & While, 1994; Charmaz, 2002; Kallio et al., 2016). The structure ensures that the information gathered across interviews remains relevant, complete, and thematically consistent enough to allow for comparisons across interviews, even though the antihero discussed in each interview may vary. The flexibility to probe and ask follow-up questions allows for valuable deep-dives into interesting experiences thanks to the greater time and opportunity available in a one-on-one interview. Follow-ups and probes are necessary to obtain clarification of meaning, encourage more complete or detailed responses, resolve inconsistencies, and aid in recall, especially in shyer or less talkative participants (Barriball & While, 1994).

Another advantage of the one-on-one format of an in-depth interview is that each participant has the opportunity to respond without the influence of other participants' thoughts and perspectives. While focus groups may generate a broader range of insights in a single session, interviews tend to inspire more unique insights than focus groups (Bezile & Öberg, 2012). For instance, in a focus group, if one participant comments on relationships in response to a question about a character's values, other participants may be primed to focus on relationships with their own character rather than other values they would have otherwise thought of. Additionally, when two or more participants recognize a common pattern in behavior or development across their characters, other participants might reach for weak or non-existent evidence relating to their character in order to conform to that common pattern – making it appear more common than it really is. Some participants may also feel pressured to respond positively towards characters they dislike when others comment positively about them.

Finally, thanks to the heightened sense of confidentiality of a relatively private interview setting, it is possible that participants feel more comfortable sharing their honest thoughts and experiences with the researcher, especially if rapport is successfully built (Barriball & While, 1994). This is important because social desirability could be a particularly large threat in the case of antihero engagement. For example, it may be difficult for a participant to share their honest feelings of support for a character who has committed incest, or to admit to loving a character that kills willy-nilly. This demand characteristic could be particularly amplified in a focus group where private thoughts are shared with multiple strangers, whereas the relative levels of privacy, rapport, probes, and follow-up exploration in one-on-one interviews can help discourage socially desirable responses (Barriball & While, 1994).

Thought-Listing

Finally, Study 3 involved thought-listing exercises conducted fully online using a Qualtrics survey. Thought-listing exercises ask participants to free-write all the thoughts that come to mind in response to a prompt, such as "What comes to mind when you think of this character?" This technique is designed to access mental processes used during a specific task and to capture content that passes through a person's short-term memory while engaging in a particular experience (Shapiro, 1994). While thought-listing techniques are ideally conducted in the moment of media engagement (i.e., while viewing a clip), they can nevertheless provide insight into what passes through a participant's mind as they recall, reflect, and engage retrospectively with a character (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

In order to access this information, thought-listing tasks specifically ask participants to report *what* they think and feel, not *why* they have those thoughts and feelings (Russo et al., 1989). "What" questions encourage descriptive responses of whatever thoughts, feelings, ideas,

etc., are passing through a participant's mind, whereas "why" questions tend to prompt explanatory responses that require a participant to justify or explain their thoughts and experiences (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson & Nisbett, 1978). Explanatory responses are problematic because so much engagement takes place on an automatic or subconscious level, which participants do not have access to and therefore cannot report (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Shapiro, 1994). Nevertheless, when asked directly, participants will attempt to explain their experience based on self-constructed theories derived from the limited information they do have access to. Unfortunately, these theories will almost certainly miss many essential elements that occurred automatically or subconsciously, resulting in partial and/or inaccurate responses (Shapiro, 1994). Descriptive responses, on the other hand, tend to be much more accurate because all that participants are required to report is the content currently going through their minds. Even though participants may filter or simplify their thoughts, and responses will be limited to currently active/accessible information, at least they will be much more representative of actual mental content and therefore more reliable when it comes to analysis (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Shapiro, 1994).

Thought-listing tasks are unique in that they are performed quickly and do not involve the same level of deep reflection that is more likely to occur during focus groups and interviews. As such, the type of insight that can be gleaned from a thought-listing task stands apart from other forms of qualitative data. First, thought-listing captures the most accessible thoughts and feelings that readily come to mind when prompted, which are believed to be the most salient elements involved in the engagement experience (van Ittersum et al., 2007). Furthermore, the number, ordering, category (e.g., moral, external/internal, factual/assumed), and other response characteristics can highlight basic patterns helpful in understanding not only what audiences

attend to, but how they might organize/structure those various elements (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Ericsson & Simon, 1980). Finally, since the administration of thought-listing exercises are comparatively low-demand and anonymous, participants may feel relatively free from the demands of social-desirability and respond more honestly and accurately than they would in a face-to-face design.

Context of Current Studies

As Smith (2011) argues, only through "'thick-description' and detailed consideration of a fictional world and its presentation" (p. 72) will we be able to begin to understand the true nature and complexities of such narratives and their characters. In order to face the complexity of both antihero character and audiences' engagement with them, it was important that participants in each study had the appropriate level of experience, familiarity, and knowledge about the characters they would be discussing. Because the majority of antihero characters are serial, appearing in long-form television shows or film series, given the scope and practical restraints of this project, the only way to ensure that level of familiarity was for participants to discuss an antihero character of their own choosing. By allowing them to choose their own character, this also ensured that we would be better able to tap the full, complex, rich nature of antihero engagement that occurs naturally when an audience member engages willingly with an antihero character over the natural course of a narrative. Therefore, in all three studies, participants were asked to come prepared to discuss an antihero character that they felt they knew well.

This, of course, meant that participants would be relying on memory as they responded to questions and discussion prompts. While it can be difficult to accurately recall detailed thoughts or feelings experienced during a specific moment of exposure, important events (e.g., big moments of reveal), themes (e.g., importance of family relationships), and impactful experiences

(e.g., shock at an unexpected choice) can be easily recalled. Even if those memories are somewhat altered from the original experience, they do represent the current, potentially lasting understanding and interpretation of those engagement experiences (Olson & Muderrisoglu, 1979). In fact, an important part of character engagement involves long-term or ongoing reflection, re-thinking, or even discussion after any particular experience (Kleemans et al., 2016; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). This is particularly salient for antihero characters who are generally complex, unpredictable, and ambiguous (Canet, 2019; Garcia, 2016; Kleemans et al., 2016; Smith, 2011). As such, when it comes to processes, the purpose of this project is to provide insight on long-term, rather than in-the-moment processes involved in antihero engagement.

Methods

Study 1 – Focus Groups

Materials

The moderator guide for the focus groups was created using standard procedures for the development of focus group and semi-structured interview questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kallio et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2000). First, a series of questions/prompts were created based upon our current understanding of character/narrative engagement and antihero characters. This helped to ensure that the questions included in the moderator guide would capture all the central themes (and notable gaps) relevant to audience engagement with antihero characters. The questions addressed themes including a character's goals/motivations, relationships, choices/decisions, traits, and audiences' judgements and perceptions of the antihero character (see Appendix A for table of questions and their purposes).

In order to generate a smooth discussion, questions and prompts were designed to be open-ended, simple, clear, and conversational (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000). The specific questions/prompts were carefully selected to capture common engagement experiences as openly as possible so as to produce natural, in-depth, rich responses from participants (Kallio et al., 2016). Like many other exploratory studies, questions and prompts focused on asking "what" rather than "why" so as to capture concrete, descriptive answers that more closely represent the contents of participants' memories and experiences (Kallio, et al., 2016). From those rich, descriptive responses, the "whys" still emerge naturally, sometimes through direct address, but also inferred through vivid descriptions, language choices, and emotional reactions.

The general ordering of questions was determined by breadth and complexity, with the first few questions/prompts being the most general and least cognitively demanding so as to help participants feel comfortable speaking freely (e.g., "Tell me a little bit about your character."). From there, the next questions/prompts became more specific and focused, addressing more complex and abstract ideas ("Tell me about a time when they did or said something that you weren't sure how to take. How did you feel about what they did?").

In accordance to both focus group and semi-structured interviewing techniques, the wording and order of the guides' questions/prompts were treated flexibly enough so that they could be adjusted based on participant understanding and conversational flow, given that the purpose or theme behind the question was more important than the exact replication of procedure. Nevertheless, the wording and order were relatively consistent across groups and interviews, providing the necessarily levels of validity and reliability (Barriball & While, 1994). The semi-structured approach also allowed for probes and follow up questions, both planned and

spontaneous, which helped to ensure a fuller and more accurate understanding between participant and researcher. Furthermore, this flexible format also provided room for the exploration of unexpected yet relevant ideas and themes brought up by participants (Barriball & While, 1994; Kallio et al., 2016).

Once the moderator guide was established, a pilot test was conducted. The pilot focus group was conducted just as the real focus groups would be, but with an additional feedback period at the end of the session so participants could provide their feedback. The pilot focus group consisted of colleagues from different communication labs, who were able to provide expert insight into the utility, wording, and techniques of the focus group. Additionally, confusing questions, awkward procedures, and gaps in questioning/material were identified by both the researcher and participants throughout the pretest. This session was also helpful in confirming the pacing of questions and the time needed for the real focus groups.

Participants and Recruitment

Because the purpose of the focus groups is to garner deep discussion of very complex characters, it was determined that smaller focus groups would be more productive than traditional market-sized focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Smaller numbers would allow time for all participants to discuss and describe their perspectives and experiences in depth. In terms of the number of focus groups to be conducted, saturation can generally be reached after 3-4 focus groups given general-population participants and phenomenologically-oriented studies such as this one (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As such, study 1 was comprised of 3 focus groups with 4-5 participants per group.

Participants were university students recruited from a dual-departmental online research platform, SONA. The only requirements for participation were 1) high familiarity with at least

one fictional antihero character, and 2) English speaking. Before signing up to participate in a focus group, participants were given a definition of an antihero (see definition in procedures section below) and asked to come prepared with at least one particular antihero character in mind that they could discuss in-depth. If they could not do so, they were asked not to participate. For those wishing to participate, they could sign up for one of three focus groups on various days/times. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 23, included 3 males and 10 female participants who identified as White/Caucasian (n=8), Asian (n=4) and Black/African American (n=1). Each of the three groups had one male participant and no significant differences in responses were identified between groups, participant gender, or participant race.

Procedure

Study 1 was conducted and recorded online via Zoom video chat (given public health restrictions active during the COVID-19 pandemic). At the time of the focus group, each participant was first directed to an online Qualtrics survey where they completed informed consent, provided demographical information, and then received a secure Zoom meeting link. Once participants entered the Zoom meeting, they were each privately assigned a code name by the researcher before joining the full group. Each Zoom meeting was then recorded onto a secure cloud account, where only the audio recording and automated transcript were retained. While participants were asked to leave their video on during the Zoom meeting to simulate a more natural discussion environment and encourage focus and participation, the video recording was deleted once a transcript was successfully created.

After each participant joined the group, recording began, and a brief introduction was given regarding the format and ground rules of the focus group. Then the definition of an antihero was reviewed to ensure all participants were comfortable with what we meant by the

term “antihero.” The definition provided for participants was as follows: “Antiheroes are characters that fall in-between classic heroes and villains. They generally display some hero-like characteristics and behaviors for which they are admired, but simultaneously act in ways or have qualities that can be regarded as ambiguous, questionable, or even evil.”

Each participant then named 1-2 antihero characters they felt they could discuss in-depth. Several characters were familiar to multiple participants in the group (e.g., Snape, Jack Sparrow, Green Arrow) while others were not (e.g., Cersei Lannister, Jules Winnfield, Vincent Vega). Most participants focused primarily on the characters they initially identified, although they were all encouraged to comment on any character regardless of familiarity level. The discussion was guided by a series of prepared questions (see Appendix A) as well as spontaneous follow-up questions/prompts, although free-flowing conversation was highly encouraged. Each focus group lasted approximately 1.5 hours, after which they were thanked and awarded course credit.

Automated transcripts from the Zoom sessions were downloaded, then corrected using the voice recording of each focus group. Thanks to the assignment of code names prior to the recording of Zoom sessions, no identifiable information was ever recorded, downloaded, or retained.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method of analysis (a method of grounded theory common for phenomenological studies) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, line-by-line initial or open coding of each focus group transcript was done to pull out interesting themes, patterns, observations, insights, etc. (Charmaz, 2002; Lofland et al., 2006). Most codes initially resembled descriptive statements such as “dedicated to goal – will go extreme.” Eventually, the categorical properties and theoretical significance of codes became clearer and patterns began to

emerge that could be categorized more simply such as “goals,” “background,” and “rooting.” This was done by comparing instances belonging to certain codes as compared to others within the same code, sometimes contributing new evidence, while other times indicating the need for a new or more refined code category. While this process began during initial coding, a second round of coding (often referred to as selective or focused coding) led to the combination, simplification, or in some cases splitting of codes into sub-codes (Charmaz, 2002; Lofland et al., 2006). For instance, “rethinking” and “questioning” were combined into a single code while “relationships” were split into two sub-categories, one for between-character relationships and one for parasocial (audience-character) relationships.

Notes and memos were also created during the coding processes as interesting ideas and patterns began to emerge, but they were more thoroughly filled out after coding was completed (Charmaz, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland et al., 2006). From a final count of approximately 40 codes, 11 categorical themes emerged during the memo writing process. These included: circumstances, character arc/development, goals/motivations/intentions, relationships (between characters), relationships (with audience), relatability, morality, story structure/production, traits, and understanding/sympathy. A memo for “other audience experiences” was also created to keep track of intriguing or significant, although not extremely common findings.

While the first round of coding was conducted free-hand using Word’s comment feature, the second round was conducted on the qualitative software ATLAS.it 9.

Study 2 – In-depth Interviews

Materials

Because focus groups and semi-structured interviews are so similar in structure and process (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kallio et al., 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2000), the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was originally developed using the same techniques and questions as the focus group moderator guide. It was also pilot tested, although with a non-expert individual, who aided in the establishment of the overall clarity and comfort of the interview. However, in line with the constant comparative method of grounded theory methodology, the interview guide was adjusted and updated based upon the experiences and findings from study 1 (see Appendix A) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These adjustments were made to guide the interviews towards the themes and experiences that either required further investigation or elicited the most valuable/telling responses.

Participants and recruitment

The participants and recruiting methods for study 2 were nearly identical to study 1 (see study 1 participants and recruitment section above). One additional requirement stating that participants may not have already participated in study 1 was included, and in an attempt to achieve a more equal gender balance between participants, the study was closed to female participants after half of the slots were filled by females. For phenomenological studies such as this one, 5-10 in-depth interviews are generally considered sufficient for a thorough analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, study 2 was comprised of 9 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 24, included 5 female and 4 male participants who identified as While/Caucasian (n=4), Asian (n=4), and Hispanic/Latino (n=1).

Procedure

The initial procedure for study 2 was the same as for study 1 (see above). At their designated interview time, participants first completed an online consent form and provided

demographics on Qualtrics. They were then provided with a private Zoom link and were assigned a code name for confidentiality after joining the Zoom session. The definition of an antihero was reviewed to ensure understanding, and then the participant named an antihero character that they were very familiar with and ready to discuss. The interview was directed by the interview guide, although spontaneous follow up questions and prompts were also asked to gain more details and ensure understanding of the participants' meaning. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, after which the participant was thanked and awarded class credit.

Analysis

The same basic analytical procedures were conducted for the in-depth interviews as for the focus groups (see above). However, in accordance with the constant comparative method, the analysis for study 2 built upon the findings from study 1, adjusting, and adding to the codes, memos, and ideas generated during study 1. An additional 10 unique codes emerged during the coding process, and 6 new memos were created to capture ideas that either were not brought up during the focus groups, or were not as evident or thoroughly discussed during the first study. The additional memo topics included: audience reflection, character judgements, character self-awareness, enjoyment/appreciation, liking, and long-term engagement. These memos were used as references for the final organization of the findings sections. Any significant differences in findings between the two studies were also noted, given the various strengths and weaknesses of each method (see findings section below).

Study 3 – Thought-listing

Materials

The questions for study 3 were selected to clarify and bolster key findings about participants' mixed feelings/reactions and allegiances that emerged from the first two studies.

They were also designed to capture more automatic, cognitively-accessible responses that do not involve as much in-depth reflection as the previous two methods. Because free response questions can lead to participant fatigue rather quickly, only five thought-listing questions/prompts were included.

The first prompt, “Tell me about the character” was included to ease participants into the study while also allowing them to provide their overall impression of the character, which may indicate which aspects of the character the participant finds most salient. The next two questions asked: “What about the character appeals to you? List everything you can think of,” and “What about the character repels you? List everything you can think of.” These were included to capture a more comprehensive range of elements that could influence the nature of their parasocial relationships and allegiances. The order, number, and type of reported traits (i.e., physical, personality, moral, etc.) could also indicate which traits stood out the most, how diverse they may be, and if there are any conflicts or contradictions between appealing and repellant traits.

The fourth prompt asked, “What do you find complicated about the character?” This question was included because it was not directly asked in the first two studies, but the theme of complexity and contradiction came up frequently during discussion. As a thought-listing prompt, this question could draw out the most relevant, interesting, or defining complexities of the character that audiences are aware of and think about without much prompting. Furthermore, the types of complexities included and not included may help separate out things that are cognitively processed versus those that are more subtly or subconsciously experienced.

Finally, the last prompt read, “Tell me about a time you found yourself rooting for the character even though they were doing something questionable or bad.” Based on the first two studies, it was clear that audiences do root for characters even when they do immoral or

questionable things. By asking them to describe such an incident, we can better identify what conditions, situations, or factors audiences consciously take into account as they root for questionable behaviors. This prompt may also lead to patterns or trends regarding which types of violations audiences can consciously get behind.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants from study 3 were also university students recruited using the school's SONA research system. The same requirements for participation applied, although anyone who participated in either of the previous two studies were not allowed to participate. Similar to study 2, more female participants signed up early in the study; therefore, part-way through, the study settings were adjusted to only allow male participants to sign up in order to achieve a more equal gender balance. Thirty-six participants (Male = 15, Female = 21) participants ranging in age between 19 and 24 participated.

Procedure

Study 3 was conducted online using a Qualtrics survey. The thought-listing survey began with informed consent, then instructed participants to think of one antihero character they knew well (the same definition of antihero from the previous two studies was provided). The first set of questions asked the participant to identify the character, the show/film the character was from, the gender of the character, and the genre of the show/film. Next, came the 5 thought-listing prompts (open ended, written responses), followed by basic demographic questions. No identifiable information was collected. After completion, they were immediately rewarded with course credit.

Analysis

The analysis of study 3 was approached with a certain degree of separation from the first two studies due to its focus on short-term rather than in-depth processing. As such, theme analysis was used to analyze the data for study 3. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2012), theme analysis uses systematic coding and theme extraction while remaining flexible enough to capture both obvious and latent patterns/themes across a dataset. This was an ideal approach that would allow for the diversity of insight required to address a range of engagement experiences. Similar to the constant comparative method used in the first two studies, each participant response was coded using a primarily inductive approach (allowing for codes to emerge from the data, rather than pre-existing codes being imposed upon the data). Naturally, it was impossible to completely separate this coding from that established in the first two studies, but by purposefully approaching the data with an inductive mindset, a few novel codes were able to emerge. These codes were then organized into themes and those themes were reviewed from multiple perspectives.

Noted Differences Between Studies

Based on the analysis of each study, there were very few notable differences found between each study. As expected, participants in the focus group did tend to feed off of each other's comments resulting in a slightly narrower range of ideas compared to the cumulative interview responses, although they were able to highlight some key individual differences in style of character engagement that was not as apparent in the interviews. The in-depth interviews resulted in more detailed and diverse responses, but did not notably differ from the focus groups in any other way. The findings from study three also supported those from the first two studies, but differed slightly in regards to focus and emphasis. For instance, in regards to character attributes, participants in the first two studies focused their discussion on more complex

character elements like intentions and motivations (e.g., protect family and friends, trying to do good) and usually only mentioned more stable, easy-to-summarize traits (e.g., passionate, selfish, clever) in passing. In contrast, the thought-listing exercises in study 3 tended to elicit these more straightforward traits, as thought-listing exercises tap into short-term-memory and encourage off-the-cuff responses. While more complex character elements were also well represented, their descriptions tended to be more brief and less detailed.

These differences showcase how different methods capture different degrees of participant engagement, which can affect the focus and depth of responses. However, it should remain clear that none of the studies contradicted each other in terms of content. There were merely minor differences in the emphasis/prominence of certain features over others, which is not a major concern for the goals of this project. For this reason, the findings will be presented as a unified whole, although interesting unique findings from various studies will be noted when relevant.

Overarching Findings

As discussed previously, the purpose of including three studies, each using different methodologies, was to triangulate their findings and build a well-rounded picture of how audiences engage with fictional antihero characters. The analysis of each study built upon the findings of the others and were examined and re-examined as a whole, although important differences were noted. As such, the findings of all three studies will be presented as a unified whole, organized thematically rather than by study. Furthermore, due to the richness of the data collected in this study, some choices had to be made regarding both the scope and depth of information to report. Because this project was designed to be a foundational, exploratory study primarily aimed at revealing the complexity and dynamism of engagement with antihero

characters, I opted to focus on breadth rather than depth. Even so, in order to make sense of the data, a certain degree of simplification and generalization was necessary.

Three major themes will be presented in the following sections, each of which addresses how participants came to understand and determine their allegiances to antihero characters. The first theme explores key elements, concepts, and processes pertaining to the *antihero character* themselves. The second theme focuses on key elements and processes regarding *narrative features* external to the antihero, such as the context, other characters, and production features. Finally, the last theme examines *viewer-related factors*, including key concepts and processes that participants experienced while engaging with antihero characters. It is important to acknowledge that while each of the elements, concepts, and processes are discussed individually, the reality is that they are highly intertwined and build upon/interact with each other in complex ways that cannot be satisfactorily represented in the following sections.

Before diving into these themes, I will first introduce two overarching concepts and two fundamental features of engagement that apply to all findings in each theme. The two key concepts – understanding and allegiance – represent the dominant goals that emerged from each study and which seemed to drive all participant engagement with antihero characters. The two key features of engagement – processing style (automatic vs. conscious) and dynamic engagement – apply to all processes involved in engagement with antiheroes and should be kept in mind at all times.

Understanding

While much of the extant literature focuses on enjoyment or appreciation as the audiences' fundamental goal, these studies reveal that the bulk of antihero engagement actually revolves around *understanding* the character. Perhaps one of the reasons understanding emerged

as such an important goal was because antihero characters are filled with contradictions making their identity, morality, intentions, actions, etc. so ambiguous. This drives audiences to want to uncover the true nature of the antihero and answer questions such as why they do what they do, why they hold the attitudes and beliefs they do, and how they may or may not act or change in the future. Many comments, regardless of the specific question or prompt, naturally revolved around participants' attempts to understand their antihero characters.

As a result, nearly every element, concept, and process to be discussed in the following themes contributed to the participants' understanding of their antihero characters.

Allegiance

One of the reasons participants went to such lengths to understand their antiheroes was to help them determine the nature of their allegiance for or against the character. As described in the literature review, an allegiance is an audience member's sympathetic or antipathetic stance towards a character based upon their assessment of the character's behaviors, attitudes, and traits (Smith, 1995; Smith, 2010). Allegiance as a concept should be understood as a neutral construct, which can be either sympathetic or antipathetic. Both sympathetic and antipathetic allegiances may vary by strength, but both are considered relatively stable stances that do not often change drastically from moment to moment (in contrast to sympathy and empathy which are usually case-specific and can come and go quickly), although they can change over time or at extreme turning points, like when Snape's (*Harry Potter*) true loyalties and motivations are revealed at the end of his narrative. Furthermore, audiences may develop partial allegiances with a character, which allows them to develop multiple, sometimes conflicting stances towards a single character, each of which vary by domain or role, like rooting for Tony (*The Sopranos*) to come out on top in conflicts with other mobs, but hating him for his treatment of his family.

Based on both academic literature (e.g., Smith, 2010) and participant discussions, a sympathetic allegiance reflects the audience member's desire to root for a character, whereas an antipathetic allegiance is associated with rooting against a character. Rooting can be defined as supporting or hoping for the success of another person, in this case a character. Because "allegiance" is an academic term unknown to the general public, participants in this study typically commented on their desire to *root* for or against a character, which was taken as a sign of the nature of a participant's allegiance. The findings from this study weighed heavily towards sympathetic allegiances (which I sometimes refer to simply as strong or positive allegiances). Most of the elements, concepts, and processes to be discussed influenced participants' decisions to build, strengthen, or weaken sympathetic allegiances. Only a few participant comments actually indicated the development of partial antipathetic allegiances, or rooting against a character in certain aspects or domains.

Allegiance became one of the major focuses of this project for a few reasons. First, it speaks directly to one of the most popular questions posted in antihero research: Why do audiences root for morally ambiguous antihero characters? Second, rooting for a character was one of the most common, *unprompted* topics discussed during the focus groups and interviews. Participants naturally centered their conversations around understanding and allegiance, indicating that those two principals lay at the center of their engagement experiences. Third, allegiance bridges the gap between antihero literature in the fields of communication and film studies. While originating in the analytically-oriented film literature, it addresses many variables already of interest in the communication field (contributing a few new variables and processes as well) and is measurable enough to be tested through the communication field's empirically-based methods. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, nearly every element, concept, and process

included in each of the three themes was directly or indirectly tied to the concept of allegiance. Allegiance, along with understanding, were the two common factors connecting all forms and contributors to engagement.

Automatic vs. Conscious Processing

One important feature of engagement to keep in mind while considering the findings of this project is that many (and likely, the majority) of the processes to be discussed do seem to occur on an automatic or subconscious basis, while others occurred consciously. As mentioned in the literature review, one of the reasons antihero characters were chosen as the character type for investigation was because their complexity and ambiguity could force participants to engage with them on a more conscious level – which I do believe occurred based on the nature of several participant comments.

Nevertheless, it is challenging to determine the degree to which each of these processes occurred automatically versus consciously, and to what degree descriptions of conscious processing were representative of what the participants actually experienced in the moment of viewing. For instance, when statements such as, “I started kind of rooting for him because I felt like everyone was almost against him,” can be tricky to interpret in regards to processing. While making this comment, the participant was obviously conscious of this particular influence on her desire to root for the character. However, was she as aware of that in the moment of engagement? Or, was it only apparent to the participant upon reflection? Was this the only reason she began to root for the character? Was it even the most important reason she began rooting for the character? These types of questions need to be asked of explicit statements made by participants if we are to accurately measure, interpret, and understand the true nature of audience engagement.

While making these types of distinctions lies largely beyond the scope of this project, I did attempt to identify moments of conscious versus automatic processing as much as possible. For instance, direct statements (such as the example in the previous paragraph) were generally taken as conscious processing, since post-viewing engagement is also a part of the overall engagement experience. This does not mean that in the moment of viewing, the same awareness existed. In fact, I believe most explicit statements were only made possible upon reflection. Regardless, explicit statements do require a level of conscious processing and were understood as such.

On the other hand, automatic processes were identified primarily through patterns pulled from descriptive statements. These descriptions did not include explanatory words like "because," "due to," or "I think," but they were identified in multiple descriptive statements across participants and studies. For instance, the idea that participants distinguished between an antihero's multiple roles was derived primarily through descriptive responses from participants. None said outright, "he was a boss and a parent and a best friend," or "he acted differently in his various roles." Rather, by comparing descriptions of instances when the participant felt upset with the antihero versus supportive of the antihero, it became clear that they were talking about different relationships and different domains of their lives. As this occurred over and over across participants and studies, I concluded that participants were unwittingly responding to the antihero in unique ways dependent upon specific roles.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that all processes included in the following themes were supported by both explicit statements made by participants (evidence of conscious processing) as well as observed patterns drawn from descriptive comments (automatic/subconscious processing) across multiple participant experiences, unless noted otherwise. Recognizing which

processes, concepts, and variables are consciously available to audiences and which are more automatically processed not only helps us understand the engagement experience, but will be important for future researchers as they make decisions about how to approach measurement and interpretation of various aspects of audience engagement.

The Dynamic Nature of Engagement

The second foundational feature underlying all participant engagement with antihero characters was that the characters themselves as well as the participants' understanding of and experiences with them were in constant flux. Based upon the discussions in each study, it was clear that participants constantly re-evaluated and updated their understanding of a character as the story progressed, as new information was revealed, and as the character grew, made choices, developed new relationships, etc. This is not to say that participants were unable to develop relatively stable opinions or understandings of an antihero. Each participant did seem to have developed a relatively stable, foundational understanding of a character rather early on, but they were also willing to change that understanding as the character and story developed. Many participants described how their initial impressions of the character changed over time as they learned new things about the character and pointed out specific moments when new developments throughout the story (e.g., developing a positive relationship, a selfless act, a change of lifestyle, etc.) changed the way they understood and felt about a character. These changes usually happened gradually as an accumulation of new developments occurred or as they became more familiar with the character, but they could also happen suddenly and dramatically with sudden reveals or extreme events. Therefore, any discussions of a character's traits, personalities, behavioral tendencies, relationships, motives, etc., as well as participants'

judgements, interpretations, sympathetic/antipathetic stances, etc., should be considered dynamic constructs subject to change.

Character-Related Factors that Influence Understanding & Allegiance to Antiheroes

This first theme addresses the ways that participants came to understand and develop allegiances to antihero characters from a character-focused perspective. It will address the key elements, concepts, and processes involved in this pursuit.

Key Elements

Participants across all three studies noted an extensive range of elements that they took into account as they discussed their understanding of an antihero character. These elements can be broken down into three subsections: character attributes, character actions, and character background & development.

Table 1. Character-Related Elements

Key Elements	**Description**	**Example**
Personality traits	Internal characteristics/qualities that make the character who they are	Charm; selfishness
Physical traits	External characteristics/qualities of the character	Invulnerable; good looking
Skills	Character's abilities	Fighting; persuasion
Strengths/Weaknesses	Things a character does well/poorly	Professionalism; clumsiness
Attitudes	Character's way of thinking/feeling about something/someone	Nothing-to-lose; idealistic
Values	Principles the character holds in high esteem	Justice; loyalty
Goals	Outcomes a character works towards	Gain power; protect family
Intentions	Conscious/expected consequence of a character's action	Harm a wrong-doer; help a loved one
Motivations	Reason/drive behind a character's action/behavior	Love; vengeance
Self-awareness	Character's conscious knowledge of themselves, their actions, motivations, etc.	Recognizing that kidnapping is wrong; understanding toxic love drove them to cross a moral line

Choices	Specific/conscious decisions a character makes	Killing someone; choosing which friend to save
Behaviors	The typical way the character acts/conducts themselves	Mistreating others; placing others' safety before own self-image
Consequences	The outcomes of a character's choices, behaviors	Estranging family; saving the day
Agency/Self-control	Character's ability to control their actions	Controlling impulse to cheat on spouse; being brainwashed
Background	A character's history/past	Watching their mother being killed
Development	The change a character undergoes throughout a story	Doing worse and worse things; redemption arcs

Character Attributes

I use the term *character attributes* to refer to all the features that make the character who they are as a person. This includes elements of their *state of being*, including personality traits (e.g., charm, selfishness), physical traits (e.g., invulnerable, good looking), skills (e.g., fighting, persuasion), and strengths/weaknesses (professionalism; clumsiness), as well as their *state of mind*, such as their attitudes (e.g., nothing-to-lose, idealistic), values (e.g., justice, loyalty), goals (e.g., gain power, protect family), intentions (e.g., harm a wrong-doer; help a loved one), motivations (e.g., love; vengeance), and self-awareness (see Table 1 for further details). Based on the accumulation of rich, complex descriptions and explanations provided by participants across all three studies, each of these attributes were individually attended to (often on an automatic level) and each contributed to the development of a participant's understanding of any given antihero character.

To demonstrate, the following quote was taken from an introductory description of an antihero character from study 3 with character attributes (plus other key elements) noted in parentheses:

> Erik Killmonger is trying to take over Wakanda (goal) and honor the death of his father (motivation) who betrayed Wakanda (background). Right now, TChalla just became in charge and Killmonger is fighting TChalla for the title (choice). He wins the challenge (skill) and becomes in charge. His main goal is to rule the world (goal)…Knowing the reasons why Killmonger wants to rule the world (motivation) makes his side valid and he is good looking (physical trait) and pro Black (attitude/value) so while he is a villain (hint at behavioral tendencies), he is also just a hurt soul (weakness).

Unsurprisingly, all antihero characters had both positive and negative character attributes, many of which clashed with each other in interesting ways. For instance, Green Arrow (*Arrow*) was perceived by the participant as fundamentally selfish, yet he used his skills and risked his safety to protect other people. Additionally, some traits that would normally be considered positive or admirable were either mis-applied or taken to such extremes that they became faults. For example, one focus group participant admired Cersei Lannister (*Game of Thrones*) as a strong and powerful female figure, but because she misused that power by only protecting and strengthening herself and her family, she was also seen as a cruel and selfish queen. Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) starts his story with a pure motivation to protect and care for his family, but his growing success and eventual obsession with his drug business becomes so extreme that his pure motivations become corrupt and, as one participant described, he eventually ends up "throwing his morals and his normal life out the window."

Character Actions

Closely related to an antihero's attributes were their choices and behavioral tendencies. I distinguish choices and behaviors by framing choices as more conscious, specific acts (e.g., Snape choosing to kill Dumbledore), with behaviors referring to things that are more generalized

or habitual (e.g., Snape mistreating students). This separation came from the way participants in all studies talked about their antiheroes. An antihero's behavioral tendencies appeared to be considered a natural extension of their personality (e.g., Snape is mean, therefore he habitually mistreats students) and therefore become part of the more stable conceptualization of the character. Choices, on the other hand were perceived as more intentional and therefore became more important for active engagement with an antihero character. They were also more closely tied with character attributes such as intentions, motivations, and goals as well as other external elements (e.g., circumstances) which will be discussed in the second theme.

Consequences. Another important extension of an antihero's choices and behavioral tendencies that emerged across all three studies was the consequences of their actions, both intended and unintended. Sometimes, the consequences of a single choice manifested in multi-faceted and complex ways, which the participants did recognize. For example, one focus group participant described a situation in which the antihero Loki (*Thor & The Avengers*) chose to fake his own death in order to come back to dethrone his father Odin, and disguised as his father, take the throne for himself. However, his choices led to both intended and unintended consequences. As the participant explained, "He put Asgard in danger, he let Thor mourn for years that he was dead, and he removed Odin…He would do whatever is necessary to gain that power, even though he didn't necessarily mean to hurt anyone in the process. He just didn't care about [the consequences] I guess." So even though Loki did end up causing many negative consequences, it was not his goal/intent to harm others (except perhaps his father). But on the other hand, while he didn't purposefully intend harm, he also didn't care that he caused harm. As illustrated by this example, an antihero's intentions can become quite complex, leading to equally complex interpretations by participants. Based upon participant discussion, participants frequently parsed

apart subtle nuances and complicated relationships between goals, intent, and consequences to make sense of an antihero's choices, which will be discussed in more depth in theme three.

Agency/Self-Control. Finally, one last consideration of an antihero's actions was the character's perceived agency or control over those actions. First, self-control was a major consideration for many antihero characters. Whenever a character was in control of their actions, participants seemed to attribute more responsibility and intentionality to those choices. In other cases, participants talked about alternative paths that antihero characters could have taken, but because they had become so obsessed with their goals or entrenched in their way of doing things that they wouldn't (or arguably couldn't) change. For instance, one participant explained that despite some effort to change his ways for the better, Tony (*The Sopranos*) didn't have the self-control to stick to this better way of life and soon settled back into his old, comfortable ways of doing things. Similarly, Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) was so skilled at his drug business that he earned enough money to quit, but rather unwittingly became so addicted to/obsessed with his new life that he couldn't.

In other cases, some characters were literally not in control of themselves. For instance, the Winter Soldier (*Captain America & The Avengers*) was brainwashed and controlled by villains. Venom's (*Venom*) state of being as an alien entity meant that he took on the personality traits of whoever's body he possessed. And as another focus group participant described, Magneto (*X-Men*) "just seemed like he had lost his mind just because so many bad things happened to him."

Another factor contributing to a character's agency/control over their actions was the degree of skill/knowledge an antihero possessed. Sometimes the lack (or abundance) of skill/knowledge prevented (or enabled) an antihero to act in a way that they wanted to. For

instance, Megamind's (*Megamind*) clumsiness made it practically impossible for him to pull off his evil plans, even though he had the skills necessary to create impressive weapons/machines. Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) wanted to help his son after the son had a panic attack, but was so unaware of the negative impact he had on his son's life that he didn't realize that he would have to change in order to truly help his son.

It should also be noted that there were also several external factors that helped or hindered an antihero's control over their own actions, but these will be discussed in greater depth in the second theme.

Character Background & Development

Finally, the last category of character elements attended to by participants was the background and development of an antihero. A character's development began with what was known about the antihero's background and carried through where the participant first encountered the antihero to the end of the narrative. Participants often referenced "arcs," "paths," and "development" in their responses, as well as background events (commonly traumas), past relationships, the nature of their upbringing, etc.

Central to understanding an antihero's development was the participant's first introduction to the character. As evident by the introductory descriptions of all three studies, especially study 3, the majority of participants began by situating the character, explaining their background, situation, and the initial introduction of the antihero in the story. Introductions such as "when he's first introduced," "in the beginning," "in the first movie," "what stood out first" were necessary for setting the trajectory of the engagement experience. Based on their understanding of who the character originally was, each participant's expectations, judgments, and opinions of the antihero were founded upon that persona, which affected the way audiences

engaged with the antihero even after more development occurred and new information was revealed.

For example, one participant chose Megamind (*Megamind*) as her antihero of choice. She said, “When he’s introduced, it gives a quick description of how [his development] happened and how he was a cute little alien baby and then all this terror and destruction was forced upon him. And so then he’s an adult and he’s forcing destruction on others…but you have faith because you know that he didn’t start out as a bad person.” This example illustrates how an initial understanding of a character’s original disposition can set up an audience member’s hopes for a specific character trajectory (e.g., redemption arc), even though they understand and expect the character to behave in a manner consistent to the present self (e.g., “evil” Megamind) for the majority of the narrative.

Sometimes, certain past events or background information about the antihero were never known, while others were inferred by participants later, or revealed through flashbacks, dialogue, or other narrative means later on in the antihero’s narrative. Regardless of when or how the background information was learned, it was clear that participants carefully attended to all past and current developments relating to an antihero’s development, and based on the discussions in the first two studies in particular, they used that information to constantly update their understanding of and engagement with the antihero.

Key Concepts

When it comes to understanding the internal characteristics and drives of an antihero, there are two fundamental concepts that play important roles: multiple character roles and layered personas.

Table 2. Character-Related Concepts

Key Concepts	**Description**	**Example**
Multiple Roles	Fulfilling different roles in different domains of life	Father vs serial killer; Family life vs professional life
Layered Personas	Having layered fronts/façades, images, or self-presentations	Tough guy vs caring friend; false façade vs true colors

By *multiple roles,* I refer to the various roles an antihero has within their narrative (e.g., father, serial killer) whereas *layered personas* refer to the various images, fronts/façades, and self-images an antihero displays (e.g., tough guy, caring friend)**.** These concepts go hand in hand, as different roles often (although not always) corresponded with different personas. Many participants intertwined these two concepts, describing them generally in terms of an antihero's "complexity," "depth," or "layers." Even when this complexity was not discussed directly, many of the descriptions, explanations, and discussion of antihero characters alluded to the existence of multiple roles and facets of the character's image, usually in cases where they contradicted each other. These types of descriptions were usually marked with telling phrases such as "even though," "there's a part of him," "but at the same time," "to some degree," "despite everything," or "he wasn't always."

Multiple Roles

Based on the findings from all three studies, one of the most common distinctions participants made was between antiheros' various roles: father & drug lord, playboy & vigilante, therapist & serial killer, mother & queen. While these examples are all binary, many participants identified several roles that their antihero filled. For example, even within the quick, limited descriptions provided in study 3, one participant mentioned each of the following roles for the character Gregory House (*House*): doctor, team-leader, friend, boyfriend, and person ("a sad genius"). While it seems like participants did not usually realize that they were making

distinctions between an antihero's various roles (no one said, "he had several roles"), it was clear from the various discussions and descriptions of their antihero that participants had unique understandings of and stances towards the character in each of their respective roles.

The above example represents an extremely common pattern in antihero engagement seen throughout all three studies. By recognizing an antihero's different roles, participants would parse the antihero's unique behavior, attitudes, etc., in each of those roles, which helped them begin to make sense of the character's many complex and often contradictory traits and behaviors. This appears to be a useful technique helpful in reconciling contradictions such as how both the Green Arrow (*Arrow*) and Odysseus (*The Odyssey*) could be selfish in their private lives but selfless in their role as a hero, or how Cersei Lannister (*Game of Thrones*) could be caring as a mother, but be completely unconcerned for her citizens as a queen.

This separation also allowed the participants to form contradictory judgements and split allegiances to antiheroes across their different roles. Phrases such as, "part of me couldn't help but…," "I do kind of have support/respect…." "you're still kind of rooting for him…," and "I had mixed feelings…" were quite common. These phrases usually accompanied a description of circumstances in which the participant could or could not root for a character. One particularly interesting instance illustrated how a participant had developed split allegiances to a character founded upon the same character trait, but in the context of two different (although closely related) roles. This focus group participant admired Jaime Lannister's (*Game of Thrones*) love and loyalty to his brother (who the participant also liked) which strengthened a dimension of her allegiance to the antihero, but simultaneously hated Jaime's loving and loyal relationship to his sister/lover Cersei (who the participant hated), which significantly damaged a separate dimension of her allegiance to him. To illustrate how this type of split allegiance can also evolve over time,

another participant talked about how Dexter (*Dexter*) becoming a father added a new layer to the character because it humanized him, showing how he could be such a different type of person with his child compared to his persona as a serial killer.

It should be noted, however, that just because participants recognized and reacted differently to an antihero's separate roles, those roles didn't necessarily stand completely separate from each other. They did build together into an overall conception of the antihero as a whole, and many character qualities did remain fairly consistent across most, if not all roles.

Layered Personas

In addition to these more formal roles, participants also pointed out discrepancies between an antihero's public "fronts" and their private "true colors." Sometimes these public fronts were put up intentionally by antiheroes. For example, a participant described how Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) had a façade that he would purposefully put on when dealing with other seedy characters in the drug world. She explained that when he first employed this façade, "the way he handled himself I think was a surprise to all because he really just seems so timid in the beginning." Other times, the character develops and maintains a false or public front unintentionally, typically as some type of automatic or subconscious mechanism. For instance, one participant talked about how Han Solo's (*Star Wars*) arrogant cockiness seemed to be "just the top layer almost like a shield to kind of keep people away and protect his inner thoughts and inner emotions." Furthermore, because he had so many negative relationships and was commonly in physical danger, he "had to act like [he was] strong and that he can defend himself…just as a shield to protect his life and reputation."

Similar to their ability to separate and react differently to an antihero's various roles, participants demonstrated a clear ability to pick up on hints and cues that some of an antihero's

surface-level attitudes and actions were not always representative of their true selves, but arose from either purposeful or unintentional self-presentations. In fact, the great majority of participant descriptions of an antihero's complexities or contradictions across all three studies revolved around ambiguities between perceptions of who the character truly was (their intentions, motivations, attitudes, personality traits) and what they did or how they acted (their actions/choices). This made it difficult for participants to identify or trust their own assumptions about an antihero's actual "true colors." Trying to solve this ambiguity appeared to be a central part of each participant's process of understanding, as it affected the way they would interpret the character's outward goals, motivations, intentions, and actions. This struggle was manifest in comments such as, "you don't really know what their thoughts were," "I don't trust [him], but at the same time, I absolutely do," "I always felt like there was something more [to his character]," "you really don't know if he is a friend to our other main character or is a foe to them," "he's super mysterious," "it's hard to say," or "does he really care?" Because of this, some participants struggled to determine the degree to which they could or should root for an antihero.

While not all ambiguities surrounding an antihero's nature were resolvable, many participants indicated that a character's true colors often revealed themselves in high-intensity, or when-it-really-counts situations. Han Solo (*Star Wars*) leaping in front of the others while being shot at to give them a chance to escape, Megamind (*Megamind*) choosing to saving the woman he kidnapped instead of his beloved machine as they were both falling to destruction, and Punisher (*Punisher*) trying to protect his sidekick when they were under attack were noted by participants as signs that deep down, each of these antiheroes were kinder and more caring than their tough, even "evil" facades would indicate. Alternatively, Jaime Lannister (*Game of Thrones*) going back for Cersei while under attack and Tony (*The Sopranos*) killing Ralph (who

he was previously trying to protect) in retaliation when Ralph caused one too many problems was taken as evidence that these antiheroes were actually worse than their charming, semi-decent-guy appearances let on. These key moments were identified by participants as make-or-break incidents that significantly impacted their overarching allegiances.

Even when the participants did feel fairly confident in their understanding of the various personas of the character and knew the true versus false nature of the antihero, they still had to wrestle with the consequences of the character upholding their public fronts or facades. For example, the participant who talked about Han Solo (*Star Wars*) stated that she believed that Han was ultimately a hero and a good person, but that she still struggled with his rudeness, arrogance, and treatment of other characters that were a part of the strong, confident front that he would put on to cope and protect himself. Deciding what to forgive or forget and what could or couldn't be overlooked was an important part of all participant's engagement with antihero characters and the nature of their allegiances.

Key Processes

When it comes to understanding an antihero character, there were two primary processes that stood out beyond simple organization and integration of information: separating and weighing key elements, and making comparisons across an antihero's character arc.

Table 3. Character-Related Processes

Key Processes	**Description**	**Example**
Separating & weighing key elements	Identifying and weighing a character's intentions, motivations, goals, actions, and consequences	Weighing an antihero's survival over their morality in a life-and-death situation
Making Comparisons (across character arcs)	Comparing current actions, attitudes, etc. to past ones	Comparing of past selfish actions to current selfless actions

Separating & Weighing Intentions, Motivations, Goals, Actions, & Consequences

A fundamental technique used by participants when engaging with antiheroes was the individual identification and weighing of the character's intentions, motivations, goals, actions, and the consequences of those actions, all of which have been described above. The process of recognizing, judging, and weighing these elements against each other is perhaps one the most complicated and individualistic tasks audiences undergo when engaging with an antihero character. For the most part, this process appeared to happen automatically as a natural part of character engagement. However, especially in the case of antihero characters, because each of these elements could be judged as positive, negative, or ambiguous to varying degrees of intensity, the contradictions between each element can become so extreme that participants were often forced to confront and struggle with them on a conscious level.

For instance, a participant described an incident in which Magneto (*X-Men*) (a mutant with the ability to control metal) killed the villain of the movie by pushing a metal coin through the villain's head, even though the villain's consciousness was currently being shared by Magneto's best friend Charles Xavier (another mutant who could control minds). The participant agreed with Magneto's *actions* and *motives*, saying "it seemed obvious, like – ok yeah, of course – kill the person who killed someone you love…I thought it was the right decision," but, he struggled with Magneto's ambiguous *intent* to harm as well as the *consequences* of his choice, acknowledging, "at the same time, he knew how much pain it was causing Charles and he knew how much troubles, how many problems it would start." This led to him questioning what path Magneto would take and if he should now consider him a villain or not. Yet in another instance, Magneto finds out that the President of the United States is planning to build an offensive weapon to protect humans from mutants, so Magento sets out to kill the president and anyone on his side. In contrast to the first incident described above, the participant claimed, "I don't admire

the fact that he's trying to kill people, but I admire that his immediate response is now just to protect the people he cares about." In this case, the participant admired Magneto's *motives* to protect his people, but not his *intent* or lethal *actions*.

As demonstrated by these examples, participants have to decide which of all the influential factors they care about most given the unique circumstances of each moment. While it may be tempting to force a universal pattern or assign a single variable as the "most important" factor, the cumulative range of experiences described by participants across all three studies would discourage such an approach. In many cases (perhaps a majority) it was the antihero's intent that carried the most weight. Other times it was the motivation or goal. Sometimes, it was the action and its consequences. There were also cases where the various elements seemed to equal out, leaving the participants in a difficult or seemingly unsolvable dilemma. While the reasons behind the choices and judgements participants made lie outside the scope of this paper, the findings from these studies do clearly indicate that each character situation is uniquely different and interpreted based on a number of audience-specific judgements.

Adding to the complexity of organizing and weighing these key elements is the ambiguity created by features of the storytelling. Frequently in antihero narratives, certain elements are purposefully left ambiguous or unknown and the audience is left to guess at the true intent, goal, or motivation behind a character's actions. Sometimes even the action and consequences of those actions are also kept hidden from audiences, making it difficult for them to understand and accurately judge the full situation. Participants were often aware of these gaps in their understanding and often chose to remain in a state of ambiguity rather than risking an erroneous assumption. Many participants said things like, "I still don't know how I feel about it,"

"I was kind of indecisive," "I never formed a conclusion," "There could be other explanations," or "It's hard to say."

These ambiguous states were sometimes temporary, but other times lasted indefinitely. For example, Snape's (*Harry Potter*) role suddenly changing from villain to hero after eight films' worth of build-up was a particularly difficult re-frame for some participants to deal with. While his motivations and many of his past actions were explained by the reveal, many elements were still ambiguous and left unexplained. For instance, how much of his past cruelty and activity with the dark side was real, or was it all a cover? Were his intentions completely pure, or did he enjoy dabbling in the dark? Findings such as this highlight a unique, yet surprisingly common experience that challenges the assumption that audiences always come to solid conclusions or make clear judgements about fictional characters and their narratives. Sometimes participants were left in a state of ambiguity, and based on the sentiments across all three studies, they seem to be generally okay with simply sitting on that ambiguity.

Making Comparisons Across Character Arcs

As described earlier under the sub-section of key elements, a character's background and development were carefully attended to by participants. One of the most important reasons for that attention was to allow participants to compare their current understanding of the character to past versions of the character as a means to identify areas of growth or digression – in essence identifying the trajectory of the antihero's development.

This process would happen naturally over the course of a show or film as participants compared their initial impression of an antihero to their current understanding of the character. This could be a general comparison, such as comparing an antihero's original standing as a villain to their heroic ending (e.g., Loki), or a specific comparison of character attributes, like

when Walter's (*Breaking Bad*) motivations changed from providing for this family to selfish gain. One important take-away from this type of comparison was for participants to see whether or not an antihero was capable of change, and if that change would be for the better or worse. Especially while actively engaging with an ongoing antihero narrative, this helped set expectations for what might or might not happen later in the story. Several participants described how their hopes and expectations for the character often relied upon evidence of change they observed in that character from the antihero's initial introduction to their current standing. For example, during an interview, one participant explained that because Tony (*The Sopranos*) would occasionally do good things, "initially at least you try and you're sort of hoping that he'll improve his life and improve [his family's] as well. And then, as it goes on you realize that's not really going to happen" and therefore you are forced to change your expectations of the character for the remainder of the show.

Another way antihero narratives can encourage audiences to compare antiheroes to their past/future selves is through atypical timelines. Many narratives accomplish this by integrating flashbacks into their storytelling or releasing films in a non-linear manner. For example, the X-men franchise first released a set of films portraying Magneto as an older man who was clearly framed as the villain. They then released a series of prequels which introduce Magneto as a young boy and younger man before he became a full-blown villain. During a focus group discussion, one participant described the effect this timeline had on him: "You kind of learn his backstory and you're like, 'oh, I can't really see this guy in the same light anymore." Even when the story catches up to the point where Magneto becomes the villain, the participant said, "I thought it was then valid that he becomes a villain, but I still didn't believe he was a villain." This was an excellent example of how comparing an antihero's past/future selves could lead

audiences to adjust their understanding of a character as a whole, integrating both of the antihero's "selves" into a more wholistic picture, forcing them to re-evaluate both the antihero and their own impressions of the character.

In summary, participants often compared antiheroes to their past selves in order to determine where the present antihero was at in their character development, see areas of growth, digression, or consistency, and determine how much potential the antihero had to become better or worse in the future. Not only did this help them understand the antihero, but this type of comparison also helped participants establish or adjust their allegiances to the character. For instance, when explaining Walter White's (*Breaking Bad*) progression from a typical, relatable guy to a hardened drug lord, one focus group participant noted that as "he starts to do more and more bad things, it kind of causes you to question to what levels you can support him doing things" – in essence damaging that participant's previous sense of allegiance to Walter.

On the other hand, other characters who showed increasingly heroic behaviors, compared to their past, typically gained stronger participant allegiances. Such was the case for a focus group participant who noted that Michael Scott (*The Office*) "starts off [as] someone you don't like, but then he grows to be someone that you do like, and that's kind of his character progression, and so for that reason I was definitely [rooting] for him at the end of the show."

This type of comparison also includes comparing early *perceptions* of who the character was to more current *perceptions* of who they are. For instance, Dexter (*Dexter*), was first introduced to a participant as a detached, emotionless serial killer that just went around killing people. But as the story progressed, the participant began to learn more about his rules/reasoning for killing, his past, and his positive interpersonal relationships. In this case, the positive

trajectory of the participant's perception of Dexter helped increase their allegiance to the character even though his actions did not change at all.

Simply put, a positive trend encouraged increased allegiance as the antihero grew closer to redemption from their previous worse state. A negative trend usually made participants question their allegiance to a character, wondering where to draw the line between acceptance and rejection. However, even in negative trends, knowing that a character was once better sometimes drove participants to hope that the antihero could return to their former levels of goodness (if not better), helping participants maintain (if not increase) their allegiance to a character. For instance, despite the fact that Megamind (*Megamind*) was on a negative path with evil goals, the participant still maintained "faith because you know that he didn't start out as a bad person."

Discussion of Character-Related Factors

The findings from this series of studies fully support Canet's (2019) statement: "The antihero is a complex character who demands equally complex responses from viewers." Between the numerous, often contradictory character traits, roles, personas, and widely varying character arcs described by participants across all three studies, it is clear that the antihero characters themselves are much more complex and diverse than much of the antihero literature has treated them. Most extant antihero studies identify antihero characters solely based upon their moral ambiguity, but go no farther into understanding or distinguishing between them. While a few have made attempts to categorize antiheroes more specifically using crowd-sourced character tropes (Eden et al., 2017) or by categorizing antiheroes based on their trajectories of moral development (Kleemans, et al., 2017), even these categorizations have proven overly

simplistic. As such, it is prudent to question how future research should approach the study of such diverse and complex antihero characters.

Perhaps the first step should be to build a stronger understanding of the various types of antihero characters themselves. After all, understanding was found to be one of the two primary goals driving audience engagement with antihero characters. The findings from this study offer a foundational list of key audience-identified, character-focused variables that participants used in their efforts to understand antihero characters. These include variables relevant to a character's *state of being*, including their personality traits, physical traits, skills, strengths and weaknesses. They also include those relating to a character's *state of mind*, including attitudes, values, goals, intentions, motivations, and level of self-awareness. These traits speak to *who* an antihero is and *why* they do the things they do – two aspects of a character participants put a great deal of effort into understanding.

Furthermore, participants also engaged deeply with antiheroes' choices and behaviors, including both the intended and unintended consequences of those actions and the degree of control the character has over those actions. These variables speak to the *what* and *how* of antihero choices and actions, which often came into conflict with the *who and why* of the character, creating an interesting and engaging conflict for participants to grapple with. In fact, the most commonly cited complexities pointed out by participants was the clash between who they felt the character was as a person versus what they did, who they were versus who they are now, conflicts of character identity, and unusual trait combinations. Several participants noted how these complexities made the characters much more interesting, unpredictable, and enjoyable to engage with, especially compared to traditional, predictable heroes. Exploring these complexities and contradictions could reveal interesting processes, concepts, and patterns that

have been previously overlooked that could contribute to a richer understanding of both antihero characters and how/why audiences engage with them.

Finally, participants also paid significant attention to the background and development of the antihero's narrative which enabled them to strengthen and contextualize the *who, why, what,* and *how's* pertaining to the character into a dynamic developmental trajectory. Some antihero researchers have already acknowledged the significance of character development and taken that into account in their studies, with a focus on the outcome of those developments (e.g., Kleemans et al. 2017). However, the present studies offer much more information about how meaningful a character's background and development can be beyond its general effect on variables such as liking and enjoyment. When it comes to engagement, an antihero's background and development helped participants ground their fundamental understanding of an antihero and set their expectations for the character's future.

In regards to understanding, an antihero's background usually helped explain why the character is the way that they are, their motives, values, traits, etc. For instance, many had traumatic pasts that drove them to vengeance, extremism, or attention-seeking. This helped viewers understand and accept (although not always agree with or support) the antihero's current traits, attitudes, and behaviors.

In terms of development, between the dozen or so examples included in these studies, we see several developmental paths that led to very different engagement experiences. For instance, Walter White's (*Breaking Bad*) downward spiral generally forced participants to question their early-established sympathetic allegiances. Loki's (*Thor/The Avengers*) upward spiral encouraged participants to find ways past his past negative actions and develop stronger sympathetic allegiances. Tony's (*The Sopranos*) constant roller coaster of ups and downs led to split

allegiances while dealing with consistent ambiguities. Each of these experiences was unique, and participants relied upon different techniques when dealing with them (to be discussed in more depth in theme 3). These differences need to be considered by future researchers especially when attempting to define, categorize, or build models of engagement or effects.

These findings also shed new light on the fact that antihero characters typically play multiple roles and often have layered personas. The idea that antiheroes may fill multiple roles within a narrative has been addressed by Plantinga (2010) who argued that split allegiances are possible because antiheroes have multiple roles (e.g., father vs mob boss), some of which audiences can support, and some of which they cannot. The findings from this project support this argument. However, these studies also provided evidence that not only do antiheroes fill multiple roles, they also have layered personas – a concept that has not yet been addressed in the antihero literature to my knowledge. What is most interesting about these layered personas is that they often made participants feel that what they were seeing or how the character was presenting themselves, might not be reflective of who they truly were inside. As one of their primary goals was to truly *understand* these antiheroes, participants would look for hints and clues and compile evidence for theories or stances regarding who they thought the character truly was.

Between the multiple roles and layered personas, it was almost as if participants were dealing with two or three characters all wrapped up in one. As one participant noted, “they’re able to bring out so many different emotions from so many different actions within one character when normally you’d have to have a bunch of different people doing [all those] things.” The resulting “deep” characters lead to complex, active engagement, especially since the layered roles and personas often lead to contradictions and/or ambiguities. The drive to resolve those intercharacter contradictions and complexities seemed to be an important part of the engagement

experience and central to the goals of understanding and rooting for (or against) an antihero character.

By recognizing that antiheroes have multiple roles and personas, this project further contributes to the existing literature by providing an additional explanation for the complexity of antiheroes beyond moral ambiguity, which is the most commonly (and sometimes only) cited characteristic of antiheroes, as demonstrated by their alternate label, "morally ambiguous characters." Because of the focus on morality, the majority of antihero research has revolved around morality in one way or another. While this has led to important advancements in antihero research, morally-related avenues of exploration have not been able to fully answer questions regarding enjoying and rooting for antihero characters, and scholars have been calling for additional explanations (Bonus et al., 2019; Janicke & Raney, 2018; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Raney et al., 2009; Smith, 2010). While variables such as identification, schema, and empathy have been identified as influential factors, even in combination with moral disengagement, there are still gaps to be filled. A consideration of antiheroes' multiple roles and layered personas may help fill this gap and lead to new, fruitful avenues of research.

When it comes to processes of engagement, the findings from this theme also provide a foundational understanding of how audiences organize and make sense of the array of character-related variables mentioned above. The sheer complexity with which participants described many of their experiences engaging with antihero characters would seem to severely limit traditional model-building approaches to antihero research. At any given moment, it appears that participants would attend to several character-related variables on both conscious and automatic levels – perhaps simultaneously. For instance, when considering Magneto's choice to kill the villain, the participant noted each of the following in a single description: his background,

motivation, intention, goal, superpowers (skills), choices, emotions, thoughts, and the consequences of his choices (along with context and relationships, which will be discussed in future themes). While it is difficult to confirm which of these elements was attended to consciously versus automatically at the time of viewing and to what degree each of these elements was activated simultaneously, it is clear that each piece played a part in helping the participant understand and react to this moment in the antihero's narrative. Future research may explore the specifics of when and how these elements are processed.

Furthermore, the findings from these studies demonstrate how the process of separating and weighing the significance of each relevant variable is highly dependent on the specific antihero, the situation they are in, and the audience member. This can drive different audience members to notably different conclusions. For instance, during one focus group session, three participants shared very different engagement experiences regarding Snape's (*Harry Potter*) final character reveal. One participant hated him throughout the narrative, but then slowly changed her mind as she went back and considered him in this new light and began to understand him and his actions better. Another liked him throughout the whole story, believing that there was some hidden explanation for his mysterious behavior and persona, which was confirmed by the reveal. Finally, a third participant said she never liked Snape and still didn't, despite learning of his "true colors, since he consistently acted like a rather awful person. Because there were eight film's worth of ambiguous behavioral patterns, choices, developments, clues, indications, etc., to sort through and reorganize, given the newly revealed information at the end of Snape's story, each participant had different priorities and judgement systems that influenced their final feelings towards the character. In essence, what mattered most to one participant did not to another, and the way they chose to interpret, weigh, and judge the same information about the antihero

differed meaningfully. Ambiguity seems to play an important role in cases where audiences may come to different conclusions regarding the same character. This type of personalized weighing and judging could be the cause of much of the online and in-person debate regarding many antihero characters.

On the other hand, many antihero narratives seemed to be interpreted by viewers in a very similar manner. For instance, the most commonly cited character throughout all three studies was Walter White from *Breaking Bad.* Without exception, all participants built and maintained a fairly strong sympathetic allegiance with Walter throughout at least the first few seasons of his narrative. Developing a character using the right character variables (or combination of variables) could very well encourage the majority of viewers to experience similar engagement processes and come to similar conclusions. While identifying these patterns lies outside the scope of this paper, there were some preliminary findings that could help springboard future research. For instance, just about all participants identified something about the antihero that they admired or respected. These included wit, charm, pro-social attitudes, or impressive skills. Good intentions or noble goals also seemed to be relatively universal winners, as were relatability and positive between-character relationships.

Regardless, the differences between participant experiences with Snape and Walter demonstrate how building predictive models from case studies (as many antihero researchers are attempting to do) may not be the best approach to understanding engagement processes – especially when it comes to extremely ambiguous or mysterious antiheroes. Letting go of linear structures and outcome effects may be necessary to truly understand how audiences deal with such complex, ambiguous characters.

Finally, the other key process discussed in this theme highlights the dynamic nature of antihero engagement. Rather than objectively judging antihero characters according to a strict moral code or even to other types of characters (like heroes), participants often considered the antihero in terms of their own progression. For instance, Punisher (*Punisher*) first appears to be an almost insane, ruthless killer, but over time, viewers learn that he has a moral code, a reason for killing, and does have qualities that humanize him. By comparing the original "cold-hearted killer" to the newer "vigilante killer," his R-rated strategies don't seem nearly as bad and viewers have a much easier time supporting him than they did at first. While many film scholars have noted the importance of moral comparativism *between* characters as a tactic for morally disengaging and rooting for flawed antihero characters (Garcia, 2016; Plantinga, 2010; Smith 2010), none have yet recognized the *intra-character* comparisons that also seem to help audiences accept less-than-moral behaviors from antihero characters.

In addition, comparing an antihero to past versions of themselves is also helpful for viewers to identify the antihero's narrative trajectory – positive, negative, or status-quo – and how they might expect the rest of the character's development to play out (if in the middle of a viewing experience). For example, if an antihero started as an innocent child/youth but is now a killer, as was the case for Erin Yeager (*Attack on Titan*), audiences can prepare themselves for increasingly negative developments, barring some kind of trigger or turning point. Similarly, if a character begins as a heartless killer like Hannibal (*Hannibal*) but later on shows signs of humanity, the audience will likely expect (or hope for) continually positive changes in the character's development. Of course, the common characteristic of antihero characters is their unpredictability and simultaneous possession of positive and negative characteristics, yet many

participants still cited these developments as reasons for their hopes and expectations for the characters' futures.

Perhaps one of the reasons participants were able to hope for positive trajectories despite many discouraging antihero behaviors was that any sign of change stood as proof that the antihero *could* change in the future. For instance, if an antihero was once good and turned bad, they may still have the ability to return to good – which was something many participants hoped for in such situations. Similarly, if they started bad, but showed even rare signs of change or improvement, participants could use those moments as grounding for their hope for additional positive changes. This obviously has some implications for allegiances. Across the board, participants wanted to root for their antiheroes and hoped for positive character progressions – even if they were minor or far and few between. Depending in part on the developmental trajectory of the character, participants could cling to hopes for the re-emergence of past goodness, or root for continual positive progressions from a negative beginning.

The findings from this theme provide a rich foundation upon which future antihero research can build. A stronger focus on the antihero characters themselves (not just audience reactions to them) could help antihero scholars find new directions forward as they attempt to answer questions of why viewers enjoy watching antihero characters, why they root for them, and how they come to understand and engage with such complex, ambiguous characters.

Narrative-Related Factors that Influence Understanding & Allegiance to Antiheroes

This second theme addresses the way participants came to better understand an antihero character by taking into account elements of the narrative that lie external to the character. The following sections will explore the main elements and process involved in this pursuit.

Key Elements

The key external elements that participants included in their discussion of antihero characters can be categorized in three sub-groups: production elements, context/circumstances, and relationships.

Table 4. Narrative-Related Elements

Key Elements	**Description**	**Example**
Narrative roles	The narrative role the character fills	Protagonist; supporting character
Genre	The category of the narrative as determined by form, style, and/or subject matter	Drama; comedy; thriller
Production company/writers	The studio, network, and/or individuals involved in writing or producing a show/film	Disney; Marvel; J. K. Rowling
Cinematography	The style or art of the show/film	Close up shots; point of view
Actor/performances	The physical and non-physical characteristics an actor brings to the character through their appearance or performance	Harrison Ford's charisma; Michael B. Jordan's good looks
Context/Circumstances	The physical, social, and/or cultural situations in which the character is in at any given point	Medieval times; kill-or-be-killed; mutual trust
Relationships	Relationships the character has with other characters in the story	Antihero & hero; antihero & villain; antihero & partner

Production Elements

The first category of external factors participants used to make sense of antihero characters was to consider the more technical elements of the storytelling and production itself. These include the narrative role the antihero filled in the show/film, the genre, production company/writers, cinematography, and the actors/their performances. These elements also clearly impacted the way that participants perceived and aligned themselves to antihero characters, although participants did not usually seem to be as aware of these influences in the moment of engagement as they were upon reflection. Nevertheless, several participants brought

up the way each of the following production elements informed their engagement with their antiheroes.

Narrative Role

First, it was clear that participants would draw from their knowledge of narrative roles to inform their expectations of an antihero character. For instance, because the large majority of antiheros included in these studies were protagonists, several participants talked about how that knowledge helped them ground their concern for the life/safety of an antihero in dangerous or life-threatening situations knowing that the show/film couldn't kill off the main protagonist too early in a season or movie. As one participant explained, "If I'm in season 2 episode 3 and [the antihero has] just been beaten to death, but there's six more episodes left, I'm not too worried." The same principle, however, had the opposite effect on antiheroes who were supporting characters or part of an ensemble. As one participant explained, "if you get a protagonist, you can always assume that he never dies, but for a supporting character [if he dies] you know he's gone forever." While the "rules" of being a protagonist or a supporting character did not appear to be something participants would usually attend to consciously, the concept existed "in the back of [your] head" and seemed to only be consciously triggered when participants were trying to predict or prepare themselves for an unknown outcome (usually life-or-death).

Furthermore, in the case of protagonist antiheroes, a few participants mentioned in passing how it was only natural to root for the main character or protagonist of a show or movie. These comments, while relatively few, were not surprising given that most stories tell the story primarily from the perspective of the main character or protagonist, making it easy to understand, sympathize, and align yourself with that character.

Genre & Production Company/Writers

In addition to narrative roles, many participants also made assumptions based on the genre or even the production company and writers of the shows and films. On the one hand, comedies stood apart from the traditional dramatic antihero narrative as the violence and consequences of negative actions are often sanitized for a more enjoyable, comedic experience. For instance, despite the fact that Jack Sparrow (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) lives the life of a pirate and often betrays his "friends" for his own welfare, one participant felt that "the humor around the whole movie makes it really difficult to see him as a villain," allowing them to root for the character without much trouble. Along similar lines, some participants knew not to expect their character or the story to get "too dark" because they knew that Disney and Marvel had family-friendly reputations to uphold. On the other hand, another participant cited the writer of her show, Bryan Fuller, as the reason she expected her character, Hannibal (*Hannibal*), and the show overall to be darker and more chaotic than you might have expected from a more "mainstream" antihero story, again priming the participant to be comfortable rooting for an equally chaotic character.

Cinematography. Some participants were also aware of certain cinematographic or stylistic features that would impact their experience. While perhaps not as conscious of these things in the moment of consumption, at least upon reflection about half of the participants across the first two studies recognized how the framing of the character/narrative, the point-of-view of the antihero, and the way scenes were shot played a role in their perception of the antihero. This was demonstrated by comments such as, "he's always positioned as this evil guy until the very end," "he's completely portrayed as a villain," or "the show kind of frames the FBI system as kind of this very dark and oppressing environment." These comments were especially prevalent when introducing a character, showing how production and storytelling elements

would push participants towards an initial stance regarding the antihero. For example, one participant highlighted how *Breaking Bad* did this, by explaining, "At first, [Walter] was about to give up, which I think was another tactic that they used to try to get the audience on his side very early on, which was understandable and I think it worked."

From there, the show or film could continuously push and pull participants' allegiances using specific cinematographic techniques. For example, one interview participant talked about how Snape (*Harry Potter*) would stare at Harry in the films was shot in such a way that it pushed audiences to believe he had negative intentions/thoughts towards Harry. A different interview participant commented on how Hannibal's (*Hannibal*) cooking was shot in a way to subvert the reality of what was actually happening to make the scene and the food "look appetizing even though he's cooking people."

Actor/Performances. Several actors were named directly and praised for their appearance and their performance, sometimes becoming entangled with the character themselves. Michael B. Jordan and Christian Bale's good looks, Johnny Depp's unique quirkiness, and Harrison Ford's charm and charisma were all mentioned as impacting participants' engagement experiences. On an even deeper level, one interview participant even compared the experience of Alan Rickman passing away in real life to Harry's experience of losing Snape in the *Harry Potter* narrative, demonstrating how intertwined the actor and their characters can be. As comparatively insignificant as an actor's characteristics may seem, in some cases, it can drive participant's allegiances to the extreme. As a thought-listing participant wrote, "Most of the reason why I like Han Solo is because the character plays well. Ford is so charismatic that even if Han Solo kills his wife in the play and wants to plant it on an unnamed disabled person, I will still support him."

Similar to some of these other production elements, it was difficult to tell if participants were consciously aware of the impact the actors had on their perception of the character during consumption, or if it was something that ran subconsciously or only considered post-consumption. Either way, it is clear that the actors, their appearance, and their performance could have a notable impact on the antihero character themselves, contributing both physical (e.g., attractiveness) and non-physical characteristics (e.g., charm, quirkiness) to the character. Furthermore, in at least a couple of cases, it appeared that a pre-existing fandom of a particular actor biased participants in favor of the character from the get-go.

Context/Circumstances

Building upon the discussion in theme 1 regarding character agency, a character's choices and behaviors (as well as character attributes) are frequently influenced by external, contextual contexts and circumstances. This included a variety of physical, social, emotional, or cultural contexts that made up an antihero's situation at any given point. Participants commonly referenced or explained a variety of situational contexts when discussing their antihero characters, even when only briefly introducing a character as in study 3. For instance, one participant talked about how the *physical context* of a battle forced his character Eren Yeager (*Attack on Titan*) to choose which of his allies he would save and which he would have to let die. Another participant pointed out the *time period* in which her character, Cersei Lannister (*Game of Thrones*) committed incest with her brother Jaime Lannister to contextualize her actions. Eight participants across all three studies chose to discuss Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), each of whom introduced the character and all his choices by first explaining his *life situation* – middle-class high school chemistry teacher who was diagnosed with cancer and felt the need to quickly earn money to pay for his chemo and provide for his family.

Generally speaking, many antiheroes were considered victims of circumstance or were perceived as being forced to do things because of difficult circumstances. While most participants acknowledged that difficult circumstances don't fully excuse an antihero's a-moral actions, most participants were still willing to interpret those questionable actions more generously. Tragic histories or difficult circumstances were an extremely common occurrence in the antihero stories shared across all three studies. To illustrate, one participant explained, "Seeing the trauma [Eren] went through, losing his parents, his friends, his entire town, his squad-mates in gruesome ways and constantly losing, I found myself rooting for him when he went on a destructive rampage…in sort of an eye-for-an-eye way."

Other participants argued that their antiheros, while not quite *victims* of circumstance, were nevertheless forced to take on the role of an antihero and do questionable things due to their circumstances. For example, the crime-ridden state of Gotham City forced Batman (*Batman*) to become a vigilante-style antihero, just as Thanos (*The Avengers*) was forced to sacrifice his daughter and kill half the universe to save the other half. Participants from one of the focus groups from study 1 made the collective argument that antiheroes generally don't *choose* to be antiheroes but feel forced into these roles because of the circumstances in which they find themselves either personally (like becoming sick and needing to make quick money for their family) or contextually (needing to protect their people from being wiped out). Nevertheless, while participants easily understood why the antihero felt they *had* to make those choices, they usually acknowledged alternative paths the antihero could have taken. By doing so, the participants attributed a certain degree of responsibility to the antihero for their questionable or immoral actions despite their difficult or pitiable circumstances.

In terms of specific, in-the-moment circumstances, the most common antihero type of situation shared by participants across all three studies involved dire circumstances. One participant who struggled with many of Tony Soprano's (*The Sopranos*) negative choices explained that the exception was typically "when he's under direct threat or direct danger, those are the situations where you're like, 'Oh, I want to see him get out of this," regardless of whatever Tony did to protect himself from that threat or danger. Many examples such as the above indicate that high-intensity situations would drive participants to accept whatever the antihero had to do to make it out alive or without getting caught more easily. Some participants cited the antihero's lack of control/agency over their reactions, while others noted their attachment to/investment in the character and the story as the reason they wanted the character to get through (at whatever cost) so their story could continue. Some even were simply intrigued by the character and the situation, wondering how the antihero was going to get themselves out of the situation.

Nevertheless, while it was easier to accept these situations in the moment, in some cases participants still experienced mixed reactions once they sank in. For instance, when watching Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) in a kill-or-be-killed situation, one interviewee said, "I was scared he was going to die…so when [Walter] killed [the other guy], I was relieved he was still safe. But then it's sort of after the fact when he had blood on his hands, that's more when you're like 'wow, that just happened'" He went on to say, "As a viewer, it's like you wanted it to happen, but once it happened, that was kind of shocking."

On the other hand, dire situations could also elevate positive participant responses when an antihero would rise above and react positively in an intense situation. For example, this occurred when Loki (*Thor/The Avengers*) sacrificed himself for his brother, and when Jack

Sparrow uncharacteristically risked his life to save his friends from the Kraken even though he had a chance to escape himself. As can be seen by these examples, circumstances often significantly affect both the way that the antihero acts and the audiences' understanding/evaluation of those actions.

Relationships

The other dominating external influence that participants considered as they engaged with antihero characters was the relationships the antihero had with other characters. While most antiheros did not actually have many close relationships, the ones they did have were highly influential. Participants consistently talked about family members, enemies, allies, neighbors, partners, even nameless "others" as central influences (both positive and negative) on their antihero characters. These other characters acted as motivations, positive/negative influences on the antihero, and highlighted the complexity of antihero characters.

Relationships served as motivations in multiple ways. To illustrate the various forms of motivation, here are some examples: Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) wanted to protect his family, Punisher (Punisher) wanted to avenge the death of his wife, Loki (*Thor/The Avengers)* wanted the love and respect he felt was denied him by his father, and Michael Scott (*The Office*) wanted to be loved and accepted generally by others. Based on the findings of these studies, relationships as motivations usually worked in the antihero's favor. One participant even commented that relationships would "purify [an antihero's] intentions," making it easier to understand and justify what they did. These relational motivations were commonly linked with stronger allegiances to antihero characters. For instance, a focus-group participant pointed out that as Loki (*Thor/The Avengers*) developed a better relationship with his brother Thor, he became more heroic (moving from villain to antihero) as his motivations to get power and glory

began to change to more selfless motivations to protect his brother/friends, making the participant want to root for Loki rather than against him.

Participants also recognized the impact these relationships had on the antihero in both positive and negative ways. While there were dozens of examples illustrating this point, the following example captures most of them in one. As described by the participant, Jaime Lannister (*Game of Thrones*) had two important relationships that were particularly influential on him and his choices. First, his friendship and association with Lady Brienne "the most good-hearted and most loyal person in the show" caused him to feel "honored to be friends with someone like her which kind of made him act honorable and to emphasize his own heroic qualities." This relationship resulted in Jaime losing his hand in a fight while protecting Lady Brienne, making the participant believe that he was becoming a truly heroic character. However, Jaime also had a strong relationship with his sister/lover Cersei, who the participant felt was a very negative influence on him. According to the participant, Jaime pushed another character off a tower, crippling him in order to protect Cersei's (and his own) reputation. Even in the act of doing so, Jaime acknowledged the lowness of his behavior by saying something like, "all the things I do for love," convincing the participant that he was perhaps not as heroic as she thought – and Cersei's bad influence was a big part of that.

While slightly less prominent an effect, some participants also acknowledged that this type of influence can be a two-way street. For instance, a focus group participant who chose Magneto (*X-Men*) talked about how Magneto and his friend Charles Xavier (the hero) impacted each other with Charles taming Magneto's violent tendencies and Magneto opening Charles' eyes to problems that needed to be faced. Similarity, one of the participants who chose Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) explained that Walter and his partner Jesse, not only helped each other

develop important character traits (e.g., professionalism, flexibility) but were both necessary to keep their business running optimally. This interdependence allows the audience to see how an antihero is not only being acted upon by other characters, but also how they influence other characters around them in important ways.

Finally, the various relationships characters had helped to highlight the various roles and multifaceted characteristics of antihero characters. To quickly recap the main points discussed in theme 1 on multiple roles and personas, the unique relationships a character had with different characters helped participants see the various sides of the character, adding depth and complexity to their understanding and engagement with the antihero themselves. Snape (*Harry Potter*), for instance, was revealed to have an extremely devoted (almost obsessive) love for Harry's mother Lilly, a clear hatred for Harry's father James (making his relationship with Harry himself very conflicted), a strong, trusting and mutually respectful relationship with Dumbledore, and a rather deceitful relationship with the villain, Voldemort. Access to these vastly different sides of a character created an extremely rich context from with the participant could derive an intricate understanding about the character which would inform their understanding, expectations, and judgements of the character.

When considering this complexity, it is important to keep in mind that participants also developed separate relationships and allegiances with characters other than the antihero. Even if the antihero was the main character or protagonist, it is only natural for audiences to develop relationships and allegiances to other characters. Participants who chose antiheroes from ensemble casts in particular showed signs of strong relationship development with multiple characters, each of which impacted the participant's perception of and feelings towards the antihero in unique ways.

Generally speaking, when it came to developing allegiances to an antihero character, one of the most important considerations participants made in regards to other characters was the antihero's treatment of and/or impact on other characters. Simply put, if the antihero impacted another character positively (especially a liked character), participants usually demonstrated stronger feelings of allegiance towards the antihero character. On the other hand, if the antihero's actions (or attitudes, goals, etc.) negatively impacted a (liked) character, participants would have a harder time supporting or sympathizing/empathizing with the antihero. For instance, one participant explained, "I kind of liked Walter's partner in the series also, so there were a couple instances where he would act a certain way towards his partner and I'd say, 'Well, I don't like him,' for a couple episodes…but I kind of ended up coming back around to [Walter] once him and his partner made up." Similarly, because he had strong relationship with other characters in the show *Attack on Titan,* a participant said that "towards the end of the series, it's basically Eren (the antihero) versus his friends. He tried to kill everyone and his friends tried to stop him from doing that and I'm definitely on the side of his friends." As can be seen from these examples, participants' relationships with these other characters affected their allegiances towards the antihero. The opposite pattern held true for disliked others.

While this trend was clear across all three studies, the findings from study 3 showed that the second most common reason an antihero *appealed* to the participant was their positive treatment/impact on other characters. Likewise, the second most common reason antiheroes *repelled* participants was in their negative treatment/impact on other characters. In some cases, the participants were even referring to the same interpersonal relationships in both their appeal and repel responses. For example, a participant admired House's (*House*) leadership skills regarding his team, while simultaneously disliking the way he personally treated his team

members. This contradiction speaks to the multi-dimensional and complex nature of both characters and their relationships/lives.

To support these findings, a common concern participants mentioned when dealing with the ambiguity or unpredictability of antiheroes was the impact an antihero's choices and actions had (or would have in the future) on others. One participant explained that while she wasn't worried that a dangerous personal conflict would lead to Han Solo's (*Star Wars*) death early on in the movie, she did worry about if "this situation [will] come back to haunt him for the rest of the movie and will start to hurt other people too." Several other participants made similar comments, pointing out the negative impact Tony (*The Sopranos*) and Walter (*Breaking Bad*) had on their families, wondering if Megamind (*Megamind*) would actually let something bad happen to his kidnapping victim or continue to abuse his minion, if Jack Sparrow (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) would choose to help or betray his allies, if Hannibal would convince Will to turn against the FBI and start killing, etc. Concern for these other characters could push participants away from antiheros and decrease their allegiances to them.

On the other hand, participants also recognized the positive impacts antiheroes had other characters, which helped build their allegiances. Using many of the same examples above, participants also recognized that Tony and Walter were trying to support and protect their families, that Megamind's interactions with these other people could turn him and his skills for good, that Jack Sparrow could come back and save the day, and that Will could convince Hannibal to stop killing and turn himself in.

Key Process

The primary process involved in antihero engagement with external influences beyond simply noting the existence and impact of external factors was the active comparison of antiheroes to other characters.

Table 5. Narrative-Related Processes

Key Process	**Description**	**Example**
Making Comparisons (between characters)	Comparing the antihero to other characters	Antihero vs hero; antihero vs villain

Comparisons Between Characters

Building from the above discussion on the centrality and implications of between-character relationships, the following section will describe how participants compared antiheroes to other characters to better understand the role of the antihero, how the antihero's qualities compared to those of other characters, and what their allegiances to the antihero would be.

Comparing Roles. First, comparing characters helped the participant decide what narrative role to assign the antihero. Many of the antiheroes discussed in these studies were killers or criminals, yet because they were placed in contrast to other worse killers and criminals, participants found themselves rooting for/developing allegiances to the antihero because they were the lesser of two evils. For example, while the Punisher's (*Punisher*) vicious tactics initially made the participant see him as a "ruthless, crazy almost psychopath," his positioning against worse "bad guys" and his comparatively moral goal of "punishing wrongdoers" helped the participant view him as the relative "good guy" despite the Punisher's "R-rated" tactics. Conversely, when compared to more heroic figures, antiheroes often came off as morally worse and participants either held weaker allegiances to them or found other ways around the negative comparison (see theme 3).

In a similar vein, when an antihero character teams up with a traditional hero or "good guy," (especially when working against a worse villain) that association can help elevate the antihero in the eyes of the audience. For instance, Loki begins as one of the main villains of the Marvel Universe, but later develops a stronger, more positive bond with his brother Thor (a hero) as well as the other Avengers, occasionally teaming up with them, and largely redeeming himself in the eyes of the viewers and winning their allegiance.

Comparing Character Qualities. Generally speaking, these studies revealed that participants compared antiheroes to other characters, primarily in terms of morality and liking, but also in regards to relatability, capability, sympathy, and in other miscellaneous ways. This served multiple functions, the most significant of which will be discussed below.

When antiheroes are compared to more traditional heroes, the flaws and complexities of the antihero character become more obvious. Based on the findings of these studies, this can actually lead to a surprising number of positive outcomes, as well as a few negative ones. In terms of the positive, when compared to traditional heroes, many participates claimed that they liked and enjoyed antiheroes more because they were much more realistic, unpredictable, relatable, and sometimes even more inspiring. In many cases, antiheroes have a lot more to overcome and have more potential to violate expectations in positive ways. After all, because audiences are prepared to see antiheroes make wrong choices, when they violate those expectations in a positive way, the payoff is much greater. Heroes, on the other hand, are expected to do the right thing, so it's not as thrilling when they do good – but it is much more damaging when a hero makes a wrong choice compared to an antihero. In this sense, antiheroes have a lot more latitude to do both good and bad and still be accepted by the audience. The same principle applies to their qualities, not just their actions. For instance, even though Loki

(*Thor/The Avengers)* was framed as the villain and clearly had worse character traits compared to his heroic brother and other superheroes in the film franchise, the positive aspects of his non-stereotypical charm, skills, wit, and other attractive qualities were comparatively much more admirable and rewarding. Those positive qualities were able to overshadow many of his villain-like-flaws and negative character comparisons, which helped him win participants' allegiances.

In addition, antiheroes were sometimes also seen as more capable than heroes because they could cross moral lines that traditional heroes couldn't. As multiple participants pointed out, by crossing those lines, antiheroes were willing to sacrifice not only their lives (which heroes also do), but also their own innocence, integrity, or reputation to do whatever has to be done. One participant explained that despite the fact that Eren (*Attack on Titan*) turned to evil and violence, "Everything he did was for the sake of his family and friends…he is willing to put his friends before his life, before his integrity, and all that [is] really admirable." Similarly, when Snape (*Harry Potter*) was secretly ordered to kill Dumbledore by Dumbledore himself, one participant acknowledged Snape's personal loss of killing his most trusted ally but also the consequence of being "really misunderstood for this action [by audiences] as well as by other people in the movie." She felt that "the loyalty he has for Dumbledore [was] very impressive."

On the other hand, sometimes being compared to other more hero-like characters can be damaging to antiheroes. First, when compared to the more traditional hero figures (e.g., Luke and Leia) flawed characters (e.g., Han Solo) can't be categorized equally heroic, even when they are on the same side and fight against a worse villain. Second, particularly in shows that have stronger ensemble casts like *The Sopranos, Game of Thrones,* or *The Office,* there are generally other characters that are more likable, moral, or relatable than the antihero. Because audiences tend to develop similarly strong relationships with many characters in ensemble casts, the

antihero often loses favor especially when they come into direct conflict with another character that the audience member likes better, identifies with more, or happens to agree with on a particular issue. For instance, one participant described how whenever they watched Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) in the context of his mob life, he always felt most favorable towards Tony because all the characters were equally amoral criminals, but in the context of his family, who were not criminals, Tony's actions were much harder to accept.

This last example illustrates the most common outcome of participants comparing antiheroes to worse characters or villains. When comparing to worse characters, the faults and flaws of the antihero don't seem as bad, making it easier for participants to support the antihero and their comparatively better, or more "moral" stance. This will be discussed in more depth in theme 3.

Finally, not to be overlooked were comparisons between the antihero and other supporting or "neutral" characters, such as you would find in an ensemble cast. In these cases, moral comparisons seemed less important than comparisons of character traits, likability, and relatability. For instance, even though one participant agreed that Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) was objectively the one in the wrong, she explained, "I feel very strongly about his wife as a character – literally one of my least favorite TV characters in all the TV shows I've ever watched, so I always took [Walter's] side, at least subconsciously." Several participants mentioned other supporting characters who they liked more or less than the antihero and talked about how the qualities of those characters sometimes impacted the degree of allegiance they felt for an antihero in both positive and negative ways.

Discussion of Narrative-Related Factors

As Smith (1995) writes, “Characters are salient elements of narrative structure, but we should never lose sight of the fact that characters are, nevertheless, parts of larger structures” (p. 74). The findings of this study certainly support this supposition. Antihero characters do not exist in bubbles, nor can they be fully understood without the worlds in which they live. Some extant antihero literature has already begun to address a few of these elements, including schema (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Matthews, 2019; Shafer & Raney, 2012), alignment (Smith, 1999; Smith 2011), and moral comparativism, family relationships, and circumstances (Garcia, 2016), although these studies have focused primarily on their effect on moral disengagement. The findings from these studies offer a broader, richer perspective on the significance of such narrative influences which expand beyond moral disengagement. These were categorized into three main categories: production elements, context/circumstances, and between-character relationships.

In terms of production elements, participants identified influences including a character’s narrative role (i.e., protagonist), genre, production company/creators, cinematography, and actors. The type of narrative role the antihero held shaped certain participant expectations for character, such as knowing that they couldn’t die or have their missions fail too early on in the story. The influences of genre fall in line with research regarding schemas, which have been included in antihero studies. Participants did seem to approach and interpret antihero narratives in accordance with their expectations built from pre-existing schemas. For instance, because they expected comedies to be relatively light-hearted, any bad behaviors were taken in a more humorous, less serious light than they would have in a drama or thriller. The same schematic principles applied to production companies and creators/writers, which shaped expectations for the antihero characters and their narratives (e.g., Disney does happy endings).

Aspects of cinematography were also noted by participants, although possibly more upon reflection rather than in the moment of viewing. Point of view, artistic shots, and other such features identified by participants fall in line with the concept of alignment, one of the three components of Smith's structure of sympathy. As introduced in the literature review, alignment involves using technical or narrative features to place viewers in a certain relationship to the character by determining their access to the character's actions, thoughts, and feelings (Smith, 1995; Smith 2010). Alignment to an antihero, in turn, can be highly influential to viewers' allegiance to the character as well. These effects were confirmed in these studies, as participants often pointed to cinematic features as reasons for their interpretations and experiences (e.g., sympathy) with antiheroes.

Finally, past research has greatly overlooked the influence specific actors playing the antihero's role have on antihero engagement experiences. Given that traits such as charm, attractiveness, mystery, or ambiguity are so central to many antihero characters, the physical appearance and performance skills of many actors become essential elements of the character themselves. Even though physical characteristics are generally considered heuristic aids most meaningful to new viewers or non-fans (Janicke & Raney, 2015), the evidence from these studies suggest otherwise. The findings from this project show that audiences pay attention to a lot more than a character's attractiveness, which is typically the only measure of a character's physical characteristics included in antihero studies. In addition to attractiveness, participants noted a wide range of physical and visually-related characteristics including physique, deformities, style, charisma, charm, or the ability to look deceptively "normal" or "average," or "creepy." These types of traits that lie heavily on the shoulders of the actors and their performances do play a

surprisingly large role in audience alignment and allegiance to antiheroes and should not be overlooked.

Another major narrative element that participants paid a great deal of attention to was the context or circumstances in which antihero characters found themselves. Discussions of context and circumstances is surprisingly rare in antihero literature, yet it appears to be extremely important to antihero engagement. To be fair, it is not easy to take so many specific, complicated contextual elements into consideration when studying antiheros. Nevertheless, some scholars, such as Garcia (2016) and Plantinga (2010) have considered how being a "victim of circumstance" can play into their theories and studies of moral disengagement. By viewing antiheroes as victims of circumstance, these authors argue that viewers absolve antiheroes of much of their guilt for resorting to extreme measures. The character's lack of options or difficult circumstances make their choices more acceptable to viewers. The findings from this study strongly support these claims.

Furthermore, evidence from these studies also indicate that even if antiheroes are not quite *victims* of circumstance, their physical, social, or cultural contexts can explain (if not excuse) many of their attitudes, choices, and behaviors. This is important for viewers attempting to achieve an understanding of antiheroes. Even when a viewer cannot agree or sympathize with an antihero's attitudes or choices, being able to identify a reason or logical explanation for those choices can help audiences understand and accept the antihero's choice. Providing reasons or explanations for antiheroes is perhaps one of the most important roles context and circumstances play in antihero narratives. If taken away, strange or disagreeable choices may appear senseless, which in turn, may severely damage favorable audience interpretations and allegiances. The explanatory power of context could help explain why audiences root for characters who do bad

things – even when the antihero cannot be considered a victim of circumstance or when they had other, better options available.

Another important contribution the current studies have to offer is insight into a key type of circumstance common in antihero narratives – dire situations. The majority of antihero characters discussed by participants in this study found themselves in life-or-death, cat-and-mouse, or make-or-break situations at one point or another. These types of situations highlighted two interesting findings. First, in these situations, participants appeared to be even more lenient in their judgements of antiheros and their actions than normal, *if* they wanted the same outcome as the antihero (e.g., to not die, protect someone). Whether that acceptance stems from the lack of options/control the antihero has, a strong allegiance, or mere curiosity about how the character will respond, participants are willing to let things slide. Second, the primary nature and/or goals of the antihero become clearer in these intense situations. Because antiheroes are typically steeped in ambiguity and may present multiple personas, seeing how they react in these now-or-never situations were often taken by participants as manifestations of what the character's "true colors" were, and the choices antiheroes made in those circumstances as signs of what mattered most to them. Participants frequently pointed out these key moments as determining factors in their opinions of a character, and future researchers may want to focus on these types of situations for the insight they offer regarding the antihero's fundamental natures and priorities and the audiences' ultimate judgements of them.

The third key narrative element discussed in this theme was between-character relationships. Relationships appeared to be one of the most important elements of antihero narratives and were central to many engagement processes. Yet, similar to context/circumstances, very little attention has been given to relationships in extant antihero

literature thus far. The findings included in this theme highlight three key ways between-character relationships are important to antiheroes. Relationships serve as motivations for antiheroes, they can influence antiheroes' attitudes and choices, and they can bring out the complex nature of antiheroes.

First, common motivations included getting vengeance for a loved one, protecting loved ones, or gaining attention, love, respect, or recognition from others. Positive relational motivations were one of the most commonly cited reasons participants could support antihero characters, even if the methods applied to those motivations were less than ideal. Relationally-driven motivations were also a key point of resonance, relatability, or sympathy that participants felt for antiheroes, making the antihero's resulting actions easier to accept and/or root for.

These findings fall in line with but also extend an argument made by Garcia (2016), who claimed that family relationships serve to justify reprehensible actions and help audiences empathize with the antiheroes. Building upon these arguments, this project found that friends, allies, partners, etc., can also provide the same motivations and justifications that Garcia argues family members provide. Furthermore, negative relationships with enemies can also serve to motivate antiheroes and in some cases justify actions and garner sympathy for the antihero. For instance, because Loki felt overlooked and mistreated by his father, he turned to violent and deceptive means to gain power and respect. While Loki's actions are likely not approved of by most audiences, no doubt many viewers could still sympathize or empathize with his feelings of frustration, difficult family dynamics, and understand his drastic reaction to such a situation. While actions driven by negative relationships may not always be as justifiable as those driven by positive relationships, they are common enough through antihero narratives that they should also be given some attention.

Less attention (if any) has been given to the way other characters influence the antihero throughout a narrative. Other characters, regardless of their relationship to the antihero can affect or influence an antihero in both positive and negative ways. These relationships may affect an antihero's attitudes, their choices, behaviors, developmental trajectories, etc. These characters may push, persuade, threaten, encourage, support, or even manipulate antihero characters. In some cases, the changes are desirable and encouraging for audiences as they root for continued improvement. When under negative influences, viewers may decrease the level of responsibility attributed to the antihero and blame the negative influence of other characters for driving the antihero down worse paths instead. This reflects some aspects of fundamental attribution theory, in that audiences may emphasize external factors (e.g., the negative influence of other characters) and minimize an antihero's dispositional factors (e.g., the antihero's internal traits, tendences, abilities) when bad choices are being made, further supporting the findings of Tamborini et al. (2018), which found that the principles of fundamental attribution do help explain audience liking of antihero characters. Focusing on the effect other characters have on antiheroes could lead to another fruitful line of research regarding justification and/or allegiance.

Relationships also have the ability to bring out the complexities of antihero characters, especially as they relate to the various roles filled by antihero characters (see theme 1). While not explicitly recognizing the existence of multiple roles fulfilled by a single character, film scholars such as Smith (2010) and Plantinga (2010) have recognized that antiheroes are multidimensional and do behave differently with different people or in various domains of their life, and argue that audiences are able to form multiple, sometimes conflicting feelings, attitudes, and allegiances towards a single antihero given the various dimensions of the character. Participant responses across all three studies reflected this pattern. Much of the participants' insight into antihero

characters, their motivations, goals, choices, personas, and audience judgements came from observations of various between-character relationships. Each relationship brought out unique aspects of the antihero that were not always observable in other situations. As such, these relationships provide an excellent context in which future scholars may explore the multidimensional aspects of antiheroes and audience engagement with them.

Finally, an additional principle highlighted in these studies is that antihero characters are not the only characters that audiences develop allegiances or parasocial relationships with. Just as antiheroes don't exist in a bubble divorced from their narrative and other characters, audience responses to antihero narratives are not limited to the antihero character alone. Because audiences develop attachments with other characters, the way the antihero interacts with them is taken into account. In essence, if an antihero treats or affects other liked characters in a positive way, they gain the audiences' favor/allegiance. On the other hand, if they hurt or negatively impact other liked (or even neutral) characters, allegiances may be damaged.

This brings us to the primary process involved in audience engagement with antiheroes and narrative elements: between-character comparisons. As should be clear by now, almost everything relating to antiheroes is comparative. In regards to relationships, the closest concept in the extant antihero literature is the idea of comparative morality. One of the strategies of moral disengagement is advantageous comparisons (Bandura, 1999). Essentially, by comparing a person to a worse person, the former comes off advantageously, regardless of their objective morality. One of Garcia's (2016) strategies for developing allegiances to antihero characters, moral comparatism, is essentially the same, although applied to antihero characters specifically. He argues that even if an antihero is quite bad, they can nevertheless be considered the lesser of

two evils, which allows audiences to ally themselves with the antihero character and drives the viewer to find ways to sympathize and support the antihero.

These patterns were clearly identified in the current studies, although again, the findings revealed even more than expected. First, as expected, comparing antiheroes to other characters was found to help participants determine the antihero's narrative role. In line with the idea of moral comparatism, whenever an antihero was compared to a worse villain, the antihero was naturally supported as the "comparative hero." However, many antihero narratives also included actual heroes, including *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter*, *Thor/The Avengers, Start Wars,* and *Punisher*. By comparison, antiheroes could not hold the heroic position and were seen as more ambiguous or villainous. In cases when both heroes and villains existed, or when neither were apparent, antiheroes were still compared and "ranked" with other characters within the narrative.

However, even though objectively "better" characters may exist in a narrative, antiheroes still achieved high levels of sympathetic allegiance. In fact, most participants found reasons to like and support antiheroes, sometimes even more than the actual heroes. This was because objective morality was not the only characteristic by which characters were compared. Participants also considered characters' likability, realism, relatability, capability, and sympathy – all characteristics that were quite common among antiheroes. These types of qualities speak to the gaps identified in extant antihero research after mortality has been taken into consideration.

For instance, because antiheroes have mixed positive and negative qualities, audiences find them to be much more realistic and relatable – as all real people (including the audience members) have both strengths and weaknesses. This leads to greater levels of sympathy, empathy, and pity (see theme 3) and allows for stronger sympathetic allegiances. Additionally, because audiences expect to see both positive and negative traits and behaviors from antiheroes,

the latitude of acceptable behaviors is much larger for antiheroes than traditional heroes – who are only allowed to be good.

This latitude was found to be significant for participants' engagement and allegiances with antihero characters in a few different ways. First of all, because antiheroes are expected to do certain bad things, it is not extremely disappointing when they do – meaning that any pre-existing sympathetic allegiances are not meaningfully damaged. Second, because viewers know that antihero characters have the *potential* to be good, they have something to root for – namely that the good in the antihero will overcome the bad. Furthermore, whenever the good in the antihero does prevail over the bad, the audiences' emotional reward is much greater and their allegiances may strengthen further.

These patterns are distinctly different from traditional heroes and villains, who have unidimensional expectations. In other words, heroes must be good and nothing but bad is expected of villains. The emotional reward when heroes do good is comparatively smaller than for antiheroes because "good" is a hero's status-quo. Anything less would be disappointing and damaging to sympathetic allegiances. Villains on the other hand offer viewers nothing worth rooting for, and therefore never achieve any form of sympathetic allegiance. It is these patterns that defined theories such as affective disposition theory (ADT), which lie at the base of most antihero research. Recent antihero scholars have rightly called for adaptation and expansion of this theory, and have attempted to do so by including mediating variables such as identification and liking. However, it would seem that concepts such as pre-existing expectations and potential for positive violations of expectations as discussed in the previous paragraph could provide alternative, even better ways to improve such theories as they relate to antihero characters.

Before moving on from the concept of latitudes of acceptability, it is interesting to note that not only do antiheroes enjoy a sympathetic cushion of sorts, but it allows for more interesting and unpredictable behaviors or choices. Knowing that an antihero could opt for the good or the bad created greater mystery and suspense, which allowed audiences to actively engage with interesting ambiguities. For many participants, this was much more enjoyable than watching predicable heroes. Furthermore, many participants saw antiheroes' capacity for "dirty work" as a necessary quality for them to achieve what had to be done, which further improved their sense of realism and relatability. In sum, an antihero's capacity for both good and bad behaviors and the latitude for acceptance across that spectrum should be considered seriously by future antihero scholars.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that even antiheroes had their limits. They could not abandon all sense or reason without losing audiences' sympathy or understanding. Especially when compared to other characters who made better choices or who were more likable or relatable, antiheroes could lose ground with audiences. Sometimes antiheroes would go too far, or give in too easily to their bad sides. While the nature of most discussion across each of the current studies was primarily positive and supportive, it was clear that antiheroes could lose an audience member's allegiance. The primary situation in which antipathetic feelings arose in this project was when an antihero character came into conflict with a more respected, liked, and/or relatable character who participants also had allegiances to. Future research will be needed to better understand these dynamics as well as other potential causes for antipathy.

The findings from this theme demonstrate how important narrative elements are to an antihero and audiences' engagement with them. It will certainly be a challenge to integrate many of these aspects into future antihero research, but the significance of many of these influences are

simply too large to be overlooked. Hopefully, many of the principles and processes revealed by this study will provide entry points from which future research can begin to expand our understanding of antihero engagement.

Viewer-Related Factors that Influence Understanding & Allegiance to Antiheroes

The final theme addresses viewer-specific factors that arose from this series of studies. Several new concepts and processes important for understanding, making judgements, and developing allegiances with antihero characters will be addressed.

Key Concepts

When it came to participants' engagement experiences with antihero characters, there were several key concepts involved in helping participants make judgements, form opinions, develop relationships, and ultimately root for antihero characters. First, I will review the overarching concept of rooting for a character as a sign of allegiance, then cover a series of concepts that were associated with the nature of a participant's allegiance. While the nature of these findings does not allow for definitive causal claims, it was clear that there were strong connections between the concepts to be discussed and the nature of allegiance participants developed with their antihero characters.

Table 6. Viewer-Related Concepts

Key Concepts	**Description**	**Example**
Rooting	Wanting a character to succeed; wanting good things for a character	Wanting an antihero to win a fight against a bad guy
Understanding	Cognitive understanding of a character's perspective, thoughts, etc.	Understanding that being rejected as a child drove the antihero to seek vengeance
Agreement	Cognitive alignment and support of a character's actions, attitudes, etc.	Supporting an antihero's attitude that family comes first
Acceptance	Understanding and going along with a character without fully agreeing	Accepting an antihero's violent action when protecting someone
Sympathy	Feeling *for* a character	Feeling bad that an antihero has no friends

Pity	Feeling sorrow or compassion for a character's suffering or misfortune	Feeling bad for an antihero who was abused as a child
Empathy	Feeling *with* a character	Feeling the same loss and sorrow when an antihero's friend dies, just like the antihero
Relatability	Feeling connected to a character through shared/similar experiences	Feeling the same urge to protect family even if you have to break the rules, like the antihero
Liking	Finding a character enjoyable, agreeable, or attractive	Enjoying the antihero's fun, witty personality
Admiration	Regarding a character with respect, awe, or approval	Feeling impressed by the antihero's persuasive skills
Attachment	Becoming invested in a character, especially with increased familiarity	Not wanting an antihero to die at the end of an 8-season show
Ambiguity	Being open to more than one interpretation; unclear	Feeling unsure if an antihero is lying for self-preservation or to protect someone else

Rooting

To briefly review, rooting for a character can be generally defined as supporting or hoping for the success of a character, and can be considered a sign of a sympathetic allegiance. Because allegiance is not a commonly known concept, participants in this study typically acknowledged their feelings/stance towards a character (both globally, or regarding a specific experience/domain) in terms of rooting for or against the antihero. In more specific terms, participants often rooted for an antihero character by supporting or wanting them to achieve their goals, to not get caught, to not die, to overcome a hardship, or to find peace or happiness. Participants also rooted for positive goals, actions, and outcomes, although they frequently found themselves rooting for many less-than-worthy things as well.

Sometimes, rooting for a character did not always mean wanting the exact same things the antihero wanted for themselves. For instance, Hannibal (*Hannibal*) wanted to continue getting away with murder, but the participant was rooting for him to stop killing, turn himself in, and become a better person. Similarly, when Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*) is killed at the end of

his story, the participant said she felt relieved that he died with his unrealistic beliefs intact rather than having to face all the disappointments coming his way, even though Gatsby himself probably would have preferred to live. As illustrated by these examples, rooting for a character did not always mean giving blind support or agreeing with all their attitudes and behaviors. In fact, most often, it usually meant wanting or hoping for something better, whether that aligned with the character's desires or not. As one participant put it, even though she was still doing "villainous things…I still found myself rooting for Cersei at times, just because I wanted her to prove me wrong." Similarly, as a victim of circumstance, one participant explained of Han Solo (*Star Wars*), "He has to be evil just based on his past experiences, so you kind of root for him to overcome that and just become a full-on hero."

Understanding

I use the term *understanding* to refer to a cognitive understanding of the character's state of mind, perspective, thoughts, attitudes, etc., similar to the concepts of theory of mind or cognitive empathy (which focus on cognitive perspective-taking and understanding another person's state of mind) (Smith, 2006). This should be distinguished from two similar concepts: agreement and acceptance. I use the term *agreement* to indicate a participant's cognitive alignment and support of a character or their actions, whereas *acceptance* captures the idea of understanding and going along with the character, while not necessarily agreeing with them – in other words, giving them a "pass."

In many cases, participants would understand (and usually accept) what the antihero was doing or why they were doing it, while still disagreeing with them. Many participants said things like, "I get it," "[I understood] that they were just doing their best given the circumstances," "if you learn his backstory…or what he went through, it kind of makes sense what he's doing" or "I

don't really think what he's doing is morally correct, but yeah, I mean I can understand why he does [it]." Logically, many questionable or clearly bad choices or attitudes made a certain degree of sense, but that did not always translate to participant agreement or support. It would, however, help participants accept and/or move past those negative choices.

As discussed in the findings introduction section, the primary goal of audiences was to achieve an understanding of the antihero character. It seems that one of the reasons understanding was so important was because it helped participants determine whether or not they could root for an antihero. Understanding appeared to accomplish this by providing a logical foundation for a positive relationship or allegiance. For instance, when comparing the choices made by Jules Winnfield and Vincent Vega (*Pulp Fiction*), with one quitting his job as a hitman and the other continuing despite the dissolution of their partnership, one participant said, "I think that one could begin to understand why he wouldn't stop after a life of doing a certain thing. It's hard to imagine what you would do without it." Instead of judging Vincent for not changing his lifestyle compared to his partner's more "moral" choice to quit, the participant maintained the favorable relationship he had built with the character by logically trying to understand his perspective. Based on this and many other examples, understanding seemed to function primarily in maintaining or minimizing damage to relationships and allegiances rather than building them. The most likely explanation for this is that understanding alone was more often accompanied by feelings of acceptance rather than agreement.

Sympathy, Empathy, & Pity

Alongside but distinct from understanding were the concepts of *sympathy, pity,* and *empathy*. *Sympathy* refers to feeling *for* someone else, like feeling bad for Michael Scott (*The Office*) when his coworkers reject him. *Empathy* (specifically affective empathy), on the other

hand, refers to the experience of sharing or feeling *with* someone else's emotions/feelings, like feeling guilt and mourning the death of Snape (*Harry Potter*) alongside Harry. Some participants also specifically spoke about feelings of *pity,* which can be taken as a more specific form of sympathy that is triggered by particularly unfair instances of suffering or misfortune. When describing their experiences with antihero characters, participants often used the terms sympathy, empathy, and pity interchangeably, not recognizing the distinctive experiences that they were. While some participant descriptions were easily identifiable as sympathy versus empathy, much of the discussion was a little too vague to accurately determine which process was in effect.

Sympathy & Empathy. Although sympathy and empathy are distinct experiences, because they had extremely similar relationships to allegiances and were frequently confounded by participants, they will be discussed together. In contrast to understanding, sympathy and empathy are more closely tied to the emotional aspects of relationship development and seemed to be associated with the strengthening and/or justification of allegiances. Most comments that included sympathy or empathy were attached to statements about the participant's feelings of support or agreement. For example, speaking of an ambiguous choice Vincent Vega (*Pulp Fiction*) had to make, one participant said, "I think I would empathize with the choices that he made and I think that, given the circumstances, he probably made the best decision." This support even stretched to incidents that logically participants knew they wouldn't normally approve of. For instance, when describing Jason Bourne's (*The Bourne* series) unprovoked attack on some police officers, a study 3 participant wrote, "I'm pretty sure the officers didn't do anything to warrant that kind of response from him, but somehow I was rooting for Bourne because at that point in the movie I already sympathized with him and his narrative."

Even when explicit statements of support were not directly included, support seemed to be inferred as participants would synonymize sympathy or empathy with support or desires to root for an antihero. For instance, when describing the introduction of Walter White, one participant said, “I think it’s hard to say, ‘I’m going to root for a drug dealer.’ So, they really needed to lay the foundation and make you feel bad for him in the beginning.” Similarly, another participant speaking of the same character said, “Although morally wrong, I sympathized with his scheme to produce meth in order to support his family after his passing. I did not feel too troubled when he told white lies to cover up his behavior.”

Conversely, the inability to sympathize or empathize with an antihero was associated with decreased or nonexistent support. While not a common situation discussed by participants (as they overwhelmingly rooted for their chosen antihero characters), one participant explained that anytime Tony (*The Sopranos*) cheated on his wife, he “couldn’t empathize with him at all,” which made him lose his sense of allegiance and fully turn against the character.

Pity. Aside from general expressions of sympathy and empathy, a handful of participants specifically referenced feelings of pity for their antihero. These participants cited “feeling bad” or “pity” for the character as one of the major drives pushing them to want to root for and support the antihero, despite all the disagreeable things about the character. In fact, pity seemed to trigger uniquely protective instincts in participants, some of whom argued that, “the fact that no one else in the movie really supported him or is really backing him…made me find it more pitiful so I felt like I needed to back him more.” Similarly, another participant explained, “I definitely started kind of rooting for him because I felt like everyone else was against him. So he kind of needed people to back him up.” Feeling needed by the antihero seemed to have a surprising, yet powerful influence on a participant’s allegiance to an antihero.

One of the most common causes of pity was the sense that the antihero was misunderstood. This misunderstanding worked in two ways. First, when participants felt that other characters misunderstood the antihero, this reinforced the idea that the antihero was being socially isolated/rejected unfairly and lacked the support that they needed, or even deserved. As one participant explained, "I'll support you because…no one believed in them, but they did things that were worth believing in." Furthermore, the feeling of being misunderstood seemed to be a highly relatable experience for many participants. As another participant explained, "We might resonate with the antihero in that there must be situations in our lives where we're misunderstood or we're doing things for good intentions, but other people might not see it that way." While not expressed directly, the overall sentiment of the discussion from which the aforementioned quote was pulled indicated an increased sense of understanding, sympathy/empathy, and allegiance.

The second way misunderstanding played a role in allegiance to antiheroes was when the participants realized that they had misunderstood the antihero themselves. While this was only clearly evident in the case of Snape from *Harry Potter,* the principle does seem likely to apply in other similar cases where the background or true nature of an antihero wasn't revealed until later in the show/film. Speaking of Snape, one interview participant referenced feeling "multiple forms of guilt," "snobbish," "hypocritical," and regretful for how he had "treated" Snape over the years. While most dramatic in Snape's case, whenever participants realized that they had misunderstood a character, feelings of guilt, shock, or surprise seemed to encourage multiple participants to double-down their efforts to give certain antihero characters a second, fair (perhaps even over-compensated) chance. This type of reveal was also associated with the desire to re-watch the show/film. As the interview participant explained of his experience with Snape,

"you sort of want them back just to relive those experiences, so you can hopefully see them in a new light and have a different relationship with him."

Another less-common source of pity that was nevertheless similarity effective in winning the allegiance of participants was the underdog mentality. For instance, Loki (*Thor/The Avengers*) was always overshadowed by his brother Thor and overlooked by their father Odin. Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) was a sick, timid high-school teacher trying to make his way in the drug world (at least at first). Megamind (*Megamind*) was an alien who lost his planet, was mistreated by the humans around him, was clumsy, and had constant bad luck. In the case of Megamind, the pitifulness of his state drove one participant to want him to prevail at *something*, regardless of what it was. She went as far as to say that if "finally, one day he robbed a bank or something, I would kind of be like, 'Wow, good job! You tried so hard to do that, I guess you finally did!'" As demonstrated by this example, a pitiful, underdog mentality could drive participants to root for an antihero to overcome their (often relatable) struggles and succeed to a degree beyond what they normally would.

Relating

The above discussion on pity touched on yet another important concept evident in all three studies: *relating* to a character. Its impact, however as a little more difficult to separate from understanding, sympathy, and empathy. Sometimes relating to an antihero seemed to be closely entangled with understanding while other times it mirrored feelings of sympathy or empathy. However, relating to a character did seem to imply a more direct connection between the participant's own life and that of the antihero.

Relating to a character occurred in two primary ways. First, and most commonly, was a participant's ability to relate to the *emotional or social aspects* of an antihero's experiences. This

stood in contrast to their ability to relate to the *literal experiences* themselves. To illustrate, several participants explained that while they never have been or ever will be a pirate, a queen, a mob boss, a drug lord, a serial killer, or a hitman, and could not really *know* exactly what the characters were going through, they could relate to the struggles of difficult family dynamics, caring about one thing more than another, letting love for someone overwhelm your objectivity, wanting a better life or recognition, or feeling misunderstood, mistreated, or left out. This perceived similarity seemed to have a strong effect on participants' willingness to connect to an antihero, strengthening their relationship and allegiance to the character.

Liking, Admiration & Attachment

Unsurprisingly, participants had a much easier time rooting for antiheroes that they liked. Liking was shown to stem from a number of factors. Character traits such as charm, wit, skill, humor, attractiveness, determination, and other positive traits (both personality and physical) were among some of the most cited reasons for liking and admiring an antihero. While most characters were generally liked, in cases that they weren't (for parts or most of their narrative), liking could be made up for with admiration. Participants commonly called antiheroes "admirable," "impressive" or deserving of "respect." These feelings existed even in contexts that were less than "ideal" as participants would extract positive qualities out of extreme or misapplied situations. For instance, in describing Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*), one participant said, "I do kind of have to respect him for the amount that he is willing to dedicate his whole life just for [Daisy] even though it's borderline creepy."

While slightly different than liking, many participants would also get attached to antiheroes (as well as their storyline) and felt driven to stay supportive of the character so they could continue enjoying their character arcs and plots. Comments about being "so far into the

series that [I'm] invested in this storyline," not wanting them to die "because it's been so long," or "you want to root for his success so that you can see him in the future" illustrate how wanting to stay in support of a character is functional in staying involved with the story as a whole. This desire often pushed participants to find ways around things that they couldn't morally support. One example cites "the humor and the interesting ways he decides to do things," as "what makes you want to watch him even if you don't agree with what he's doing." While prevalent in all studies, this idea was especially evident in the findings of study three. Continued engagement emerged as the most common goal (both explicit and implied) of participants when asked to describe a situation in which they rooted for a character even if they were doing something questionable or bad.

Ambiguity

Because of the contradictory nature of most antihero characters, participants had to deal with a great deal of ambiguity when it came to their own relationship and allegiances to antiheroes. Participants frequently called antiheroes "unpredictable," or made comments regarding elements of mystery, uncertainty, suspense, etc. Even though participants across all studies generally remained on the side of the antihero overall, there were also times when participants found themselves in extremely difficult, ambiguous situations. Despite significant effort to make sense of these situations, theorize possible explanations, or weigh all factors, some participants would still make comments such as, "I just don't know why I'm rooting for her" or "I still don't know how I feel about him."

As negative as this ambiguity may seem, these participants did not demonstrate as much frustration or dissolution of allegiances as expected. Either they trusted their gut feelings about the antihero or felt that the mystery and unpredictability made the character more interesting to

watch. The only case in which a participant gave up on a character was when there was clearly no rhyme or reason for his hypocrisy and lack of development. The primary difference between these two experiences seems to lie in the fact that participants that accepted an antihero's ambiguity believed that there was an explanation for the character's choices that they simply didn't understand, whereas the one that gave up felt that there was no actual reason for the antihero's unpredictability.

Key Processes

Perhaps the biggest problem participants faced when determining their relationships with/the nature of their allegiance to antihero characters was determining whether or not the good in an antihero could outweigh the bad. This is not to say that allegiances were determined by a clear-cut weighing of the scales. Logic and emotion commonly clashed, forcing participants to make highly personal determinations about an antihero at any given time regarding any given aspect of the character's life. While understanding, sympathizing/empathizing, or relating to a character were clearly important elements in this pursuit, there were several more specific and concrete strategies that participants used to form conclusions about antiheroes and their personal relationship/allegiance to those characters. These include: justification & rationalization, forgiveness & forgetting, developing shared goals, making comparisons, and post-viewing engagement & repeated viewing.

Table 7. Viewer-Related Processes

Key Processes	**Description**	**Example**
Justification/Rationalization	Coming up with reasons, explanations for the correctness or acceptableness of a character's actions	Accepting an antihero killing someone else who is a worse criminal
Forgiveness/Forgetting	Letting go or moving past a character's poor choices –	Getting past an antihero cheating on their spouse after they stop cheating

	restoring feelings of allegiance, liking, etc.	
Developing shared goals	Rooting for/wanting the same outcome as a character	Also wanting an antihero to achieve their goal of protecting their family
Making Comparisons (between antihero & viewer)	Finding commonalities with the character, imagining themselves in a character's situations	Comparing an antihero's past selfish actions to their recent selfless actions
Making Comparisons (between issues/sub-plots)	Comparing/weighing the significance of various issues across character roles, sub-plots, etc.	Comparing family life problems to life-threatening job-related problems
Post-viewing Engagement & Repeated Viewing	Any form of post-viewing discussion, reflection, or repeated viewing/engagement	Reading online posts, discussing an antihero with friends, re-watching a movie

Justification & Rationalization

Another common process related to audience allegiance was justifying and/or rationalizing an antihero's actions. Whenever participants began to recognize and support positive aspects of an antihero, they began to develop allegiances, positive relationships and/or a sense of liking, admiration, and/or enjoyment of the character. While supported by all studies, one particular group of focus group participants talked about how familiarity, liking, and a desire to root for a character changed their motivation to justify or rationalize an antihero's actions. As one group member put it, "In the beginning, the trust wasn't fully built up or I wasn't fully rooting for the character yet, so I wasn't rationalizing his actions too much and just taking them objectively." As a means to maintain this positive stance or upward momentum, participants also acknowledged once they were on the side of the character and became invested in seeing them succeed, they wanted to maintain that relationship and would "definitely look at the things [antiheroes] do [with] a biased perspective." This biased stance motivated participants to justify, rationalize, or explain away some of the antihero's failings, especially the smaller ones. Based on

these discussions, the level of familiarity and the role of time emerged as important, dynamic influences on when and why participants feel compelled to justify or rationalize immoral acts.

Justification and rationalization, however, didn't blind participants to the negative actions of the antihero. As one participant explained, "Even though you know that [Loki] will most likely betray [Thor]…the whole time you're kind of rooting for him because the actor that plays him does a really good job of making Loki very charming and very funny and he's a very likable character, even though he is manipulative and self-serving…I personally am very biased and I very much enjoy Loki as a character and I make excuses for all his actions." This example shows how a person can fully recognize an antihero's faults and have negative expectations of their actions, yet still like, enjoy, and justify the character and their choices due to charm, humor, and likability.

In addition, just because a participant was biased and wanted to maintain their allegiance to an antihero, being able to justify or rationalize disagreeable things was not always easy. One participant acknowledged how liking and wanting to root for a character led him to "[try] to rationalize a way that [his actions] could be good or rationalize a way to sympathize or empathize with them, but looking at it objectively, I know that it's a bad thing and that they shouldn't have done it." This comment further emphasizes the clash between emotionally wanting to sympathize or empathize with the character (which implies support and allegiance), yet they know rationally/objectively that what the antihero did was simply wrong. Many participants faced this same challenge, and most put a surprising amount of effort into justifying or rationalizing a way to stay in support of the character simply because they liked the antihero and wanted to root for them (although not all participants displayed such a conscious awareness of their biases, justifications, or rationalizations as these examples demonstrate).

Forgiveness & Forgetting

An alternative way of dealing with bad choices and failings of antihero characters was to forgive and/or forget. Speaking first of forgiveness, participants were generally open to and even hopeful for the chance to be able to forgive a character for their past transgressions. Sometimes forgiveness was quick, following a meaningful, positive act. For example, speaking of Han Solo (*Star Wars*), "at the end of the movie [Han] does come back and he prevents Luke from dying and he works and he helps to save the day, and…you kind of forgive him for any of the questionable parts that happened before in the movie."

Other times, forgiveness came only with time, especially if no significant redemptive act followed a notable transgression. This type of forgiveness, however, was usually more akin to forgetting and moving on. For example, after Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) purposefully lets another (relatively neutral) character die, one participant struggled to get past that choice, which she strongly disagreed with. She explained that it took several episodes and just time to kind of forget and move on from that incident, although she acknowledged, "it was always in the back of my head for a while." However, she eventually did forget and move on, as did several other participants who found themselves in similar positions.

A few participants indicated that in cases such as the situation above, they were able to move on and "forget" their feelings of anger or disgust given time and the emergence of other, unrelated developments. One participant explained that after Tony Soprano would cheat on his wife, he wouldn't necessarily forget it "but some other situation not necessarily around that would sort of draw me in…So just sitting there focusing on the scene that's happening, you can start to forget that because that quality of him is not really a factor in that scene…so it's easier to

kind of ignore it." This speaks to the compartmentalization of feelings and attitudes about a character into their different roles or domains of life.

While the term "forgive" only came up a few times, participants would commonly demonstrate the desire and ability to forgive in terms of redemption. Antiheroes frequently earned redemption in both small and large ways, but always only after they turned away (at least in part or for a time) from their bad tendencies and did the "right thing." For instance, Loki (*Thor/The Avengers*) earned full redemption "despite everything that [he] has done and all the manipulation, the villainy he's done [by dying] a hero's death fighting against Thanos." On the other hand, Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) achieved a small moment of redemption when "he kidnaps his newborn baby to take her with him on the run…and then after running for a while he decides that that wasn't the right thing to do and so he turns around and returns his daughter."

An interesting pattern to see was that actual moments of redemption were rather few and far between. The majority of the time, antiheroes tended to make bad decisions. As one participant put it, "Because he has good moments, I root for him then, [but] in some cases he will turn around and make the good things bad…the plot twists are interesting." These moments of hope appear to be strong sustaining forces despite the frequent setbacks or negative twists. Additionally, because participants often knew about an antihero's past, their circumstances, and/or their potential for change/good, they would cling to a hope of redemption and would continue to root for the antihero specifically to be or do better. Many participants talked about "having faith" in the antihero, "really wanting him to be good," wanting them to "fix his ways and start to become more aware." Some participants were more specific about how this impacted their allegiances to these antiheroes. One participant said, "You tend to want a happy ending, or some sort of resolution, so you found yourself rooting for Jack Sparrow just because you

assumed he'd end up doing the right thing." Another participant wanted "to see [Cersei] progress to this better character…So when bad things happen to her, I don't want them to because I want a continuation of that trend of her becoming a better person."

In contrast, when characters were on a clear downward path, participants would lose some of that faith and allegiances to the character would generally suffer. As one participant explained, "I thought they were making decent progress to becoming a better person, but they kind of backtracked out of that so I was kind of disappointed." Similarly, Tony's (*The Sopranos*) continuous lack of improvement and Walter's (*Breaking Bad*) continual downward progression forced participants to give up their hope for redemption and "question to what levels you can [continue to] support him doing things." While their allegiance to these characters did suffer, participants nevertheless cited alternative factors that kept them at least interested in the character, such as humor, attachment, and suspense. However, in one notable case, a participant cited the character's continued hypocrisy and irrational actions as being simply too difficult to make sense of, leading to feelings of confusion and frustration. Comparing these cases illustrates the importance of having *something* for the audience to root for even if hope of redemption is gone.

Shared Goals

Another common, rather straightforward factor that helped audiences develop and/or maintain allegiances to antiheroes was having shared goals. In most cases, these shared goals were general, such as fighting the "bad guy," protecting family/others, finding love/acceptance, and not getting caught while in the pursuit of worthy goals. In most cases these shared goals were implied rather than identified explicitly by participants. Nevertheless, this appeared to be a very common way for participants to build or maintain allegiances with antihero characters. The

importance of having common goals was especially apparent when they came into conflict with an antihero's method of accomplishing that goal, which was extremely common. In the case of mismatch of goal versus actions, a shared goal usually trumped the method in terms of importance. As one participant explained, "Even though he was violently stabbing [the bad guys] and cutting off their heads, I chose to root for [Deadpool] because his ultimate goal seemed valiant and worthwhile, and I was willing to overlook the bad deeds he was doing to achieve that goal." Similarly, another participant said, "Clearly [Dexter] is a serial killer, and that's wrong. But at the same time…you're still rooting for him to get the bad guys."

Making Comparisons

Another big part of participants' engagement with antiheroes was their use of comparisons. They did this in several ways. In addition to comparing antiheros to their past selves/across their own character arc (see theme 1) and comparing antiheroes to other characters (see theme 2), participants also made comparisons between a) themselves and the antihero, and b) comparisons between various issues/sub-plots in the antihero's narrative. Both of these comparisons will be described below.

Comparisons Between the Antihero and the Viewer. Another way participants used comparisons was to compare the antihero to themselves. For the most part, participants talked about this type of comparison in terms of finding commonalities (or differences) between themselves and the antihero or imagining themselves in the antihero's situation, wondering what they would do. One participant said that he "felt stuck, just like the character at the time," when the character faced a difficult choice. Another commented, "I wouldn't want others to experience the pain I felt before, but Eren doesn't seem to care." A third explained, "This guy lost everything, and sometimes I think, 'okay, what if I lose everything? What would I be able to

leave?'" The majority of comments, however, dealt with feelings of sympathy, empathy, and pity – all of which require the participant to make some type of comparison or put themselves in the place of the antihero to some degree. As explained in the key concepts section of this theme, feelings of sympathy, empathy, and pity appear to be intricately connected to a participant's development of allegiances to antiheroes.

Finally, when making comparisons between the antihero and themselves, many participants mentioned ways in which the antihero inspired them or changed their real-world perspective. For instance, one participant thought he should eat less sugar and work out more to achieve a more impressive physique like the character. Another admired the confidence and assertiveness of a character and thought she should stand up for herself more like the character did (even though he did it to an extreme), while another participant felt that the character's example of self-sacrifice was something he should learn from. Others compared the reality of the antihero's world with their own. As one participant concluded, "you never know what people are doing behind closed doors."

An interesting explanation for this degree of inspiration despite all the flaws and extremism of antihero characters was in the relatability of antiheros. One participant even argued that "[Heroes] are just painted in a way that set them so far above others, when antiheroes make you feel a little bit better about yourself." She felt that because antiheroes are more accessible, their achievements seem like something you could also achieve. As she explained, "You don't have to be much to be an antihero, but you have to be a lot to be a hero." This sentiment was common throughout the studies, especially studies 1 and 2.

To sum up, when participants made comparisons between themselves and an antihero, they were able to better relate to the character, increase their understanding, and elevate their

feelings of sympathy, empathy, and pity – all of which were associated with stronger allegiances. Furthermore, by recognizing the antihero's strengths and comparing them to their own weaknesses, participants sometimes felt inspired to change to be more like the antihero in those aspects.

Comparisons between Issues/Sub-Plots. Finally, there was one additional comparison that emerged from the studies worth mentioning. Sometimes an antihero's personality and/or their stories became so multi-dimensional, layered, and complex that participants had to make choices about which issues or sub-plots they would consider comparatively meaningful or important. In other words, when participants struggled with an element of lesser importance compared to another larger issue, the larger problem would usually overwhelm the smaller, helping the participant let it go and move on to "more important" things. For instance, in trying to reconcile her disgust regarding Cersei and Jaime Lannister's (*Game of Thrones*) incestuous relationship, one participant said, "I kind of moved on with it because there were just so many other issues throughout the series that that was not the main issue anymore…Because she faced so many other problems, I found myself rooting for her family, which included him, so I kind of moved on from there." By focusing on the most important issues and letting go of the smaller details, a participant's overall allegiance became more-or-less focused on the biggest elements of the character and their story.

This process was often aided by an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" mentality. This idea refers back to the idea of forgiveness/forgetting violations by the antihero which was discussed previously in this theme. When jumping scenes and sub-plots, violations in one storyline would sometimes lose its sting as there were other issues at hand to worry about. Drawing upon the same quote regarding an interview participant's experience dealing with Tony's (*The Sopranos*)

choice to cheat on his wife, he explained "some other situation not necessarily around that would sort of draw me in…So just sitting there focusing on the scene that's happening, you can start to forget that because that quality of him is not really a factor in that scene…so it's easier to kind of ignore it."

When it came to deciding whether or not a participant could root for an antihero, comparing the weightiness and significance of certain issues over others could help them determine their overall allegiance towards a character. If the participant could get on board with the biggest issues, they were able to more easily let go of the smaller issues that they were not in agreement with.

Post-Viewing Engagement & Repeated Viewing

A final process that emerged particularly from studies 1 & 2 was the role various forms of post-viewing engagement played in developing and solidifying participants' understanding, opinions, judgements, and allegiances to antihero characters.

Post-Viewing Engagement. Several participants mentioned online posts/discussion boards, conversations with friends, and spontaneous reflection/wondering/thinking as they talked about their thoughts and feelings about a character. For instance, one participant talked about how he enjoyed reading theories online about what might or should have happened to Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) given the final scene which cut to black just as many audience members suspected something terrible was about to happen. He also liked to think about it on his own and come up with his own conclusions. A different participant acknowledged that he would randomly start thinking about the character Punisher (*Punisher*) and wonder, for instance, what he personally would do if he found himself in the same types of situations that Punisher was in. Similarly, one participant recalled that she suddenly thought, "how crazy would it be if the

McDonalds in my town was like [the fast-food chain that Walter had his meth lab underneath]," and went on to say that she would think a lot about how people might not be what they seem because of her experience with Walter (*Breaking Bad*).

Re-watching. While not a commonly brought up practice, a few participants talked about how re-watching a show or series of movies changed the way they understood and felt about their antihero characters. There seemed to be a few different reasons for doing this. First, in order to better understand and keep track of the complicated development of her character, Han Solo (*Star Wars*), one interviewee said, "I think it's kind of hard to get inside his head until you've seen the movie more than once and can piece together the entire character arc from start to finish." This makes sense, as many participants talked about complexities, details, ambiguities, or pieces of evidence that would inform their perception of a character, which, as this participant argues, could become much clearer with repeated viewing.

In a different situation, one interview participant talked about how re-watching (as well as using other post-viewing engagement) improved his understanding of the character Snape (*Harry Potter*) and made his allegiance to the character grow stronger and more meaningful after the fact. This antihero had a particularly dramatic and last-minute reveal of his "true colors" that essentially undid eight films' worth of audience perceptions/feelings towards the character. Several participants chose Snape across all three studies, all of whom mentioned this big reveal and, in one way or another, referred to the need to re-evaluate. Most obviously, the interview participant mentioned above explained, "By watching it a couple times or maybe just speaking to people about it or even just lingering on it and thinking about it, that's where you get a little bit more deeper understanding or appreciation." He also added, "Most of the things I've said today

are from re-watching and really wanting to see him from that other side after you know what he actually is like."

Participants clearly illustrated tendencies to adapt and update their understanding of an antihero even after the initial viewing experience, sometimes using sources external to the original content itself or simply revisiting the original content again. This type of re-watching and post-viewing engagement has largely been overlooked, but seems to play an important and dynamic role in the overall engagement, understanding, and appreciation of antihero characters.

Discussion of Viewer-Related Factors

Theme 3 addresses the viewer-related concepts and processes related to understanding and developing allegiances with antihero characters. To begin with, these studies identified several prominent viewer-related concepts that play an important role in antihero engagement. These include the concept of rooting for a character, understanding, sympathy/empathy/pity, relating, and liking/admiring/attachment.

To begin with, "rooting" for a character can be defined by its lay definition of support or hope for the success of another person, which antihero scholars consider a sign or form of allegiance (Garcia, 2016; Smith, 2010). Participants' usage of the term "rooting" did fall in line with this description, although a few additional details and patterns did emerge from the findings. Participants often talked about their desire for a positive outcome for an antihero, regarding both specific moments and overall. These positive outcomes participants rooted for often aligned with an antihero's own wishes (e.g., to not die, to protect family). However, other times, participants wanted things that they felt were better for the antihero than what the character wanted for themselves, including changing goals or wanting an antihero to overcome bad habits or character flaws that the antihero did not seem to care about changing.

This type of rooting is reminiscent of many real-world relationships, such as wanting a friend to break up with a manipulative partner or loving and believing in a family member who committed a crime, while not condoning the crime itself. By recognizing how common this type of caring relationship between a viewer and an antihero is, we gain further insight into why many audiences root for antiheroes despite their many failings and bad choices. Essentially, the viewers are not really rooting for the character to continue in their ways, but to redeem themselves by overcoming their weaknesses and evil tendencies. As such, sympathetic allegiances don't necessarily mean blind support – they often indicate hope for and/or expectations of positive change.

In order to root for an antihero, participants need to find reasons to do so. The findings from these studies indicate that participants found these reasons through the following strategies: understanding, sympathy/empathy/pity, relating, and liking/admiration/attraction.

As discussed in the introduction to the findings section, understanding seems to be one of the primary goals of antihero engagement. Surprisingly, the importance of understanding a character has been largely overlooked in the extant antihero literature. Understanding does reflect a few concepts and theories found in the communication literature that have yet to be applied to antihero studies, including theory of mind and cognitive empathy, which address cognitive perspective taking and understanding another person's state of mind. Similarly, in regards to the film literature, the closest concept to understanding so far appears to be Smith's concept of *recognition,* the first concept of his structure of sympathy which also includes alignment and allegiance. Recognition "describes the spectator's construction of the character," which speaks to who the character is – their physical form, personality traits, and other elements

of humanness (Smith, 1994, p. 40). One would assume that a natural outcome of recognizing a character would be understanding who they are.

Smith (1994) claims that recognition has received the least attention because it seems the most obvious. The same obviousness is likely the reason why understanding has not been seriously addressed in the literature. Nevertheless, these studies uncovered an abundance of evidence that demonstrate how essential accessing and understanding an antihero's perspective and state of mind is. Participants spent a great deal of time attempting to do so, indicating that understanding should become a central concept in future antihero studies, and related concepts and theories (i.e., theory of mind, cognitive empathy, recognition) should be given more attention.

Because understanding has not been a topic of interest thus far in the antihero literature, this project has much to offer. Naturally, the largest contribution is the recognition of the centrality of understanding to all antihero engagement. Of course, antiheroes are known for their ambiguity, making the pursuit of understanding one of the most common processes of antihero engagement. After all, without a certain degree of understanding, audiences cannot come to any conclusions or judgements about a character, and therefore cannot determine whether or not they should root for an antihero. Understanding a character provides a logical foundation from which viewers can derive explanations for an antihero's attitudes and actions. Without these explanations, antiheroes may appear chaotic and without purpose or direction. Not only would this block or damage sympathetic allegiances to antiheroes, but it has the potential to ruin plots and lose audiences' attention.

Another interesting finding related to understanding was its distinction from the concepts of agreement and acceptance. Understanding is a neutral concept that does not require either

agreement or acceptance of an antihero or their behaviors. Agreement naturally infers support, whereas acceptance requires understanding and a "pass" based on sufficient reason or logic, but not support. In making these distinctions, it is possible to recognize differences in the degree of audience support for an antihero and/or their actions. Rather than dichotomizing responses into "rooting for" or "rooting against," we can capture nuances of understanding and acceptance without forcing participants into the uncomfortable position of declaring one or the other. By recognizing degrees of understanding and agreement, we may reframe our understanding of audience allegiance by demonstrating that attitudes or judgements that may look like support (e.g., understanding and/or accepting why an antihero kills) do not necessarily mean that audiences are in agreement with or fully supportive of an antihero.

Moving on to the concepts of sympathy, empathy, and pity, the findings from these studies strongly support the existing understanding of these concepts as well as their relationship to allegiance. Studies from the communication field have found sympathy and trait empathy to increase enjoyment and moral disengagement, especially in fans (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Raney et al., 2009). Similarly, film scholars have discussed in depth the distinct natures of sympathy and empathy as short-term reactions to specific situations, and demonstrated their difference from the more stable, long-term experience of allegiance. Despite these distinctions, they also demonstrated the positive relationship between increased sympathy and long-term sympathetic allegiance (Plantinga, 2010; Smith, 2011). No conflicts with these findings were found in the current studies. While participants were not careful about distinguishing between sympathy, empathy, and pity, they did fundamentally equate these emotional experiences to feelings of support and increased sympathetic allegiances.

In more detailed discussions of these experiences, participants noted some interesting, specific reactions that further support our current understanding of these concepts. Just as Plantinga (2010) argued, participants felt the need to protect and support antiheroes, especially when they were suffering, bereaved, or being treated unfairly. Protective feelings and feeling needed by the antihero were surprisingly strong triggers for sympathy, empathy, and pity, especially when participants believed that the antihero had been misunderstood, mistreated, or was the underdog. Although the need to protect or stand by an antihero was not brought up by many participants, those that did expressed particularly strong desires to support the antihero despite, or even because of, their many failings. This speaks to a degree of interaction that has not yet been discussed in antihero literature but could be explored further in future studies.

It is possible that one of the reasons participants felt such strong responses to situations in which an antihero appeared misunderstood, mistreated, or were facing unfair odds was because audiences could relate to those types of experiences. Being able to relate to an antihero was found to be a very common and influential experience and one of the most common explanations participants gave for liking antiheroes over other types of characters. It is important to understand that the main way participants related to antiheroes was through the *emotional* or *social* aspects of antiheroes' experiences rather than their literal experiences. As described in the findings section, while participants had no idea what it was like to kill someone, be in a mob, be a pirate, or a queen, they could relate to feelings of injustice, the struggles of family drama, or the pain of losing a loved one. These types of experiences drew out strong feelings of sympathy, empathy, pity, and understanding.

Relatability has been cited in previous antihero studies as well, usually in conjunction with identification, which is a popular variable in antihero research, as they relate to antihero

enjoyment (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016). Despite its popularity in extant antihero literature, identification, defined as the experience of stepping into the shoes of a character and experiencing a narrative as if they were the character (Sanders & Tsay-Vogel, 2016), was not found to be a very common experience in any of the three studies. Nor was the concept of perceived similarity (or homophily), which is another commonly related concept in character studies (although not yet applied to antihero research). It is possible that participants were more reluctant to identify with or acknowledge perceived similarities with antiheroes because of those characters' many flaws and distasteful characteristics. Making too close of connections between themselves and morally ambiguous antiheroes could be seen as threatening to the self, leading participants to avoid such comparisons. Relatability, on the other hand, carries no such danger, making it a more palatable connection. Future researchers should explore these differences, giving particular attention to the concept of relatability rather than identification when it comes to audience engagement with antihero characters.

Finally, these studies revealed a significant influence of liking, admiration, and attachment to antihero characters, each of which was associated with stronger sympathetic allegiances. The most meaningful finding was the fact that they could function independently from each other, while all influencing the same outcome – allegiance. For instance, while liking certainly improved sympathetic allegiances, it was not always necessary. In some cases, admiration for certain qualities, skills, or choices was enough to win over participants despite dislikable personalities. Attachment to a character could also function independently, although it was typically associated with both liking and admiration. Attachment in particular appeared to keep participants invested in antiheroes even after they had officially given up on hopes for

character improvement or redemption. This is possible because, as Vaage (2014) argues, “we become partial towards the character we know best,” (p. 269) which can blind us to their more reprehensible actions and allow emotional, rather than cognitive evaluations to take control. Additionally, invested participants simply wanted to see how things turned out for the antihero/the narrative in the end. While liking and occasionally attachment (more commonly its sister concept of familiarity) has been measured in past antihero studies, future research should not lump these concepts together as they are independent and have unique influences on engagement and allegiances.

In terms of processes, the findings from these studies identified five strategies that enabled participants to build, maintain, or minimize damage to sympathetic allegiances. These included justification & rationalization, forgiveness & forgetting, developing shared goals, making comparisons, and post-viewing engagement/repeated viewing. These processes cross paths with some of the most popular processes in antihero research, including moral disengagement and moral comparatism, partially supporting, but also challenging and extending beyond them.

To recap, moral disengagement is the process of justifying or excusing behaviors that we would normally consider moral violations. These strategies include restructuring conduct (war → defense), sanitizing language (collateral damage), advantageous comparisons (lesser of two evils), displacement of responsibility (following orders), minimizing injuries (not a big deal), or blaming/dehumanizing victims (brought it upon themselves) (Bandura, 1996; Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement, especially the strategy of advantageous comparisons (alternatively termed “moral comparatism”), has been used in the majority of antihero literature as the fundamental (although not complete) explanation behind audience support of antihero characters. Similar

strategies have also been added to this list of disengagement strategies, specific to antihero engagement including humanizing through family relationships, acts of contrition, and blaming external circumstances or treatment (Garcia, 2016).

Many participants in the current studies did appear to use these strategies when attempting to justify or rationalize an antihero's amoral or questionable deeds, especially once they had gotten to know the antihero and developed sympathetic allegiances and biases towards them. This supports Janicke & Raney's (2015) findings that fans engaged in moral disengagement strategies while non-fans did not, further emphasizing the idea that engagement processes change with levels of familiarity (or attachment) and allegiance. For this reason, antihero studies need to take into account the degree of familiarity and allegiance participants feel when designing, measuring, and analyzing studies.

However, justification and rationalization were not the only strategies used when dealing with disagreeable behaviors and choices. Many participants talked about times when they would choose to forgive and/or forget past violations – which indicated that any attempts at justification or rationalization had ultimately failed. The concepts of forgiveness and forgetting challenge the idea of moral disengagement in that viewers are not denying, minimizing, or taking morality out of the equation (aka disengage with morality). Rather, participants openly recognized, acknowledged, and disagreed with many of the antihero's choices and behaviors, but still found ways to move past them, primarily through forgiveness or eventually forgetting/letting go of them.

Based upon the findings of these studies, forgiveness was most commonly achieved through redemptive actions – coming back to save the day, sacrificing themselves for others, stopping or undoing the damage they've caused, or even simply overcoming their own

weaknesses. Again, the hope or potential for redemptive paths was found to be one of the driving forces behind allegiance to flawed antiheroes. Once achieved, the satisfaction derived from a character's redemption allowed participants to forgive and let go of past discretions. Or, looking at it another way, having proved themselves a better person, the new-and-improved antihero could be considered worthy of forgiveness, having earned it.

However, there were also cases where antiheroes crossed lines that participants could not turn a blind eye to. These situations usually weakened or destroyed sympathetic allegiances as participants could not morally disengage or find a reason to forgive the antihero's sins. Nevertheless, in order to continue engaging with (and hopefully enjoying) the ongoing narrative, participants found ways to forget and move on, even if they could not reframe or forgive what happened. This was often aided by narrative structures or strategies, like bringing up other issues that were more important or interesting, showcasing the antihero's other positive qualities, or merely moving on with the narrative/plot which created an out-of-sight-out-of-mind effect.

These narrative aids connect to the process of comparing issues and sub-plots, wherein participants would have to sort and prioritize the many intricate plotlines and issues that are especially common in antihero narratives. Given the cognitive and emotional demands required for engaging with complex narratives and characters, some participants indicated the need to sideline or de-value certain elements in order to remain engaged in the story as a whole. They simply did not have the time or energy to fixate on many of the minor issues, which included moral violations. By de-prioritizing those violations, participants were eventually able to "forget" and move on from those lesser issues. This process may speak to principles of limited capacity models of processing (Lang, 2000), which may have a place in future antihero research.

In sum, the findings from this project highlight alternative ways of thinking about moral issues. While there was certainly evidence of moral disengagement, there were many notable cases where participants did not disengage morally, but rather acknowledged moral issues and dealt with them through forgiveness/redemption or simple acceptance and moving on. Future antihero research should expand its thinking about how audiences deal with moral issues to include these alternative approaches to audience engagement.

Another common experience that encouraged participants to build sympathetic allegiances with antiheroes was shared goals. There is not much discussion in antihero literature regarding this concept, likely because it is rather straightforward and obvious – just as understanding has been overlooked due to its basic nature. Plantinga (2010) mentions in passing that audiences do sometimes "root for a character to carry out a task or finish a job simply because spectators are goal oriented" (p. 37), but aside from this, shared goals have not been acknowledged. Simply put, audiences often root for antiheroes because they share the same goals (e.g., getting the bad guy, protecting other characters, achieving justice). Because of this, audiences may find it easier to convince themselves that the "ends justify the means." Naturally there are many considerations when deciding to what degree the ends (in this case the shared goal) justify whatever means the antihero has chosen, but the main takeaway here is that shared goals are a fundamental building block to those decisions and therefore impact sympathetic allegiances.

The final two processes – post-viewing engagement/repeated viewing and making comparisons between the antihero and the viewer – speak more to the goal of understanding than allegiance, although they do influence allegiances as well.

Beginning with post-viewing/repeated engagement, it was clear that participants engaged with antihero characters long after the screen went black. Participants found themselves thinking about the character at random times of day, or when seeing things that triggered memories of the antihero/their narrative. They also discussed antiheroes with friends and family, and/or read posts and theories online. Given the complexity and ambiguity of antihero characters, some participants even felt the need to re-watch films/shows in order to gain a better understanding of the antihero, or to see them through a different perspective. By doing so, they were able to gain new perspectives, develop alternate theories or explanations, and achieve a deeper understanding of a character. Several participants mentioned how much of their understanding of an antihero changed after they had time to review and reconsider things, let them sink in, and work out their "final" interpretations.

The experience of post-viewing engagement (including re-watching) has not been acknowledged to my knowledge in any antihero literature. Yet, it seems to be a very common and meaningful experience and holds important implications for study designs. Most antihero studies to date measure responses immediately after a viewing experience. While such an approach is certainly capable of capturing immediate reactions to an antihero, those reactions may differ after participants have had time to work through their thoughts and feelings. It may be interesting to compare how immediate and lasting reactions to antiheroes/antihero narratives differ and it is worth thinking about the unique value/significance of each type of response.

Finally, the last process revealed by these studies involved viewers comparing themselves to the antihero. Usually, these comparisons fell into one of two categories. The first was comparing their own life situations and thought processes to those of the antihero. This usually led to questions such as, "what would I do in that situation?" This supports the argument that

antihero narratives can act as a "moral playground" where audiences can exercise their emotions, imagination, moral thinking, perspective taking, etc. (Kleemans et al., 2017). This frequently led to feelings of sympathy or empathy, increased understanding, and acceptance. Other times it led to harsher judgements and helped participants draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Some participants also claimed that this type of mental exercise was one of the things that made engaging with antiheroes so enjoyable, interesting, and interactive. As such, the literature focused on enjoyment should consider the degree of cognitive engagement as a key factor in their future studies.

The second type of comparison participants made between themselves and antihero characters was between their qualities and strengths. In particular, several audience members recognized strengths that antiheroes had and compared it to their own weaknesses in a way that triggered inspirational thoughts. This finding was somewhat surprising as antiheroes generally are not considered the best role-models. Not only do they have many flaws, but their strengths are often misused or taken to extremes. Nevertheless, participants recognized and admired many strengths (even when they were misused or extreme), extracted and "sanitized" them, and took them as inspiration for things ranging from working out to sticking up for oneself.

This practice highlights audiences' tendencies to look for the good in a character and to take them as they are, with both weaknesses to overcome and strengths that could be admired and learned from. In fact, multiple participants argued that it was easier to feel inspired by an antihero because they were starting at the same place – imperfection. Heroes were too lofty and their strengths too "perfect" to feel achievable by an everyday person. Most antiheroes, on the other hand, struggled, and had admirable qualities that didn't seem quite as unattainable.

In conclusion, the findings included in theme 3 largely support many of the existing concepts, processes, and theories included in extant antihero literature. However, it also suggests a few key adjustments to established concepts (such as moral disengagement) and contributes additional concepts, distinctions, and processes that should be considered in the future.

General Discussion & Implications

The findings from this set of studies, when taken together, offer many valuable findings and carry important academic, industry, and social implications. The most significant of these findings and implications will be briefly reviewed in this section.

Academic Implications

This project triangulated three qualitative studies in order to attain an audience-driven perspective on how viewers engage with antihero characters. By breaking from the traditional methodologies used in extant antihero literature, these studies were able to tap into a fresh perspective on antihero engagement and uncover several rich and valuable variables, concepts, and processes that have thus far been overlooked, greatly enhancing our current understanding of antihero engagement.

To date, two main fields of study have taken on the study of antihero characters: communication and film studies. The communication field has relied primarily on experimental or variable approaches focused on effects, primarily enjoyment. Most communication scholars have done so by adding various traditional engagement variables such as identification and liking to affective disposition theory (ADT) in order to build a predictive model for audience enjoyment of antihero characters/narratives. While some models have been generally supported, they acknowledge the existence of many gaps, which some scholars have attempted to address

(with limited success) by applying additional theories and concepts such as schema theory and moral disengagement.

While the pursuit of building a model of antihero enjoyment is worthwhile, it is extremely limited in scope. Even if antihero scholars were to look beyond enjoyment to other outcomes, their effect-based approach is limited to just that – a focus on outcome effects. In other words, experimental or variable approaches are not suited for capturing long-term effects or processes. Because they rely upon limited stimuli such as short stories, video clips, or (at most) feature-length films, they are not able to replicate the more common extensive antihero engagement experience which often spans several seasons or films. While studies using these types of stimuli may capture snapshot insights into some key processes, they cannot capture the long-term, complex experiences or processes involved in most antihero narratives. Additionally, the variables and measures used in such studies are developed by the researchers themselves, which tend to be restricted by traditions and biases of the field. They do not allow for the emergence of unexpected findings that may be key to understanding antihero engagement. As a result, antihero studies have been limited to the study of various combinations of traditional engagement variables, primarily moral disengagement, identification, and liking.

Finally, another challenge communication scholars have faced relates to their conceptualization of antihero characters. Antiheroes are commonly referred to as "morally ambiguous characters" or MACs, which places a heavy emphasis on their morality. While morality is undoubtedly a major part of the antihero, it is not the only important factor in audience engagement with them. Recently, some antihero scholars have recognized this and have rightly called for future exploration beyond morality, but until now, very little has been accomplished in that regard.

Antihero scholars within the field of film studies have also focused heavily on morality or moral disengagement, although their focus has rested on the question of why audiences root for antihero characters, rather than why they enjoy them. This approach has led to a heavy focus on strategies of moral disengagement and allegiance, which has offered some interesting insight into possible processes audiences may use as they engage with antihero characters – especially in regards to sympathetic feelings and stances. While richer in depth and complexity than the data offered in the communication literature, the film studies field takes a purely analytical approach to theory building, which they then apply to individual case studies. Again, this limits the findings to the researcher's/field's ideas and interpretations, which may conform to select case studies, but may not capture the audiences' actual experiences.

While each of these traditions has offered valuable insight and interesting perspectives regarding various forms of audience engagement with antihero characters, they both face some significant limitations as described above. This project addresses many of those limitations and fills several gaps by taking an open-ended, audience-driven approach to the study of antihero engagement. Methodologically speaking, by asking open-ended questions designed to generate descriptive responses, participants were able to share a variety of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that were unexpected by the researcher. By minimizing the researcher's bias or influence on participant responses, several new and valuable insights were gained that would not have been possible using traditional methodologies.

Furthermore, by allowing participants to discuss antiheroes they had willingly engaged with for extended periods of time, they were able to comment on the full range of engagement experiences, from first impressions to post-viewing engagement. As such, many of their descriptions highlighted several short-term and long-term processes that variable approaches

would not have captured. Finally, by triangulating data from three studies using three qualitative methodologies, it was possible to compare and contrast experiences across multiple participants, characters, and response experiences (i.e., group discussion, one-on-one conversation, online written responses). By doing so, many of the limitations inherent in each method were compensated for, resulting in a strong, well-rounded perspective into audience engagement with antihero characters. The findings from this project break into several new directions and highlight many important variables, concepts, and processes that have thus far been overlooked or glossed over by the extant antihero literature.

Key Findings

To begin with, these studies uncovered two central goals that audience members have when engaging with antiheroes beyond enjoyment: understanding and allegiance. While enjoyment is certainly an outcome desired by audiences, it is a relatively passive experience compared to the pursuit of understanding a character as ambiguous, contradictory, and complicated as an antihero, and deciding to what degree and in what ways one can support or root for such a character. Participants put a great deal of effort into accomplishing these two goals, and the majority of variables, concepts, and processes discussed in each study revolved around these pursuits.

Understanding an antihero included understanding who they were, what they did, and why they did it. It did not necessarily mean agreeing with or even accepting their thoughts, feelings, and actions – merely building a cognitive understanding of the character's dynamic cognitive and emotional states. Obviously, being able to understand a character is important for understanding and engaging with a story or plot, as well as being able to appropriately react to a character. Achieving understanding was not only functional, but it presented a particularly

interesting and enjoyable challenge for participants as they puzzled out these famously ambiguous, mysterious, and complex antihero characters.

The findings from these studies indicate that reaching this type of understanding involved an intricate consideration of an antihero's background, goals, motivations, intentions, attitudes, choices, behaviors, agency, relationships, physical and social situations, and more. Participants described several situations during which they engaged with most or all of these elements all at once, often struggling to come to a conclusion because of odd contradictions or complexities. While antiheroes have always been referred to as "complex," that complexity usually only referred to an antihero's contradictory morals. However, aside from acknowledging this moral complexity and trying to reconcile how audiences deal with contradictory morals, no other complexities were considered. Fortunately, these studies revealed two specific ways in which an antihero's complexity can exist as they related to both morality and additional character traits.

First, antiheroes typically filled multiple roles within a narrative – they could be a father, a husband, a boss, and a psychiatric patient all in one. Participants recognized (at some level) that the character's traits and behaviors varied from role to role, which helped them reconcile those complexities and contradictions. For instance, a character could be a skilled doctor, but a clumsy cook, a loving father, but a cruel boss, which allowed for the co-existence of multiple, contradictory traits (which were not strictly morally-based) in a single character, while still making sense as a coherent and genuine character.

Second, participants also acknowledged different layered personas within a single antihero character. These personas or fronts often coincided with the various roles an antihero played, but not always. For instance, sometimes a character would purposefully put up a tougher and meaner front in a professional setting, while maintaining a soft and kind nature in their

private life. Other times, regardless of whichever role was active, a character may keep up a certain image or front to maintain a specific self-identity, although their true colors would sometimes break through in moments of weakness or security. Again, these personas are not limited to strictly moral complexities, as qualities such as confidence, shyness, strength, or passion are not morally-based. Participants showed a clear capability to recognize and reconcile the contradictions or complexities of these layered personas, which helped them develop a clearer understanding of who a character truly was.

To my knowledge, no other antihero literature has recognized the importance of these types of character complexities. Yet by recognizing the various roles and personas a single antihero may display, antiheroes can be appreciated for more than their moral complexity, and it becomes much easier to understand and address the various complexities of a character.

As alluded to in the previous discussion, one of the main reasons participants put so much effort into understanding an antihero was to help them make judgments about the character and decide to what extent they wanted to root for or against the antihero – essentially determining the nature of their allegiance (a viewer's sympathetic or antipathetic stance towards a character) – the second main goal identified in these studies. Not only was picking sides and rooting for or against various characters a central and natural part of the engagement experience (like understanding) most of the variables, concepts, and processes identified in these studies contributed to this goal.

While allegiances are generally considered to be more of an outcome stance rather than an active goal in the film literature (Smith, 1995; 2010), participants engaged in several strategies and processes as they built, monitored, and adjusted their allegiances towards antihero characters. For instance, it was clear that sympathy, empathy, and pity were extremely important

experiences that affected overall allegiances. While more fleeting and case-specific than allegiances, the accumulation of several sympathetic or pitiable experiences were clearly linked to stronger sympathetic allegiances. Unsympathetic experiences, on the other hand, could damage existing allegiances or cause participants to develop split allegiances, wherein they could support and root for an antihero in one aspect of their life (i.e., one of their roles or personas), but not another.

Moral judgements also clearly informed allegiances, although perhaps in ways that were more complex than previously understood. For instance, one of the main processes identified in this project was the separation, weighing, and judgement of all the various elements (i.e., motivation, intention, behavior, consequences, etc.) involved in a specific act or situation. When some of these elements were morally acceptable and others were not, participants had to decide which elements carried more weight than others and balance out the various acceptable and unacceptable aspects into a final determination. This was a highly individual and case-specific judgement that no model could predict.

While morality did seem to lay at the foundation of most judgements, there were several cases where other elements outweighed strictly moral considerations. As mentioned previously, particularly pitiable or sympathetic circumstances could give an antihero a moral pass, avoiding damage to a sympathetic allegiance. Furthermore, likeable or admirable qualities such as charm, humor, skill, determination, even good looks, could outweigh even serious moral transgressions. These influences were particularly powerful after participants had established sympathetic allegiances and/or become familiar or attached to an antihero. Several participants admitted that they had become biased towards characters they liked and/or were attached to, and were much

more motivated to justify, rationalize, forgive, or forget moral transgressions that they would normally have found unacceptable.

This speaks to a strategy that most extant antihero literature has focused on – moral disengagement – which minimizes or reframes immoral acts into acceptable ones. The findings from this study support the functionality of disengagement strategies, but challenge their centrality in antihero engagement experiences. Moral disengagement traditionally implies minimizing or ignoring moral digressions as a way for audiences to divorce themselves from those actions, which participants in this study often did. However, there were just as many (if not more) cases where participants fully acknowledged the degree of immorality that was taking place, but nevertheless found ways to justify, rationalize, forgive, or simply move past those moments. For instance, they could justify bad behaviors given impossible situations (kill or be killed), rationalize others by comparing them to someone else's worse behaviors (revenge/justice), forgive past actions after an antihero has redeemed themselves through a particularly noble act, or simply forget a moral violation by prioritizing other issues and moving on with time. Each of these processes offer promising alternatives to moral disengagement and help clarify how and why audiences can continue to support morally ambiguous antihero characters despite their failings.

Before moving on from the topic of morality, many antihero scholars in both the communication and film fields have questioned the centrality of morality in audience enjoyment and allegiance to antihero characters, but have struggled to find satisfactory alternative explanations. The findings from this project suggest that feelings of sympathy, empathy, or pity can explain the acceptance of less-than-moral behaviors, as can attractive traits, familiarity, and attachment. In addition, being able to relate to a character's emotional and social experiences

helped bolster sympathetic feelings and minimize the damage moral discretions had on allegiances. While nearly all of these elements have been mentioned in passing by extant antihero literature, most have been glossed over and not given the serious attention they deserve. However, the current studies found strong evidence for the powerful influence these elements can have on audience understanding and allegiance, indicating a need for future studies to revisit these influences.

Finally, another important contribution this project adds to the current understanding of audience engagement with antihero characters is the acknowledgement of other influences outside of the antihero character themselves. These include the context, setting, other characters, plots/sub-plots, and even elements of production including the actors, production companies, genres, and cinematography – the majority of which have been overlooked by most extant antihero literature (although some film studies have addressed some of these elements). Antiheroes do not exist in bubbles and much of who they are, what they do, why they do it, and to what effect is significantly influenced by those external influences. Additionally, common processes involved in understanding and allegiance are reliant on these external influences.

For instance, one of the most common processes found in these studies was the comparison of antiheroes to other characters. Antiheroes could be easily supported despite their flaws if they were placed in opposition to a much worse villain. Other times, participants would lose sympathy for an antihero if they felt they were mistreating another character who was an objectively better person or more likeable. These types of comparisons not only established the moral ranking of the antihero compared to others, but also their likability, relatability, trustworthiness, and other qualities and characteristics. These comparisons helped participants

situate their antihero in context of the story and informed the nature of their allegiances to the antihero.

These external influences also affected the way participants understood and perceived characters. A tragic background, the loss of a loved one, a toxic romantic relationship, being misunderstood by other characters, or any number of other factors have the potential to completely explain or reframe an antihero and/or their actions, which can meaningfully impact perceptions, judgements, and allegiances. If antihero studies ignore these external influences, they may end up with confusing or misleading conclusions. While it will be challenging to control for or otherwise integrate such complex contextual elements into future studies, it is important to do so.

In a similar vein, future studies should not overlook the various real-world influences that could influence audience members' experiences. For example, the findings from this study showed clear distinctions between antiheroes in comedies versus dramas, and differences in participant expectations of antiheroes based on the reputations of their production studios or writers (e.g., Disney is family friendly). Participants also talked about how discussing antiheroes with friends, reading online posts, or re-watching antihero narratives changed their perceptions of and feelings towards antiheroes.

Before concluding, an additional benefit of this project is that it can reach beyond the study of antihero characters specifically and offer valuable insight regarding fictional characters generally. Because antiheroes are so complex, contradictory, and do demand high levels of cognitive and emotional processing, these studies were able to draw out some elements, concepts, and processes that apply to all characters, but may not have been as evident given more straightforward characters such as traditional heroes or villains. For instance, it is very likely that

heroes also have distinct motivations, intentions, values, goals, and actions, but because these elements tend to align so well with one another in a hero, important distinctions between each of those elements may not have been noticed in a similar study on hero engagement. But because those elements frequently clash with each other in antihero characters, it was easier to identify and understand the unique characteristics of each element. While it is true that some of the concepts and processes identified in this set of studies may be antihero-specific, it is worth considering how they might also function in other types of characters, many of whom also have complex personalities, relationships, situations, etc.

In conclusion, the current studies offer many new and exciting directions for future antihero research. The findings from these studies confirm the general conclusions of extant antihero literature, but also greatly expand the current understanding of antihero engagement by introducing new audience goals, key variables, concepts, and processes. These findings were drawn from the source itself – audiences – resulting in a fresh, rich perspective on the full engagement experience. No doubt there are many more interesting discoveries to be made regarding these complex, dynamic, and ambiguous characters, but this project offers a solid foundation from which future studies can build.

Industry Implications

While not the focus of this study, the findings offer some important implications for the entertainment industry. First, it confirms that antihero narratives are indeed popular and highly enjoyed. All but one participant between the first two studies agreed that they prefer antihero narratives over traditional hero narratives (although this could be an effect of sample bias). Not only were antiheroes considered more interesting to engage with, but participants liked to see flawed characters that they could relate to more easily than “perfect” heroes. These findings

should encourage writers and producers to focus on building characters that have interesting personalities and narratives that require some puzzling out, but who also have traits or experiences that audiences can relate to. Again, this does not mean that characters need to have the exact same literal experiences as their audiences. In fact, a handful of participants brought up how they especially enjoyed exploring other types of life that they would never personally experience (e.g., life in a mob, being a pirate or a wizard, living in outer space, etc.), but they could still relate to the fundamental emotional and social struggles and experiences that can occur within any of these physical situations. The combination of interesting, unlived literal experiences with relatable emotional and social experiences seems to be a promising combination. These findings also suggest that industry practitioners should consider (if they do not already) measuring the "success" of a character or show/film using multiple constructs beyond enjoyment and liking to include measures such as interest or intrigue.

Second, this project has identified many character and narrative related elements and processes that audiences use to make sense of the characters and to engage cognitively and emotionally throughout a narrative. If not already considered by content writers and producers, these elements and processes could be of great benefit. For instance, when developing an antihero character, playing around with various combinations of sympathetic and antipathetic character traits could enhance the complexity and intrigue of a character. A sympathetic motivation with an antipathetic intent, yet a relatively sympathetic goal, but a questionable means can give audiences a lot to chew on. Similarly, they could play with different layers of an antihero's persona to create interesting character dynamics. They could counterpose who the antihero fundamentally is, with who others think they are, with who the character is trying to be, with who they have the potential to be – as seen by the audience and/or other characters. Simply

put, this project offers a toolbox of character and narrative related elements, concepts, and processes that can help content producers develop antihero characters in a way that audiences will want to engage with.

This study also offers a few important principles and warnings in regards to antihero character development. First, based upon the findings of these studies, it is clear that there is no single antihero template when it comes to character development. Antiheroes may improve, devolve, roller-coaster up and down throughout a narrative, or change course suddenly given an acceptably large trigger (or a character reveal as seen with Snape from *Harry Potter*). However, regardless of the trajectory, each of these had a few common elements that tied audiences to them no matter where they stood morally or what path they were on.

First, audiences need something to root for. They need to have hope that the antihero has the potential to do or become something worth supporting or believing in. This could be a return to former innocence, redemption from a sordid past, overcoming a personal weakness, letting go of a toxic ambition, discovering an element of humanity within themselves, developing positive relationships, etc. These do not always require full redemption or a complete abandonment of old, questionable ways. Cases like Walter While (*Braking Bad*) or Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*) do not have "happy" or strongly redemptive endings but each antihero maintains a potential for good despite their tendencies to choose bad throughout their narrative.

Second, especially in cases where no real progress or redemption is achieved, it is important for audiences to recognize *reasons* for antihero actions/choices – both the good and the bad. Several participants noted the existence of reasoning as one of the main reasons they were able to understand and accept the antihero's choices or even attitudes. The importance of reasoning was made especially evident in cases where reason did not exist. Those senseless

moments caused frustration and confusion in participants, which producers should take pains to avoid. This does not mean, however, that explanations must be given for every action. If an antihero has been established as the type of person who has reasons for everything that they do, audiences will assume that there is some kind of reason for actions or choices that they don't fully understand. This seems to allow for mystery, suspense, and intriguing ambiguity while still avoiding frustration.

On the topic of ambiguity, the findings from these studies also suggest that one way to effectively handle ambiguity is to ensure that any ambiguous act has multiple, legitimate explanations. These explanations do not have to be clear in the moment, but upon looking back at the end of a narrative or after new developments shed light on past events, any of the possible explanations should be supported by some type of evidence or reasoning. Any twists, reveals, explanations for past ambiguities that have not been supported by previous evidence may come off as a copout or a random, meaningless narrative choice. Again, this emphasizes the centrality of the pursuit of understanding in audience engagement and enjoyment. Multiple participants praised the skill with which certain narratives built up multiple interpretations based on the same set of evidence, even when no definitive "correct" interpretation is given, indicating popular support for these types of engagement experiences.

Next, without exception, all of the antiheroes identified in these studies had qualities that participants liked and/or admired. Likability is a rather obvious attraction for any type of character, and it is a generally good idea for producers to create antihero characters that have likable personalities or qualities. However, content creators also have some leeway in regards to likeability. If they want or need to develop an antihero character who lacks likeable attributes, the findings from these studies suggest that they would need to ensure that the antihero has other

qualities or characteristics that can be considered admirable. It is probable that developing an antihero character that audiences could get behind without liking *or* admiration would be difficult if not impossible.

Finally, there is something to be said about attachment to a character and a narrative, especially when it comes to antiheroes with negative or no clear developmental trajectories. Once audiences become familiar with and invested in antiheroes *and* their narratives, producers gain more leeway to push boundaries or opt for less positive outcomes or trajectories. Of course, there will always be limits to what an antihero and a story should do, but once a strong attachment to a character is established, it can carry audiences through long and difficult periods of a narrative.

In sum, many of the findings from these studies may prove useful to writers, producers, or other creators within the entertainment industry. Of course, most of the principles discussed in this section are theoretical, based off of only a few dozen characters, and have not been empirically tested. As such, all assertions made in this section should be taken with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, these patterns were clear in the findings of this project and do fall in line with much of the existing antihero research and film theories, suggesting that they are worth considering.

Social Implications

Finally, this project uncovered a few unexpected social implications of antihero engagement. First, antiheroes inspired a good deal of self-reflection in participants. They often found themselves thinking about their own moral codes, how they might react in a similar situation, recognized parallels between themselves and the antiheroes, and even considered ways they could change to be more like the antihero in certain aspects. This supports the argument that

audiences use fictional narratives as models or simulations of the social world (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

As discussed in previous discussion sections, participants found many antihero characters to be particularly relatable, given their flaws, weaknesses, impulses, and struggles. Watching antiheroes overcome those struggles was inspiring for many, as were the strengths antiheroes brought to the table despite their flaws. This, in a sense, makes antiheroes more realistic role models (in certain regards), which makes it easier for audiences to see themselves accomplishing similar tasks. After all, as one participant stated, "You don't have to be much to be an antihero, but you have to be a lot to be a hero." In other words, you have to be just about perfect – in some cases super-human – to be considered a hero, but even a regular person can be an antihero.

Engaging with antihero characters also allowed participants to flex their sympathetic, empathetic, and perspective-taking muscles. Their efforts to understand, justify, rationalize, forgive, or simply accept many of the negative behaviors and attitudes of antiheroes could potentially help them transfer those skills to real-world situations. When asked if there was anything else they wanted to share about their thoughts and experiences with antiheroes, several participants brought up the positive social implications these types of characters can have on society. One participant talked about how using the skills developed with antiheroes could help address problems with cancel culture – the modern form of social ostracism from social or professional life due to mistakes or transgressions. She hypothesized that an oversaturation of perfect hero figures in popular media has led modern society to develop unrealistic expectations about public figures, and that more antihero narratives were needed to combat this toxic perfectionism.

Similarly, another participant talked about how the experience of taking the perspective of an antihero can help people better understand real-world criminals or even terrorists. Understanding that from the outside, we don't always know the whole story and that the criminal probably has reasons and motivations that make sense to them, helps us understand (but not justify) why they do the things that they do. He described how realizing that the rules of other people's cultures and beliefs can differ so much from our own and, for them, justify things that we don't accept.

While careful not to condone any immoral behaviors, this participant, as well as others, believed that antihero narratives can be socially significant tools that help viewers become more understanding, sympathetic, forgiving, or at least knowledgeable about the imperfections of real people in the real world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers many valuable takeaways for the academic, industry, and social worlds. These can guide future academics, media producers, and even casual viewers in interesting new directions. However, it is important to remember that this project also contains limitations, including a certain degree of researcher bias. As the first study of its kind, the findings and conclusions drawn from these studies should be explored further and confirmed by future research.

Nevertheless, this project offers a rich, new perspective based on audience-driven experiences with antihero engagement and clearly demonstrates that antihero characters and viewers' engagement with them are complex, fascinating, meaningful, and deserving of future attention. I add my voice to Janicke and Raney, who definitively state, "We would be remiss if

we did not continue to seek better insight into these socially significant media experiences" (2015, p. 494).

Limitations

There are a few limitations of this project that should be acknowledged. First, it should be noted that there was somewhat of a gender imbalance with more female (n= 36) than male (n=22) participants, although no immediately observable differences in responses were identified. Furthermore, due to limited resources, this project relied upon a student sample. This naturally limits the age range of participants and may skew the demographics of the sample in other ways including race, education level, and SES. While university-level students are generally considered adults in most social science research and have been found to be capable of complex cognitive and affective processing, it is nevertheless possible that students may engage with characters differently than participants of different ages.

Future studies may consider exploring antihero engagement with both older and younger audiences. Older adults may have different experiences, perspectives, and values that could alter the way they perceive and engage with antihero characters. Younger audiences differ from university students not only in regard to life experience, but they may be less cognizant of the influence of alignment techniques (e.g., cinematography) and have been shown to be less capable of complex cognitive and emotional processing (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Rosaen & Dibble, 2008). A comment made by a participant in these studies indicated that this was true for her, as her interpretation of Snape (*Harry Potter*) changed as she grew up and became more capable of understanding the complex dynamics between Snape, Lily, and Harry. Future research should consider differences in antihero engagement in a more diverse range of age and life experience.

A second limitation pertains to the selection of antihero characters. Because participants were able to select their own character of choice, it follows that most of these antihero characters were well liked and enjoyed by the participants. Without exception, all participants claimed to root for their chosen character either fully or in part and generally spoke well of their characters. However, this positive, supportive attitude may not apply to all antihero characters. A handful of participants mentioned other antiheroes in passing, some of whom they did not like and did not support. For instance, during study 2, one participant consistently referenced Cersei Lannister from *Game of Thrones* in her discussion of Jaime Lannister, Cersei's brother/lover. This participant was very anti-Cersei and clearly interpreted and engaged with her very differently than a participant in study 1 who had chosen Cersei as her character of choice and liked/rooted for her. Future studies should attempt to identify differences between supported/unsupported antihero characters and investigate more deeply into how individual differences (or other influences) play a role in interpretation and support of antihero characters.

A third limitation was the retrospective nature of all three studies. While the advantages of a retrospective approach have previously been explained and justified, there were also a few disadvantages. When recalling engagement experiences, it is virtually impossible for an audience member to recall the exact feelings and thoughts they experienced during any given viewing experience. Their retrospective summaries of those experiences likely lack detail, some level of accuracy, and were likely altered over time.

Future studies could use alternative methods to capture more detailed insight into processes and relationships involved in antihero engagement. For instance, a longitudinal diary study could more accurately capture the detailed progression of an audience member's experiences with an antihero character during an active viewing experience, although an

inorganic viewing experience (reporting between viewing sessions), limited range of stimuli, high resource demand, and threat of participant fatigue and/or drop-out would create additional challenges. Alternatively, while the disadvantages of experimental or variable approaches have already been discussed, they would be suited for testing the effects of variables, relationships, and interactions discovered in this study. They could also shed light on processes involved during a specific stage of antihero engagement (e.g., initial impression formation) or key experiential moments (e.g., extreme moral violation, moment of redemption).

This project revealed numerous elements, concepts, and processes that should be explored in greater depth using a variety of theories, models, approaches, and methods. Audience engagement with antihero characters has proven to be an extremely complex, dynamic experience with vast research potential.

APPENDIX A

(*Questions added to interview guide, not in original focus group moderator guide)

Question:	**Purpose/Reasoning:**
Tell me about the character.	Warm up question, also to capture key characteristics that the participant finds most relevant for getting a sense of who a character is.
What about the character stands out the most to you?	To identify the most dominant, important, aspect(s) of the character that the participant most likely thought a lot about, engaged deeply with. To begin tapping into participant emotions, judgements, attitudes.
What is important to the character? Probes: How does that make you feel about them? What does that say about the character?	To capture motivations, goals, intentions, or other factors central to the character/their story. To reveal participants' stances towards the character and their values, goals, actions, etc.
Tell me about their most important relationships, whether they be positive or negative.	To capture more insight into character motivations, influences, situations, etc. To compare to audience-character relationships.
Tell me about a time they faced a problem or important decision. What did they do? How did you feel about it?	To gain further insight into complexity of the character, their reasoning, goals, intentions, development – how audiences interpret all those elements and make judgements, allegiance.
Tell me about a time when they did or said something that you weren't sure how to take or didn't quite understand.	To gain further insight into the complexity/ambiguity of antiheroes and how participants negotiate their interpretations of these events – how they adapt their allegiances.
Tell me about a time when something bad happened to the character. How did that make you feel?	To gain deeper insight into a participant's overall sense of allegiance and possible reasons for it.
*What was a really great moment for you watching the character?	To better understand what audiences rooted for – what moments felt like payoffs for their allegiance
*What about the character appeals to you?	To identify additional factors that promote allegiance to a character that may not be as dominant as indications from previous questions.
*Were there times that you turned against the character?	To capture points of conflict for the participant, struggles of justification/reasoning. Insight into how participants work through difficult moments/phases of the character's journey.
Imagine that you were a part of their world and you and this character knew each other – what do you think your relationship would be like?	To illustrate the actual character-audience relationship (in context of the fictional world). Description of nature of allegiance.
What if they existed in our world, in real life, and you knew each other – what do you think your relationship would be like then?	Compared to the above, identify how realism changes experience/relationships/allegiance. Shed light on importance of story context.
Is there anything else that came to mind that we haven't talked about yet?	To capture any other dimensions of antihero engagement not covered by previous prompts.

APPENDIX B

List of Characters	Show/Film	Study
Loki*	Thor/The Avengers	Focus Group 1
Dexter Morgan*	Dexter	Focus Group 1
Jay Gatsby*	The Great Gatsby	Focus Group 1
Michael Scott	The Office	Focus Group 1
Walter White*	Breaking Bad	Focus Group 1
Loki*	Thor/The Avengers	Focus Group 2
Jules Winnfield* & Vincent Vega	Pulp Fiction	Focus Group 2
Walter White*	Breaking Bad	Focus Group 2
Cersei Lannister	Game of Thrones	Focus Group 2
Magneto	X-Men	Focus Group 3
Severus Snape*	Harry Potter	Focus Group 3
Green Arrow	Arrow	Focus Group 3
Jack Sparrow	Pirates of the Caribbean	Focus Group 3
Jaime Lannister	Game of Thrones	Interview 1
Hannibal Lecter	Hannibal	Interview 2
Han Solo*	Star Wars	Interview 3
Eren Yeager*	Attack on Titan	Interview 4
Tony Soprano	The Sopranos	Interview 5
Megamind	Megamind	Interview 6
Punisher	Punisher	Interview 7
Walter White*	Breaking Bad	Interview 8
Severus Snape*	Harry Potter	Interview 9
Walter White (5)*, Severus Snape (3)*, Deadpool (3)*, Loki*, Dexter Morgan*, Eren Yeager*, Jay Gatsby*, Han Solo*, Jules Winnfield*, Gregory House, Odysseus, Venom, Rick Sanchez, Batman, Erik Killmonger, Zuko, Blair Waldorf, Lucifer Morningstar, Thanos, Villanelle, Hondo Ohnaka, Jason Bourne, Candace Flyn, Winter Soldier		Thought-Listing

*Indicates repeated character between studies

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