

Is empathizing with fictional villains linked to dark personality traits?

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Villains in fictional media often become some of the most popular characters in their respective franchises, appearing on merchandise, starring in spinoffs and accruing large, dedicated fanbases. But new research suggests that individuals who are drawn strongly to such antagonists may have less-than-savory personality traits themselves.

In an [article](#) published in the December edition of *Poetics*, researchers examined whether people who preferred villainous characters in their media consumption had the so-called Dark Triad of personality traits. The Dark Triad refers to the conventionally immoral traits of narcissism, an entitled interpersonal style where one feels superior to others; Machiavellianism, a manipulative interpersonal style that includes duplicity and selfish ambition; and psychopathy, a callous interpersonal style focused on immediate gratification and including low self-control.

The study surveyed 1,805 individuals in North America, asking them to report on how they felt toward villains who came immediately to mind for them. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree,” participants were asked to mark how

they felt about statements such as “I tend to feel the emotions of the villain,” “I tend to want the villain to succeed in achieving his or her goals” and “I tend to find the villain more fascinating than the hero.”

Participants were also asked to respond to self-defining statements such as “I like to use clever manipulation to get my way,” “You should wait for the right time to get back at people” and “I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so” in the same 1 through 5 agreement scale as way of measuring the presence of the “Dark Triad” of personality traits.

The study found a strong correlation, with individuals who had higher indications of Dark Triad personality traits more likely to report that they enjoyed, identified with or empathized with villainous characters. Of the three Dark Triad traits, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were more strongly associated with villain positivity than narcissism.

Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, a graduate student at Aarhus University and an author of the study, said that he and his colleagues wanted to examine the relationship between villains and audiences, and to challenge the assumption “that moral characters are liked because they are moral, and immoral characters are disliked because they are immoral.”

“We do not doubt that this is very often the case, but it can’t be the whole story: many villainous characters, such as Darth Vader from the Star Wars films and Sephiroth

from the Final Fantasy video games, are very popular among audiences. They are most definitely ‘liked’ in some sense of that word,” Kjeldgaard-Christiansen said. “We wanted to explore how such villainous characters can be liked, enjoyed and otherwise responded positively to.”

The research team also sought to explore the idea that immoral individuals may enjoy immoral characters in media, due to such villains or antagonists feeling more relatable to those individuals.

“More specifically, we hypothesized that individuals with a conventionally immoral personality profile — a personality characterized by Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy — might be more likely to enjoy villainous fictional characters, who presumably embody such immoral traits,” Kjeldgaard-Christiansen said. “Before our study, the notion that character preferences could be deeply dependent on personality factors had received very little attention.”

Kjeldgaard-Christiansen noted that there are many different ways of “liking” a character in media that “are not moral or sympathetic in nature,” so the survey was aimed at reporting on attitudes such as enjoyment, sympathy, empathy and understanding toward villains.

“You can be morally opposed to Darth Vader yet find him fascinating and alluring ... or you can appreciate the Joker’s insane embodiment of nihilism without thinking he’s a pleasant fella,” Kjeldgaard-Christiansen added.

The correlational nature of the study wasn't able to conclusively establish any directionality regarding if the personality traits were preexisting or if they developed as a result of liking villainous characters. However, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen said that fictional preferences have a "rather limited" impact on real-life actions and attitudes.

"For example, despite sensationalistic claims to the contrary, you don't generally become violent by playing violent video games," Kjeldgaard-Christiansen said. "We find it much more plausible that those of our respondents who had immoral tendencies were more likely to enjoy, and otherwise respond positively toward, villainous characters."

The correlational results of the study hold "mostly theoretical and conceptual" interest, rather than practical application, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen said, though the data does suggest that further investigation of the topic is needed. Additional investigations will look into more narrow lines of focus, such as whether specific characters might be more attractive to individuals who share their traits — for example, an especially narcissistic villain being more appealing to narcissistic individuals.

"The data suggests that previous research has overlooked the importance of basic personality factors in shaping character preferences," Kjeldgaard-Christiansen added. "Our study thus highlights the need for theoretical models

of character engagement to recognize the contribution of personality.”

The article, “Do dark personalities prefer dark characters? A personality psychological approach to positive engagement with fictional villainy,” was published on Dec. 13, 2020 in Poetics. It was authored by Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Anne Fiskaali, Henrik Høgh-Olesen, and Mathias Clasen, all of Aarhus University, John A. Johnson of Pennsylvania State University, and Murray Smith of the University of Kent.